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# TORONTO'S WOMEN CHEFS

## THE ROAD TO THE TOP

BY SHERYL KIRBY

The number of female chefs running fine-dining establishments in Toronto can be counted on the fingers of two hands, with a few left over as spares. Every six months or so some publication runs a piece bemoaning the gender disparity, but nothing ever really changes. Estimates put female graduates of culinary-training institutions at 40 percent of the class, yet these numbers are not translating into the fine-dining arena.

So where are these women going?

From the very start, female chefs have a hard time getting a foot in the door. Donna Dooher, owner and executive chef of Mildred's Temple Kitchen, describes her attempts to find work in the early '80s: "I experienced kitchens where I was very kindly told, 'We don't hire women to work in our kitchens,'" she says, although she stresses that it was done with courtesy and not malice. The idea of a woman working in, never mind running, a fine-dining kitchen was unheard of at the time, and Dooher points out that she realized early on that she would have to work harder to achieve her goals.

Anne Yarymowich, executive chef at Frank at the Art Gallery of Ontario, echoes Dooher's experience. "Early in my career, I interviewed with a prominent Toronto chef and was given the distinct impression that women were not being considered for the position. I think there was a bit of a boys club in some kitchens at that time. It didn't hold me back," she says. "I sought employment elsewhere, and found it."

Other female chefs who were able to secure positions sometimes found the work atmosphere to be difficult, with experiences ranging from sexist comments to generally not being taken seriously. Andrea Nicholson, former executive chef at the now-defunct 35 Elm Street, says of her time working in the Rubino brothers' kitchen at Luce: "I had a really rough time there – I think it was the first time they had met a woman with balls, who knew what she was doing. I didn't get along with the posse and it ended rough."

Of course, women have been running kitchens since the invention of fire, and in many ways are better suited to the role. Fiona Lim,



**Chef Anne Yarymowich**

executive sous-chef at George, explains: "The nature of the industry necessitates hard work, drive, determination and passion, whether male or female. The high demand for organizational skills, focus, drive, and ability to multi-task, while being able to assume the position of a mentor and a leader, is absolutely necessary."

Augmenting the list of skills at which women typically excel, Yarymowich adds creativity, research, people skills, a good work ethic, physical stamina, and the ability to delegate and prioritize. "Perhaps physical strength could be a factor," she concedes, "but let's face it – since when has brute strength been the defining factor in the success of a chef?"

Yarymowich also points out, however, that "self confidence and a strong ego are also areas where women may find themselves lacking." Dooher thinks this is a problem with all new chefs: "We don't have enough self-confidence, women in particular – true, genuine confidence, not that bravado; the ability to walk into a room full of other cooks and feel that you can inspire them, that you can lead them through to deliver a wonderful product to their customers."

One reason women tend not to make it to the top rungs of the culinary ladder is that their priorities are often different from those of male chefs. Dooher points out that women involved in a relationship might still defer to a partner's busier or higher-paying job and that women who want a family also find themselves often having to make a choice. "I noticed women dropping off at around age thirty-five," says Dooher of her female cooks. "That's your window, and if you want children, you've got to take it."

Dana McCauley trained to be a chef but now works in other areas of the industry. Married to Pangaea executive chef and co-owner Martin Kouprie, she has a unique perspective on women working in fine-dining establishments. "I think things have changed a lot with respect to women being taken seriously by their co-workers, but I think that the reality of being a woman with kids still drives a lot of women out of the industry," she says. "For example, if my hubby and I [had] both worked in a restaurant, who would have been home on a routine basis to make dinner, do bath time

Photo by Carlo Catenazzi, AGO Photographer

and make sure homework was done? You just don't make enough as a chef to be able to have fourteen hours a day of nanny care and, even if you did, what would be the point of parenthood if hired help raised the kids?"

That's not to say that women disappear from the industry once they have a family. Many women leave larger fine-dining restaurants to run smaller operations where they can have more control over their work environment, and can use all of those great creative and organizational skills to create both a product and a setting that allows them to feel good about what they do. Local chefs such as Alida Solomon at Tutti Matti and Aster Ketsela Belayneh at Addis Ababa are proof that women can run a professional kitchen just as well as a man, and many small local catering operations, pastry and chocolate shops, and small, family-run restaurants have a woman steering the ship. And in many cases, employees feel that these establishments are a far more positive place to work.

"[It's a] different approach to work when the brigade is largely female," explains Dooher. "There's a different approach to problem-solving. When it's a predominantly male brigade, that all changes again. I enjoy the environment that is created with other women." That positive environment is a draw for new cooks looking to learn. Kitchens like those run by Dooher and Yarmowich, both known for hiring and mentoring female cooks, are hot tickets for young aspiring chefs of both sexes.

One area where female chefs still seem to get the short end of the stick relates to restaurant reviews. Of the female chefs interviewed for this piece, most said they felt there was no bias in any area of the industry although, off the record, a few did admit to having been slighted by reviewers of both sexes. Corey Mintz, a former chef and now restaurant critic at the Toronto Star, says, "Looking at restaurants as a critic, there are so many factors that shape our impression, from the time they take our reservation, to the moment we taste our first bite of food. Gender is not relevant."



**Chef Donna Dooher**

Some reviewers, however, are known in the industry for having favourites and for ignoring restaurants run by female chefs (especially younger women), while other critics go into a review with preconceived notions based on the chef's gender. Nicholson references a review of 35 Elm by Gina Mallet of the National Post that includes a philosophical and romanticized idea of the female chef as nurturer and mother, serving up comfort food and dispensing love and hugs. "Coming from a woman, it was really disheartening," says Nicholson, whose background is in haute cuisine and who earned her culinary knocks cooking for a six-star cruise line.

It's likely that female chefs will never outnumber men in the area of fine dining. With different priorities and often a different working style, it may be that the attitude of the industry will have to significantly change before the disparity disappears. But it's possible that women have a greater effect on the restaurant industry as a whole than their male counterparts because, when faced with the typical hierarchical environment of a high-end kitchen, they often choose to create opportunities for themselves – and other women – through an entrepre-

neurial spirit that lets them find their niche.

At the end of my interview with Dooher, she leaves me with one parting thought: While fine-dining kitchens may still be rife with gender disparity, we shouldn't count the ladies out just yet. After all, with two of the most highly anticipated restaurants to open in Toronto in 2008 being run by women (Dooher's Mildred's Temple Kitchen and Yarmowich's Frank), it's clear that Toronto's female chefs offer a fine example of quality over quantity. □

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