Why Are There No Great Women Chefs?

But in actuality, as we all know, things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class, and, above all, male. The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, or our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education—education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs and signals.


It started a few years ago when I noticed that Food & Wine’s annual roundup of ten Best New Chefs always listed one token woman.

And it lingered.

In 2007 Michelin awarded French chef Anne-Sophie Pic three stars, making her only the fourth woman in her country’s history to receive that honor (fifty years had passed since the last of her sex had garnered that third sparkler). The following year, in the United Kingdom, it was considered breaking news when ten female chefs won any Michelin stars at all. The tabloid Telegraph announced: “It could be the beginning of the end for the foul-mouthed, macho, and defiantly male master chef. The number of women with Michelin stars has nearly doubled in just 12 months.”

Then came the 2009 James Beard Awards gala, held after the ceremony and annually assigned a theme. “Women in Food” was the chosen motif, but since only sixteen of the evening’s ninety-six nominees were, in fact, women, it seemed like a cruel joke. In the end, only two of those sixteen went home victorious, out of nineteen winners total.

Next, Phaidon announced the publication of its forthcoming cookbook Coco: 10 World Leading Masters Choose 100 Contemporary Chefs, for which one Alice Waters and nine of her male comrades each picked ten young chefs whose work they admire. Collectively, these culinary authorities managed to put fewer than ten women on the roster—less than 10 percent of the total talent featured.

Finally, in Bravo TV’s Top Chef Masters competition, a paltry three out of twenty-four American “Masters” were women. Really.

The “It” in the pit of my stomach was the sinking realization that female chefs do not attain the same recognition or critical acclaim as their male peers.

No one doubts women’s abilities in the kitchen. They certainly have skill and creativity. So what is the problem? This conundrum reminded me of something I’d read in an undergraduate art history class, Linda Nochlin’s “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Her article was a watershed not just because it posed such a loaded question—a rhetorical device, as it turns out—but also because by posing that question Nochlin forced academics and feminists to challenge their own practices. She argued that the query is inherently flawed because it presupposes a deficiency in women and thereby perpetuates the difficulties of female painters and sculptors in achieving the status of artist, let alone great artist. Much of the problem, Nochlin maintained, lies in how we, as a culture, define terms like “great” and “great artist,” and also how those of us who examine these terms—academics, journalists, critics, and theorists—shape or champion their definitions by accepting them as the norm.

In theory, we’ve come a long way from the notion that a woman’s place is in the domestic kitchen, and that the only kitchen appropriate for a man is the professional one.

Semiology 101

Before anyone says “That’s just semantics,” I should note that there has always been a strong distinction between the...
provocative title onto the article. “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” is a trick question, a trap that presumes the need to defend or justify women—an act that inevitably plays right into the gender discrepancy.

Evidence of that trap was gamely brought to light at a recent panel discussion on “Gender Confusion: Unraveling the Myths of Gender in the Restaurant Kitchen” at New York’s Astor Center. The event centered on an experiment, a meal of six courses, each represented by two dishes sharing a theme ingredient. The panel had to guess which of each pair had been prepared by a female chef and which by a male, based solely on how they looked and tasted. Of course, as the judges themselves predicted and then proved, it was impossible to tell—sometimes they guessed correctly, other times not. They cracked predictable, ice-breaking jokes about phallic-shaped cocktail garnishes and tried not to embarrass themselves when explaining why they were guessing a woman had made dish A and a man dish B. They did better when they looked for clues in each chef’s personal history and training.

The panelists quickly realized that determining who had produced the rhubarb gimlet or crispy sardine salad was not the most interesting question. Rather, why did they assume that certain flourishes or flavors were feminine? The evening’s message was that men and women don’t really cook differently; we just judge their food in different ways. This prejudice operates on two levels. Edible flowers on a plate can be said to signify “female,” while precisely stacked layers and drizzled sauces can be deemed “male.” But, when a chef’s gender is known, we can also describe his or her seemingly neutral dish with different vocabularies. Panelist Gwen Hyman, who writes about gender politics and food, reminded the audience of the old cultural trope “Women cook with the heart, men cook with the head—because women have hearts and men have brains.”

