

**Report on Sabbatical
Fall Inservice**

“A Woman’s Place is in the Kitchen--Unless that Kitchen is in a Restaurant”

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Introduction: What is a Writing Instructor Doing in the Kitchen?

In my instructional and coordination roles at Lane, I observed the impact that gender inequalities continue to have on our students. For my sabbatical, I explored in a systematic way possible answers to several related questions, and integrated these answers into all my work at Lane. I examined the interrelatedness of literary history and labor history as they were inflected by gender issues and as they impact learning. I looked at real-world applications and deepened my understanding of how gender affects our students in the workplace and how they can respond to their experience through writing.

My Guiding Questions

My research was guided by the following questions,

Literary and Social History

In literary history (which is one of my discipline areas), the “canon” of literature is dominated by male authors—even though some of the most popular works of all time have been written by women. How does this same dynamic operate in the “canon” of *haute cuisine* where male chefs hold more power and authority as executive chefs or “top chefs” while women continue to occupy a “service” positions and “30-minute meal prep” that mirrors the domestic hierarchy?

Shifting Roles

If the kitchen has been traditionally perceived as “feminine” territory, why do roles shift in professional kitchens, where gender barriers persist in spite of advances in other professions?

Economic and Social Effects

What values are at work in the increasingly popular “chef shows” that feature “Iron Chefs” with masculine gestures and warlike demeanors? How do such shows work against women, excluding them from the most lucrative areas of the culinary profession? What are the implications of these shows—and the books that follow in their wake—for our culinary arts students?

Overcoming Obstacles

How have professional women chefs and women writers used the act of writing to overcome obstacles presented by the role their gender plays in their lives?

Local Applications

How can Lane students come to a new consciousness around the issues related to gender roles and equity in the workplace—in the Culinary Arts program, but also in other pre-professional areas?

Reflecting on the Project

As writing instructor to Culinary Arts students in the “Food for Thought” Learning Community; as composition instructor in the “Women and Work” learning community; as instructor of the English department’s “Women Writers” and “Gender and Literature” courses; as Service Learning Coordinator, and in all my writing classes, I witnessed the effects of gender restrictions on my students—male and female. In coming to sustained answers to the questions I posed, I know I am now more responsive to students’ experiences in the workplace, and can help them to cope with obstacles they encounter, and help them to use writing as a means for breaking free of the barriers placed in front of them. While I focused on gender in my work, and specifically on gender in the culinary professional world, my findings have already had positive implications for all working students—male and female, since my social justice framework engages everyone. I am now teaching a Writing 115 class that has benefitted from my new understanding of these tensions.

Food Industry, The Culinary Arts Program and Writing

Even before my sabbatical work, my engagement with these questions in the Lane Learning Community “Food for Thought” convinced me of the value of this pursuit—and led me to the food and wine industries. As a newly accredited Culinary Arts program, Lane has become more serious about its course offerings in this area—and its reputation is growing among men and women students.

My Accomplishments:

I interviewed more than five professional woman chefs including: Stephanie Pearl Kimmel, Sara Moulton, Tracy DeJardine, and Annie Somerville, and winemaker Patricia Green. I open my sabbatical report with a film clip from *Julie and Julia* to illustrate Julia Child’s experience seeking a culinary arts education in France in the 1940s. The clip illustrates what Julia Child was up against—this Julia who is still, undeniably, **the icon on the successful home cook**, dedicated to making French cuisine **approachable** and attainable to the home cook. While certainly things have changed for women in the professional kitchen, there’s still an uneven playing field when it comes to gender dynamics in the kitchen.

Women do belong in the professional kitchen, and what I learned in my sabbatical research is that despite assumptions that women have been leaving the professional kitchen, the opposite is actually true. The women I talked with—business owners, writers, winemakers, chefs—are amazing women—passionate, **inspiring**, even revolutionary.

Why did I do this inquiry project and what was my inspiration?

I’ve always loved being in the kitchen—grew up cooking with my mother and watching Julia Child’s “The French Chef” on PBS. My partner went to CCA in San Francisco and before I was hired at Lane, I was a guest in her B & P class—made Italian meringue, scraped mold out of bread baskets—I realized this was hard, hard work. Physical labor like this is typically reserved for men. I learned then that to do this work, you must be driven, must love it at a high level.

My interests led me to create a Learning Community at Lane, *Food for Thought*, where I created food writing assignments and essays centered on sustainable cuisine.

My experiences with my students gave me the chance to witness some gender dynamics at play in the food classroom. One student in particular—an A writer, a seemingly confident young woman—agreed to be a relatively silent member of a group focused on another male student’s cheesecake recipe. Now, it was an amazing cheesecake, his signature dessert, but I didn’t quite understand why she wouldn’t want to take more ownership and have more of a presence in the end-of-the-term oral presentation. Instead, her fairly “macho” peer (an ex-con, coincidentally) took over, much like the way some male chefs are

portrayed on food TV—tough, show-offy, knife-wielding chefs. So, the experience started me thinking about how the professional kitchen sometimes seems to operate—the domain for women historically seems to be reserved more for men once it's rewarded with accolades, prestige, money.

What did I expect to find?

- I assumed an either/or dichotomy would be at play in the professional kitchen: there would be no middle ground; real life would mirror Food Network images of women chefs *either* simplified/not taken seriously (Sandra Lee) and femmed up, wearing cashmere sweaters (Nigella Lawson) *or* the complete opposite, forced to adopt a stereotypically “male” stance to succeed. (Cat Cora's image to promote *Iron Chef*, Tracey DesJardine's hard stance on *Top Chef Masters*)
- I expected to find that women experienced challenges and that I would hear “glass ceiling” stories—how hard it was to break through.
- I expected to find that women are typically gravitate toward Baking and Pastry.
- I hoped to find that women could have it all: a career as a professional chef and a family.

