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Cheffes de Cuisine: Women and Work in the Professional French Kitchen

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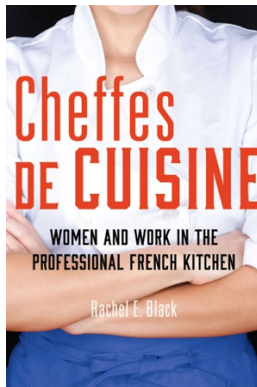
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BOOK REVIEW

Cheffes de Cuisine: Women and Work in the Professional French Kitchen, by Rachel E. Black, Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2021, 248pp., ISBN 978-0252086052.



Rachel E. Black's 2021 publication *Cheffes de Cuisine* fills an important gap in shining a light on gender inequality in the chef profession in Lyon, the culinary capital of France. Black is an associate professor of Anthropology at Connecticut College, but has also trained as a professional chef. She employs an interesting and engaging methodology by combining historical and contemporary analysis of the legend of *mères Lyonnaises* and *bouchons* with an ethnographic study of women chefs at varying stages in their education and careers. This analysis is bolstered with her own embodied culinary experiences. While it is clear from this book that women continue to be disadvantaged, Black highlights women who have engaged with the current system of culinary competitions to raise their profiles and advance their careers. In addition, Black showcases three women who have cast off the patriarchal processes and structures to successfully carve out their own culinary space in Lyon. Ultimately, this book concludes that many barriers remain for women and the author makes some concrete suggestions on what needs to change to help advance gender equality for women chefs in Lyon and in France as a whole.

Chapter one contextualises the book by uncovering the story of the author's initial research interest, the *mères Lyonnaises*. Black discovered that very little official recorded documentation existed and her account relies on the stories as told by the women she meets in the culinary industry in Lyon. These stories recount the 'legend' of *les mères Lyonnaise* who cooked according to the simple tradition of subtle flavours, also known as *cuisine bourgeoise*. This style arguably lies at the bottom of the French cuisine hierarchy and Black gives a good account of the three main culinary categories which consists of *cuisine bourgeoise*, *cuisine gastronomique*, and *haute* or *grande cuisine*. Noting that the narrative of *les mères Lyonnaises* is one of simple food cooked

by stern mother figures, Black ponders the importance of who the storytellers actually are. In this case they are male critics and chefs, in particular Paul Bocuse, who reinforce gendered expectations about what women should cook and how they should act in the kitchen. Black questions the significance of the legend of *les mères Lyonnaises* for women chefs in contemporary Lyon today, a theme which she explores in chapter two.

Chapter two moves into an exploration of the famed *bouchons* in present-day Lyon where the *mère Lyonnaise* first found their commercial niche. *Bouchons* began as small rustic gendered working-class eateries where men served wine out front, while women cooked hearty, local fare in the back. Today in Lyon, *bouchons* are popular tourist attractions and Black interviews women working in *bouchons* to explore the construction of authenticity, where she notes that there is great variety and complexity in the cooking style in contemporary *bouchons*. Nevertheless, again Black recognises contradictions and limitations: of cooks that are perceived as variously ‘homely’, matronly and domestic, thus limiting their ability as women to move forward or expand into the greater culinary world in Lyon.

In chapter three, Black examines the ways in which culinary education reproduces bias, discrimination, and stereotypes, while also noting ways in which this is challenged. Here Black, using participant observation, explores her own embodied experience as a 35-year-old pregnant culinary apprentice, along with her ethnographic study of four culinary apprentices to understand the ways in which women reproduce and subvert gender norms. Black makes some illuminating observations about gender discrimination in both cases. She acknowledges her own hyper awareness of the subject matter and recounts her observations during her apprenticeship. This contrasts sharply with the lack of awareness or lack of understanding of gender discrimination, as Black sees it, among younger apprentices in her separate ethnographic study. While enrolment of culinary students who are women has slowly advanced since WW2, the uptake by women of courses by 2017 is noted as being very positive. A common theme among the four apprentice interviewees was the perception of constant favouritism of male apprentices, the ways they were praised, their apprenticeship assignments at prestigious restaurants and how their potential career trajectories were discussed. Black notes that particularly in France building a strong resume with prestigious addresses and well-respected experience is essential for a successful career. She asserts that if *stages* are doled out not on the basis of talent alone, but on the basis of gender and talent, then women will invariably lose, making it increasingly difficult to make it to the top. French educational gatekeepers appear to have greater gender bias regardless of students’ talents and promise.

Chapter four addresses the matter of culinary competitions: specifically, culinary television shows and how women are finally accessing these previously male-dominated shows and competitions. Black discusses the inherent contradiction in taking part in overtly masculine culinary competitions such as *Iron Chef*, where participation reinforces the masculine, aggressive, competitive chef persona while also

playing an important role in elevating a chef's profile and expanding their career opportunities. Two female chefs, from different backgrounds, are interviewed to assess how they successfully navigated culinary competitions. Brazilian chef Tabata Mey, found her passion for food while studying medicine prompting her to undertake a *stage* in a restaurant in Rio. Subsequently she moved to Lyon to study and work under the tutelage of renowned chef Paul Bocuse. Young chef Audrey Jacquier basked in the culinary heritage of her family; her grand-father, and both her father and mother worked in the family restaurant. A chef career was a natural choice for Jacquier. Black notes that mentorship with culinary expertise and knowledge of the broader culinary world was instrumental in encouraging both female chefs to access key culinary pathways to develop career advancement. Both participated in culinary competitions to successfully help advance their career paths by raising their profiles, gaining credibility and remaining relevant. Black concludes the chapter by discussing the significance of a more diverse culinary media and journalistic focus in recent years. She identifies food writers and journalists seeking out diverse culinary stories of women and ethnic minorities, those with different culinary traditions that help to change the dominant narrative one story at a time.