I went to both Food & Wine and Gourmet magazines to see if they could address this elephant in the kitchen—the great male/female culinary divide. The respective editors-in-chief (both women, incidentally) shared the opinion that to give women special attention is to corroborate that an actual difference exists between a person with a penis who wields a spatula and his penis-free counterpart. That fear is what Nochlin purposely tapped into when she slapped her
role is that of mother and, to some extent, backer. Her son, Joseph (aka Joe) Bastianich is the prolific business partner of Mario Batali. Together the two men have built an empire that encompasses multiple eateries across the country, cookbooks, cookware, an Italian wine store, a travel show, and, on the horizon, an upscale Italian market. What people may not realize is that Lidia is also a partner in at least one of these ventures, Del Posto, a bastion of haute Italian cuisine.

While Joe gets all the credit for the business success of the Bastianich family, Lidia is identified as the Italian equivalent of Julia Child. She cooks, with love, out of a home kitchen for her PBS audience and is noted for making remarks like “food for me was a connecting link to my grandmother, to my childhood, to my past. And what I found out is that for everybody, food is a connector to their roots, to their past in different ways. It gives you security.”

Lidia is an über-mother—an unfussy nurturer—and her latest TV program, Lidia’s Family Table, drives this point home with its charming vignettes of the chef teaching her grandchildren how to shape pasta. This is not Lidia as restaurateur or recipient of multiple James Beard awards (wouldn’t you know, she was the host of the 2009 gala).

This is Lidia, great cook and homey chef. Although her food on television seems rustic and simple, in reality she was one of the first chefs to elevate and refine American Italian cuisine. Dining at her restaurants reveals an overwhelmingly accomplished chef. So why the disconnect between what is behind the scenes and what we see on camera? Lidia is not allowed to be both things at once and, we are led to believe, she can appeal to the masses only by

Exhibit A: Lidia Bastianich

Our most preeminent female superstar in this arena is more like a counterpoint than a counterpart to these male archetypes. Lidia Bastianich is a triple (non)threat—restaurant owner, cookbook author, and television personality. She owns four Italian restaurants. Manhattan’s Felidia, which she originally opened in 1981 with her ex-husband and now operates alone, is the one most frequently associated with her. I’m not sure anyone realizes she has three others. There’s Becco, also in New York, and then Lidia’s Pittsburgh and Lidia’s Kansas City (confession: I had no idea these places existed until researching this story). Aside from Felidia, Lidia’s better-known restaurant roots, to their past in different ways. It gives you security.”

Lidia is an über-mother—an unfussy nurturer—and her latest TV program, Lidia’s Family Table, drives this point home with its charming vignettes of the chef teaching her grandchildren how to shape pasta. This is not Lidia as restaurateur or recipient of multiple James Beard awards (wouldn’t you know, she was the host of the 2009 gala). This is Lidia, great cook and homey chef. Although her food on television seems rustic and simple, in reality she was one of the first chefs to elevate and refine American Italian cuisine. Dining at her restaurants reveals an overwhelmingly accomplished chef. So why the disconnect between what is behind the scenes and what we see on camera? Lidia is not allowed to be both things at once and, we are led to believe, she can appeal to the masses only by

Exhibit A: Lidia Bastianich

Our most preeminent female superstar in this arena is more like a counterpoint than a counterpart to these male archetypes. Lidia Bastianich is a triple (non)threat—restaurant owner, cookbook author, and television personality. She owns four Italian restaurants. Manhattan’s Felidia, which she originally opened in 1981 with her ex-husband and now operates alone, is the one most frequently associated with her. I’m not sure anyone realizes she has three others. There’s Becco, also in New York, and then Lidia’s Pittsburgh and Lidia’s Kansas City (confession: I had no idea these places existed until researching this story). Aside from Felidia, Lidia’s better-known restaurant

roots, to their past in different ways. It gives you security.”