My main activities:

I interviewed local and national women chefs, business owners, writers—learned what they do, why they do it, how they feel about working in the field of culinary arts/food writing and how they feel about being a woman in a traditionally male dominated field—one that is highly challenging—physically, emotionally, and mentally.

In addition to these interviews, I read widely in the field of food writing and culinary labor history--memoirs, cookbooks and instructional manuals, etc (e.g., *Gastronomica*, *The Greens Cookbook*, MFK Fisher *Gastronomical Me*, *The Art of Eating*, and the investigative work of Barbara Ehrenreich in *Nickel and Dimed* among others.

What surprised me? How accessible the chefs were: some of the women I interviewed are superstars in the culinary field--Sara Moulton, Annie Somerville. I was surprised and thrilled to have the chance to talk with them. That they would take the time to talk with a community college instructor demonstrated to me that they were interested in leading the way for other women in the field.

What I learned:

- How many women chefs graduate from top culinary schools? At CIA, in 1972, 5% of the graduates were women; today, it's 25%. Of the 2134 certified executive chefs in the US today, 92 are female. I learned how driven Sara Moulton had to be to succeed, top I her class, at CIA in the 70s.
- Who wins the James Beard awards? In 2009, of the 96 nominees, 16 were women. Only 2 of those sixteen went home winners out of the 19 total.
- Are women still in the professional kitchen and what's it like for them in the professional kitchen, a place that seems to be male-dominated despite women's occupation in the domestic sphere. Can women chefs and writers have it all? The women I spoke with didn't have the same experience of sexism that we might know of. They have their own restaurants, their own shows and so perhaps for these reasons they don't experience this. Here are some examples of my notes from my conversations:

Sara Moulton, Executive Chef, *Gourmet Magazine* /Cookbook Author: women dominate on Food TV—it's the real-life cooking everyone wants to see (Paula Deen, Nigella Lawson, Rachael Ray, Ina Garten). “If I want a BLT, I want a BLT—I don't care how great your knife skills are or how macho you look using a blow torch.” **Sara Moulton**—Julia child—what do you expect? (when the French chef chased her around the kitchen). Took her 6 months to even tell Julia Child, but she said basically, buck up—that's the way it is in the kitchen. It's all about how we view it.

Lynn Penner-Ash, winemaker for Penner-Ash in Oregon—on being a woman in the winemaking industry: "It's tough, it's hard, and you have to work harder and not make excuses." As she's gotten older ("and doesn't look 12"), she hasn't run into challenges related to being a woman in the field. As a woman, you have to "be better, more organized, smarter and work harder. You can't make excuses in the male-dominated world when things get dirty or difficult." One question she was asked when interviewing for her first job, "Do you plan to have kids?" and she wasn't even married yet. Are men asked the same kinds of questions?

Annie Somerville, Executive Chef, Greens/Cookbook Author: Never experienced male domination at Greens in San Francisco perhaps because it's a rare restaurant, founded by the San Francisco Zen Center, run by women, the only kitchen she's worked in. Annie says a gender balance in the kitchen is **necessary**: "men and women work differently and handle stress differently." Things go in waves: sometimes there are more men in the kitchen, sometimes more women. Anecdotally, two of our top female chefs had babies within one month of each other. Both came back after 6 months out of the kitchen and both left within 5 months of their return because, "Once they became mothers—mothers in particular—the realized this was no longer the work for them. For them, they couldn't succeed in a professional kitchen *and* be a mother of small children at the same time."

Jennifer Snelling, Food Writer for *Register Guard*: "I write about home cooking, not professional cooking. I don't necessarily think that's because I'm a woman, although I made the choice because it's what appeals to me and it's certainly also more accessible to my life ... being home with the kids."

Stephanie Pearl Kimball, Founding Chef, Marche: Stephanie's story about the filming of her dinner for Beard House in Greenwich Village—cost is \$5,000-20,000 to cook there, it's an honor. New York is still where it's happening, it's still the culinary center of the world," said the chef, who said he was embarrassed by the amount he spent, although not regretful. "And if you're asked to cook here it means you've arrived."

"For chefs, the Beard House is a home away from home," said a chef who paid \$15,000 to transport his staff, exotic produce and local fish from Hawaii to Manhattan for a night.

Honor of cooking for Julia Child and the demystification of this icon of home cooking. She poo-poo'd organics.

Side notes:

On Gordon Ramsey—interestingly someone who "plays" such a macho role on food TV (Hell's Kitchen, the F-word, etc) he's a champion of women in the kitchen when you research him online. I admit I don't watch Hell's Kitchen—have never seen it—but I have watched many episodes of the F-word, enough to see Ramsey's style and personality and how unlikely it would be to imagine him as a champion of women in the kitchen. (He's domineering, insulting, crass)

How this work is impacting my teaching CA students?

I don't know yet. My course is primarily for the non CA student this term, but I have a deeper understanding of the challenges of working in this field—and the understanding that some women in this field have the challenge of balancing a drive to achieve professionally with the pull of the maternal.

I wrote my application before I got pregnant, and then by the time I went on my sabbatical, I already had twins. So while I wasn't able to do the kind of travel I had intended, I was nevertheless very satisfied with the access I had to professional women chefs and writers with regional and national reputations.

The resource list of writings that I developed from my reading and research will play an important role in my future course development.

I had intended to explore the role of sustainability in food writing, and as I write above, this was more complicated than I had expected. I do plan to include Michael Pollan's books in my future courses because of his focus on sustainable practices, but this is a tangential issue right now.

I was unable to attend the National Women's Studies Association conference as planned because of my pregnancy, but with that one exception, I was able to complete my research work and interview by phone and local travel.