Chapter five is an uplifting segue that showcases three women restaurateurs who have successfully moved away from the patriarchal hierarchical organisational structures, by creating their own ways of working in professional kitchens which has brought them both professional success and personal satisfaction. Black adopts Deutsch's framework 'undoing gender'¹ which reframes the question of gender inequality by asking how we undo the performative nature of masculine and feminine stereotypes that disadvantage women, when as West and Zimmerman² argued, they are so deeply embedded in the structures of how men and women interact in the workplace. Black considers how women chefs overcome and succeed when the sexualised nature of the professional kitchen workplace can actively deter women from participating. Black shows how women moved away from the masculine hierarchical brigade system and adopted a system based on mutual respect, mentorship, mutual support, empathy and dialogue to offer a more humane progressive alternative model of working in a professional kitchen. Key aspects of this new model are an emphasis on diversity and more sustainable cooking methods. Women chefs negative experiences of masculine kitchens taught them to operate their own kitchen under new principles. For chef Paulette Castaing, mutual respect for all chefs, a calm work environment and lack of the chef ego are key features. Chef Sonia Ezgulian's challenging transition from journalism into the professional kitchen was exacerbated by her lack of culinary education and subsequent difficulty finding chefs to work with

¹ Francine M. Deutsch, "Undoing Gender," *Gender & Society* 21, no. 1 (2007): 106-127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243206293577>

² Candace West, and Don H. Zimmermann, "Doing Gender." *Gender & Society* 1, no, 2 (1997): 125-151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002>

her recipes. She adapted her recipes to the professional world and encourages anti-waste practices that harks back to her mother's domestic practices. Chef Connie Zagora runs her own restaurant with her partner. Independence allows her to develop creatively, and together with a diverse group, mainly foreign and women chefs, she is part of the culinary landscape of nouvelle cuisine Lyonnaise.

In her concluding chapter Black acknowledges that while women are making progress and indeed forging their own pathways, real change will only come about by addressing the deep-seated structural barriers for women. She asserts that structural reform must begin with education, specifically by increasing the number of chef educators who are women, implementing implicit bias training for both culinary educators and their students, and finally creating specific support networks to assist women. Black also suggests that women chefs should be encouraged to participate in culinary competitions and elite culinary organisations to help build important professional networks and to elevate their personas, thereby gaining credibility and legitimacy at the highest levels. Recognising the challenges that family and children pose for women, she suggests that increased maternity leave, greater access to childcare, and more flexible working hours, will help women succeed as professional chefs.

This book has many great qualities, not least the interesting way in which Black uses her own embodied experiences to engage the reader and broaden the appeal of the book beyond academic readership. She believes this embodied knowledge furthers her understanding of the broader culinary culture and critically helps her understand what it was, and is, like to be a woman in a professional kitchen in France. She acknowledges that situated learning is at the heart of becoming a professional chef, and cleverly describes how her body resisted and was finally moulded to the pressures and demands of a professional kitchen. She is careful to recognise that her own experiences are not universal, and she cleverly contrasts her own experiences of sexism and discrimination in the kitchen with that of younger apprentice women chefs who do not recognise sexism and discrimination in a similar way to her. Her ethnographic study of female chefs is refreshing and illuminating in its uncovering of subtle and overt sexism and discrimination in the culinary scene in Lyon. This study highlights the importance of listening to women's embodied experiences, and challenging male gatekeepers' control of how women and their culinary ability are portrayed. Furthermore, it expands the discourse on how women chefs can successfully challenge outmoded organisational structures in professional kitchens.

Black is somewhat cursory in her discussion of the intersection of race and migrant status. According to her findings, women were not necessarily discriminated against on the basis of race or migrant status. Perhaps the scope of the book was not able to

adequately address this specific issue of race and migrant chefs.³ This may be a step too far for this book and a separate study specifically addressing this subject matter may be a better way to proceed. Nevertheless, Black does an excellent job of identifying the patriarchal systems and processes that continue to create barriers for women chefs: gatekeepers who define women within gendered culinary stories; education gatekeepers who favour male apprentices; culinary competitions' gatekeepers who protect male hegemony and who all ultimately define and shape the culinary culture to women's disadvantage. Black makes concrete recommendations to address these processes and systems, adding to the increasing voices within the chef profession for more access to women in the culinary world.

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³ For recent research on migrant chefs in France, see Siobhán Gough and Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, "Les noirs ne sont pas des cuisiniers, c'est des plongeurs': Exploring the Lived Experience of Migrant Cooks in Paris," *Journal of Foodservice Business Research* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15378020.2022.2096980>.