Lidia is an über-mother—an unfussy nurturer—and her latest TV program, Lidia’s Family Table, drives this point home with its charming vignettes of the chef teaching her grandchildren how to shape pasta. This is not Lidia as restaurateur or recipient of multiple James Beard awards (wouldn’t you know, she was the host of the 2009 gala). This is Lidia, great cook and homey chef. Although her food on television seems rustic and simple, in reality she was one of the first chefs to elevate and refine American Italian cuisine. Dining at her restaurants reveals an overwhelmingly accomplished chef. So why the disconnect between what is behind the scenes and what we see on camera? Lidia is not allowed to be both things at once and, we are led to believe, she can appeal to the masses only by
portraying the Italian *nonna*, her “feminine” side. Lidia Bastianich has all the makings of Great Chef, minus one crucial element: she is not a man.

Which takes us back to square one in the search for female correspondents to the reigning male Greats.

In “Where Are the Women Chefs?,” an online article for *Gourmet*’s Web site, Laura Shapiro seeks these female counterparts and finds herself at a loss. She looks at two chefs who had similar plans of action that yielded very different results:

When Gabrielle Hamilton opened a tiny, uncomfortable place called Prune in 1999, her idiosyncratic menu caught on, the restaurant became successful, and today she’s a much-admired figure on the scene. When David Chang opened a tiny, uncomfortable place called Momofuku Noodle Bar in 2004, his idiosyncratic menu caught on, the restaurant became successful, and today he’s a much-admired figure on the scene—with numerous awards, scads of magazine profiles, two more restaurants and a public that worships him. However you account for the difference between these two career trajectories, it’s got to include something besides the food.1

This is where oppositions like head : heart and chef : cook begin to have serious repercussions. If women are thought to work from their hearts, and men with their heads, which of them will be taken more seriously in the context of business? Or as a heroic renegade? A chef is, at the minimum, the leader of a professional kitchen. Beyond that, a chef is a risk-taker, the face of a company or concept, a television personality, and, above all, an expert. Being a cook is a much more blue-collar gig—it means being a nose-to-the-grindstone worker, a cog in a wheel, a hearth-tender. The chef is a professional who goes through proper training and rises in the ranks of a military system. The cook is self-taught, home-schooled, working by instinct.

If this sounds oversimplified, I encourage you to look at how the achievements of female chefs who have found relative success are represented. You will begin to see that gendered dichotomies are very much at play. Lidia Bastianich is a prime example. Alice Waters is another. The “mother” of American slow food, Alice is depicted as a nurturer. She has defined herself (not to her credit or that of her female peers) as a cook—a self-taught Francophile whose initial goal was to open “a simple little place where we could cook and talk politics,” a restaurant “born from the counterculture.” Her role is that of an educator, a caretaker, a protector of what is natural and “of the earth.” These characteristics are all stereotypically female.

### Exhibit B: Bay Area versus SoCal

Hard-pressed to find female equivalents of the Changs, Batalis, or Kellers of this world, Shapiro goes to the one place where there is a notable number of female-chef-owned restaurants, the San Francisco Bay Area.9 Waters, of course, is considered responsible for the burgeoning of this school of West Coast chefs—women who own small, independent restaurants that serve “homey,” Waters-inspired food. When people talk about accomplished female chefs, they often look to California to prove that the phenomenon actually exists. While the East Coast is notoriously unfriendly to enterprising women of the whisk, the West Coast is seen as a hotbed of culinary girl power.

But let’s take a closer look. Generally, the Bay Area chefs own one restaurant apiece, and it’s a casual affair—neither the chefs nor their restaurants are household names or internationally acclaimed. Michelin has probably never heard of most of them. Their boîtes are local charmers appreciated by fellow chefs and nearby foodies. Also worth noting is the communal spirit evoked when describing this band of West Coast women. Their success is limited to their context, which still feels very much bound by a gendered framework.

