

## Women Belong in the Kitchen

BY NICOLE OLIVIER

The food industry is the single largest private sector employer in America with 12.5 million employees. Within that sector, women make up the majority of the workforce at 56 percent according to the National Restaurant Association. So it is a wonder that women as chefs and restaurateurs are a fairly new phenomenon and still in the minority within the upper level positions of this industry.

Historically, the belief has been that front-of-house positions were available for women but running the kitchen or the business was a job for men. This is not surprising to Brigid Flanigan, associate professor at **Southern New Hampshire University's** (SNHU) Hospitality, Tourism and Culinary Management program. "Kitchens had a somewhat down and dirty atmosphere where bad tempers and language may have been tolerated. For women to make it in that environment, they had to cut to the chase and speak more clearly and effectively and possibly act more aggressively than they otherwise would," she says.

While Flanigan says women have made headway in the past 10 to 12 years, NH has been behind the curve. "New Hampshire is a very traditional state steeped in its old school values. For many years, there just weren't opportunities for women to work to the top of this male dominated field. However, in the present day situation, New Hampshire actually affords maybe more opportunity to women because the smaller restaurants still outnumber the corporate chains and a woman that wants to start her own restaurant will be well received," she says.

Active in Women Chefs and Restaurateurs, a networking and support organization, Flanigan says the group's "goal is to promote a safer, sane and more civilized workplace."

"We have made great strides towards getting out of the 15- or 16-hour days that were traditional to these positions and we are getting positive feedback from men as well regarding these efforts. More and more men want to spend time with their families and changes currently being made are allowing men and women to do this without having to trade their family life for their chosen profession," she says.

The research department at the National Restaurant Association reports that restaurant industry employment is expected to continue to rise well into the next decade reaching 14.4 million by 2016 and the number of foodservice managers is projected to increase 12 percent overall by 2016.

John Knorr, assistant dean at SNHU's Tourism and Culinary Management, sees gender demographics changing along with the projected growth. He says, "Over 50 percent of our students are female. This has been growing over the past few years and indicates that we are moving away from a male-dominated workforce in the kitchen. When you look at the industry's upper-level positions, it is still primarily male dominated but strides are being made to make it a level playing field. As chefs are becoming more well known and are publicizing their creativity, even in TV reality shows and such, women may have an easier time being creative with menus and ideas. In fact, since creativity can come more naturally to women than to some of their male counterparts, this could actually give them an edge in this industry."

*New Hampshire Hospitality News* made a number of calls to female chefs and owners, all of which proved fruitless. Those chefs and owners who did return calls often said they had no time to be interviewed and this seems to speak to the challenges facing women working at this level and also trying to create a work/life balance.

Flanigan says that this profession has "physical challenges as well as time challenges that a 9 to 5 position does not have to contend with. But with more and more women at the helm, women are able to hire a supervisor to fill in when they need to be elsewhere or even arrange to have their children with them at the office raising multi-tasking to an art form."

Emily Lynn, executive director for Women Chefs and Restaurateurs, says that in the 13 years that the organization has existed, their scholarship program for women has grown from offering 13 scholarships annually to 37. “We want to make sure we are connecting with every woman in the industry and that opportunities are afforded evenly to all who are interested in this career path,” she says.

Eric Goodwin, president of **Goodwin & Associates Hospitality Services LLC**, says he will launch a Web site later this year for women in hospitality that will serve as a job site but also incorporate networking, guest blogs, and information useful to professional women in the industry.

“Hospitality is considered an old boys network in many ways, and there is a groundswell of sentiment among women in the industry that they sometimes are fighting an uphill battle for leadership positions. This site will be a great place for women to share common challenges and success stories.

“Most great companies actually work hard at attracting women and diversity candidates to their organizations. Some are actually mandated to do it based on HR objectives and achieving balance in the ranks, and some, sad to say, [do it] to ward off potential litigation. Whatever their motivation, it’s a segment that is sought after in the industry. In our recruiting division, we receive multiple calls per week from clients demanding to see women and diversity candidates,” Goodwin says.

Goodwin says he developed the idea while fielding a call from a large restaurant company asking if his organization could refer more women and minorities. “It just all crystallized for me,” he says. “I envisioned a place where women and diversity candidates would like to go, and a place where our extensive client list would have to buy postings, where we could sell links to this target demographic to businesses.”

As Julia Child once said, “Working in a restaurant kitchen is a skilled dance.” The challenge for the industry now continues to be to get more women performing that dance.

07/06/2007 in [Food](#) | [Permalink](#)