Shapiro might have found a more compelling template had she extended her scope a bit farther south, to Los Angeles, where professionals like Nancy Silverton and Suzanne Goin have quietly—with much consistent hard work—become insider favorites (what you’d call chef’s chefs). Yet both have kept relatively low profiles. Silverton, beloved for her skills as a pastry chef, opened her first venue, La Brea Bakery, in 1989 with her (then) husband, chef Mark Peel, with whom she later opened Campanile. She has recently teamed with Batali and Bastianich to open Mozza and Osteria Mozza. Goin launched her first restaurant, Lucques, in 1998, with business partner Caroline Styne. Four years later, AOC followed, and in 2005 Goin opened The Hungry Cat with her husband, chef David Lentz (they’ve since added a second outpost in Santa Barbara). A few months ago, Goin and Styne opened a new venture, Tavern, an eatery with a takeout shop and bakery.

Both Silverton and Goin have received James Beard awards and penned cookbooks; they own multiple venues, each of which has been heaped with praise. You can find them profiled in food magazines or, in Goin’s case, making an unremarkable cameo as a judge on *Top Chef*. But whatever exposure they’ve received is far from celebrity. Goin’s culinary skills sometimes play second fiddle to her good looks and chic-seeming lifestyle. She and hubby Lentz were
shot by Annie Leibovitz for a Vogue profile that gushed, “How is it that celebrated chef Suzanne Goin can surround herself with the most flavorful food and still have an Audrey Hepburn-like figure; can care so little for trends and always look cool?” It’s as though the very idea of an attractive, stylish woman who can hold her own in a professional kitchen and even possibly out-cook the men is untenable, an impossible dream. Somehow, being in Vogue seems to undermine her cooking chops. A male chef would not be discussed in these terms. When Esquire does a profile on David Chang, no one is writing about his favorite clothing labels or his weight.

Then there’s the piece that Cookie (an upscale glossy for sophisticated parents) did for its “Homefront” section. Here, Goin is the devoted mother of twins, shown, porch-side, with her babies, husband, and dog. The article delves into what sort of food she prepares for her fifteen-month-old daughters and catches her before a weeklong family beach holiday, an indication, we are told, that Goin “has shifted her priorities.” This chef sacrificed “18-hour days and years with no time off” to reach the ultimate goal, a life in which “family trumps the restaurant world.” Again, how often do you read such a story about a male chef? And is there any mention of Goin’s husband turning his attention away from the restaurant or changing his priorities? Nope.

Despite the quality of the coverage Goin or Silverton receive, relative to their peers up north these women have greater credibility as restaurateurs and, for the most part, as serious chefs. Still, what they do share with the ladies of the Bay Area is a lack of widespread fame. Outside of Los Angeles, media hub New York, and the inner circle of the food cogniscenti, these SoCal ladies remain unknowns. When the average out-of-towners go to Mozza, they’re going either because they’ve heard the pizza is killer or because the current style “updated wench chic” and said it successfully solves the dilemma faced by women in the cooking world. “They have to exude competence, but they can’t be frowzy,” he said. The old housewife-like era of Betty Crocker and Julia Child is out, he said, because the culture no longer allows that kind of happy frumpiness. “Everyone has to have a little bit of hootchy,” he said. “But the trick is not to have it go too far, because if it becomes too overly sexual, issues of hygiene come into play.”

The look, Louie surmises, was likely initiated by UK food deity Nigella Lawson, the original vampy homemaker who suggestively sucks chocolate batter off her finger before popping cake pans in the oven. Louie also sought out a Vogue editor, who addresses the bosomy costume’s potential as an antidote to the dowdiness of aprons and the “prudish”

**Of TV and V-Necks**

Although I generally agree with Shapiro’s assertions, I take issue with the media question. Just turn on the Food Network: women are everywhere. The problem isn’t lack of airtime. It’s the quality of that time and the way in which the women are portrayed: as cooks, not chefs; as pretty faces who do easy meals for families or casual parties.

Take Paula Dean—a larger-than-life southern mother hen who squawks, “I graduated magna cum laude from my granny’s kitchen!” Giada de Laurentis—an alluring (cleavage-bearing) girl-next-door who likes to cook simple Italian-ish meals for friends and family; Rachael Ray—a no-fuss, 30-minutes-or less everywoman who is everything but a chef (and who insists she is not one); Sandra Lee—a table-decorating, cocktail-sipping ditz who cooks with “semi-homemade” products and matches her appliances to her outfits; the Barefoot Contessa Ina Garten—a caterer-turned-lifestyle guru who loves throwing parties and preparing sophisticated versions of comfort food; and Anne Burrell, the only “professional” of the bunch. Although she is Mario Batali’s sous chef—assistant—on Iron Chef, on her own show she dumbs down her restaurant dishes and is shown not in chef’s whites, but in low-cut, V-neck sweaters, at a residential kitchen counter. In fact, all of these women have a home kitchen as their backdrop.

Two years ago Elaine Louie wrote an article for the New York Times Dining In/Dining Out section titled “Frump-Free Cooking: The Look That Sizzles,” in which she observed the V-neck as a trend for televised female stove-tenders. She cited deadpan expert opinions from fashion personalities like Simon Doonan, creative director for Barney’s New York:

[He] called the current style “updated wench chic” and said it successfully solves the dilemma faced by women in the cooking world. “They have to exude competence, but they can’t be frowzy,” he said. The old housewife-like era of Betty Crocker and Julia Child is out, he said, because the culture no longer allows that kind of happy frumpiness. “Everyone has to have a little bit of hootchy,” he said. “But the trick is not to have it go too far, because if it becomes too overly sexual, issues of hygiene come into play.”

The look, Louie surmises, was likely initiated by UK food deity Nigella Lawson, the original vampy homemaker who suggestively sucks chocolate batter off her finger before popping cake pans in the oven. Louie also sought out a Vogue editor, who addresses the bosomy costume’s potential as an antidote to the dowdiness of aprons and the “prudish”...
crewneck. Then there’s Nick Sullivan, fashion director of Esquire magazine, who talks about the fifties-style retro charm of the outfit. He comments on Nigella’s maternal appeal, citing her “come over here and lick my spoon kind of approach,” because a come-hither aura is essential to emitting motherliness, right? Louie never questions what all this means, tidily summing up the current uniform for television’s female food personalities as “sexy meets utilitarian.” She doesn’t bother to write about what the male TV stars are wearing, or whether they’re showing their biceps in the kitchen.

Speaking of men, the Food Network consistently portrays them as serious chefs, experts, adventurers, competitors. Except for the necessary place-filler Cat Cora, all the Iron Chefs are male. Bobby Flay, one such Iron force, also participates in Throwdown challenges, while his Iron colleague, Michael Symon, does double duty in Dinner Impossible, another against-the-clock thriller. Rock-star-impersonating Guy Fieri tours the country making clown-like pit stops at rough-n-tumble diners. Ironically, the one pastry chef on the network is male, but even he, the Ace of Cakes, is presented as a bad-ass punk. Otherwise, Alton Brown is a didactic science nerd. Pretty boy Tyler Florence may have shown up at the homes of desperate housewives to solve their 911 food emergencies, but his portrayal was more as a prince-charming-pro-to-the-rescue than as a paterfamilias. On his new show, Tyler’s Ultimate, Florence is in a residential kitchen (even if it is industrial in style), but he still plays the role of educating guru, having found and perfected the “ultimate” recipe. There’s no corner cutting for quick meals, no dinner table set for a final scene of dishing out to friends and family. Next up is a new show called Chefs vs. City, billed as “the ultimate foodie tour,” in which Mexican food authority and multiple-restaurant owner Aaron Sanchez and his cohort, offal expert Chris Cosentino, challenge locals to find the best culinary haunts around town.

These men are fearless mavericks, the women—domesticated goddesses. But back in the restaurant kitchen, women who wish to be taken more seriously forego virgin-whore style in favor of androgyny. They are generally unfeminine, short-haired, and makeup free, often quite muscular, even manly, in appearance. It’s as though the only way to gain legitimacy as a food force is by hiding all traces of femininity. Proof positive, you have Suzanne Goin, who, when portrayed as “feminine” (compared by Vogue to Audrey Hepburn, or to a happy, gourmet hausfrau by Cookie) is simultaneously downplayed as a culinary talent to be reckoned with. Male chefs are inherently sexy; female chefs, sexless. This assumption runs counter to the media-friendly women of the TV cooking shows that, by putting beautiful homemaker types on screen, reinforce the male-is-to-chef what female-is-to-cook identification. The defeminization factor is another byproduct of the frat-like culture of the professional kitchen.

Kitchen Culture: In the Trenches

Most twenty-first-century back-of-houses are testosterone-fueled, aggressive, male-dominated spaces. That’s the reality disseminated by chef Anthony Bourdain, who describes the roughness of the restaurant kitchen and its surly, tough, ball-busting guys. In his wildly popular book Heat, Bill Buford recounts his experience in the Batali-owned Babbo galley and the orange-clogged maestro’s own early run-ins with bad-boy chef Marco Pierre White. His message: the kitchen is a place where only the strong survive. Competition is constant. Women are not often welcome there—not because they can’t cook but because they’re not taken seriously as competitors.

When asked how men and women differ in the kitchen, Batali says, “It’s in women’s nature to be better because they don’t cook to compete, they cook to feed people. Back in Italy, the best chefs are never dudes—it’s always the grandma. There are two ways to make someone happy—both are by putting something in them…right now we’re talking about food!” Batali’s point of view is disconcerting, and not because of his crass double entendre. The grandmothers of whom he speaks do cook to feed people, but it’s also true that some women cook to compete. His observations...
raise another question: If most women don’t like to compete, does that mean they can’t be Great Chefs? Do you have to be a competitor to have the success of a Batali? To survive one of his kitchens, it would seem so.

The generalization that, professionally, women make love and men war is implied by V-neck pundit Nick Sullivan in his adoration for Nigella Lawson. Elaine Louie writes: “He contrasts her warm, nurturing style of cooking with the Gordon Ramsay style of cooking, which he described as ‘war.’” Gordon Ramsay, meanwhile, is given a reality show where his culinary expertise allows him to put chefs through their paces, taunt them, and decide their fates. His tyrannical, tantrum-throwing tendencies are encouraged; they make him all the more compelling to watch. Quietly, on another channel, Nigella the home cook lovingly frosts a cake for her child’s birthday, with a little swivel in her hips.

Serious restaurant kitchens are organized according to the brigade system. The military terminology is not accidental. Although it traces back to the fourteenth century, Georges-Auguste Escoffier is often cited as the chef who brought the system out of the barracks and into restaurant industry at the end of the nineteenth century. At the top of the pecking order is the chef de cuisine, who acts like a drill sergeant to keep his staff in line, by whatever means necessary. The system is extremely hierarchical; underlings and newcomers are often subjected to hazing. As relative newcomers to the professional kitchen elite, women often find themselves in subservient positions. And, since their lack of ability or desire to compete is presumed from the start, they are often hazed harder than the boys.

More problematic, perhaps, than this military system of organization are the ergonomics of the Francocentric restaurant kitchen, which create an environment both psychologically challenging and physically grueling. Women aren’t given any special dispensation. They have to endure the same conditions—heat, heavy pots, equipment stacked to the ceiling, standing on your feet all day. With less muscle mass to start with, women aren’t generally as tall or as physically strong as their male counterparts. So, although the setup isn’t particularly friendly to anyone, it’s harder on females. If given free reign, would women chefs invent an alternative operational system or utilize the space of the kitchen differently? Probably. Alison Vines-Rushing, winner of the 2014 James Beard Rising Star Award and co-owner (with her husband) of the New Orleans restaurant MiLa and Dirty Bird To-Go, a Manhattan fried chicken canteen, happily recalls the kitchen of her previous restaurant, Longbranch: “We painted the walls blue to make it home-like…it was the opposite of industrial.” She also made structural adjustments to accommodate her smaller size.

Anita Lo, executive chef and owner of Annisa in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village, also designed a non-standard kitchen after having worked at traditional, haute restaurants like Bouley and Chanterelle. Although she didn’t have many options due to her galley’s size, she chose an L-shape in lieu of the traditional rectangle with one central aisle down the middle. That way she could participate in the cooking and feel like part of the staff. “Most executive chefs aren’t usually in the kitchen,” she explained. “They stand at the pass and make sure all the dishes look alright going out. But I wanted to be in there cooking. Women chefs tend to prefer teamwork.” This small detail denotes a significant shift in mentality.

What to Expect

Will such newfangled, anti-brigade kitchens be perceived as amateur in the eyes of the James Beard or Michelin judges, even if the food they turn out is sensational? More to the point, can women who choose not to play by the same rules as the boys; who are equally ambitious culinarily but prefer different lifestyles—a slower pace, a more communal spirit in the kitchen, motherhood, less manic hours, or one restaurant where they cook as opposed to ten they oversee from afar—still vie for the same trophies as their male counterparts? As long as success is measured by the male status quo, women will likely remain overlooked.

Alexandra Guarnaschelli, executive chef at New York City’s Butter, agrees with Laura Shapiro that “When women chefs get media attention, it’s for bucking the norm...how about we just become part of the norm? Can we qualify for norm status?” Her comments remind me of something Linda Nochlin said two years ago in an interview regarding the expectations for women’s art: “the trope of ‘woman as exception’ has always been popular...People don’t know exactly what to do with ‘woman as exception.’ They’re like some odd bird out there that has done something unusual.” Categorizing a female talent—artistic, culinary, or otherwise—as an exception, an unusual spectacle, removes her from any comparative realm. After all, how can you fairly compare an exception to those who follow the rules? If she is the odd woman out, she can’t be considered according to the standards of her profession; she can be judged only against fellow oddballs. And then, by virtue of being eccentric, she technically becomes incomparable.

So bucking the norm and getting attention for difference does not help women achieve. Unfortunately, the
norm isn’t an option, either. The question remains: Can women qualify for great status? Can the West Coast model, for example, become another paradigm for greatness? Can’t talent and deliciousness count most? Must the traditional combination of a certain training, experience, and behavior be the only yardstick against which greatness is measured? The issue, of course, is not really about qualifying for the norm or for great status. It’s about expanding and redefining what the standards are, to make them more inclusive.

That’s what Nochlin was trying to do when she turned the tables on her fellow academics. The questions, and the manner in which they are asked, are what need amending. In the food industry, both the portrayal of female chefs in the media and the ergonomics of professional kitchen design need to change. The criteria for choosing “Best New” apparently favor the male culinary experience. Are there really no wildly creative, innovative young female chefs to be found? What about “Rising Stars”? The James Beard Foundation gives out an annual award to “A chef New” apparently favor the male culinary experience. Are years only four recipients of this honor have been women; years to come.” How are “impressive talent” or likelihood of “significant impact” measured? Over the last eighteen years only four recipients of this honor have been women; the most recent, Alison Vines-Rushing, received her award seven years ago. The requirements of eligibility need reevaluating.

But not necessarily on Nochlin’s terms. Forty years after her treatise appeared, it’s time for reassessment. We can no longer simply identify the problem—that women are considered incapable of doing the same as men, or that they do things equally but differently. The very definition of “problem” is at issue, and the question remains as relevant as ever. Women must conceive of themselves as potentially, if not actually, equal subjects, and must be willing to look the facts of their situation full in the face, without self-pity or cop-outs; at the same time they must view their situation with that high degree of emotional and intellectual commitment necessary to create a world in which equal achievement will be not only made possible but actively encouraged by social institutions.21

Today, women chefs have embraced their equal value and have faced the facts of their situation. But because they remain isolated and pigeonholed by the media, by culinary institutions, and sometimes even by their male peers, women don’t have the influence, numbers, or respect to change the reality of restaurant kitchens. The women who ought to question their culpability or power to effect change are those with agency and clout—the members of social institutions like the media and culinary organizations. Better to try and fail than do nothing. It’s already 2010. The status quo is unacceptable.

NOTES

9. Ibid.
13. As stated on the Food Network program Chefs:ology: Paula Dean.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.