

teaching note

Why Are Women Not so Successful as Men in the Professional Kitchen?

Case Summary

The present case study provides a scenario of a woman aspiring to be a chef. Because of the stereotypes that exist in the restaurant industry and society in general, her opportunities for promotion are fewer than those available to men. This brings on feelings of frustration, particularly because women have always been recognized for their culinary skills at home and the ability to feed groups of people in her background. The perceived monopolization of the cooking profession by men fills her with doubt and feelings of injustice and inequality. Considering her own well-rounded work experience and additional professional studies, it should not be as difficult as it currently is for her to find employment in a position of greater responsibility in the kitchen hierarchy. She has concluded that those positions are implicitly reserved for men, and she doubts her strength and capability to take on a more demanding position in a restaurant.

Target Audience

The proposed lesson plan is tailored for culinary students and requires the use of a teaching kitchen. This case could be used in any restaurant management, human resources, or food and culture course in a module that addresses diversity management. This lesson could also be applied in restaurant management or a hospitality-centered human resources course with a module that addresses diversity management.

Teaching Objectives

This case study aims to bring light to the treatment of women in the culinary side of the restaurant industry and juxtapose it with women's historical roles as nurturers and providers of nourishment. Its main objective is to discuss the factors which may hinder women's professional success in restaurant kitchens, particularly in comparison with their male peers. By the end of the class, students will understand multiple points of view, have a more holistic view of women's roles in culinary history, and the awareness that even in one's professional life, one must never forget one's origins.

Prior to Class

Prior to class, students will be assigned to read the case study about Gabrielle. They will be asked to come up with a recipe for a dish that reminds them of their mother and where they are from. They will have an opportunity to make a small requisition with the ingredients needed to cook this dish for four people to sample, including the instructor and three other students.

Phase 1. Introduction

Students will introduce themselves for a couple of minutes, expressing who they are, where they are from, who first taught them to cook, and a brief explanation of the role that their mothers, grandmothers, and other women in their families played in influencing their desire to pursue cooking professionally. (20 minutes)

Phase 2. Background and Discussion

This phase will implement the content of the case study. Students will discuss what they learned about the situation of women in the restaurant industry, and if applicable, share their own experiences with gender roles in the kitchen. The discussion can lead into the teaching questions from the case, with possible solutions as follows.

- Understanding Gabrielle's situation, and given the circumstance that she hasn't been able to find a job pathway compatible with her passion, what would be an option for her to advance her career and keep doing something fulfilling? This could be an opportunity to learn about effective networking and job search skills. For example, Gabrielle can find a mentor or a non-culinary position in a hotel that could present the opportunity for lateral service. A class-wide brainstorm of possibilities can serve to inform students of career options that they otherwise would not have been aware of, which will help with their long-term career development.
- What would be the best way to change the military-based "brigade" staffing model of the restaurant industry? What cultural mindset changes would be necessary to convince the industry that this could be both feasible and beneficial? One way kitchen production environments can evolve is by normalizing a more collaborative workplace and loosening the stiffness of authority and rank. This would require adopting a more respectful work environment that values and welcomes everyone's contribution and treats all workers with dignity.
- What would be the value for culinary students to study and analyze the work of women as traditional cooks in addition to the work of renowned professional chefs around the world? How could this be done without implying that one is better than the other? Much of what is considered traditional in terms of cooking methods are born out of necessity; one way that looking at this work would bring value to culinary students is by teaching them how to adapt to less than ideal situations and ingredients. This adaptability can translate into creativity and the ability to perform in a crisis, which are essential skills to have in a culinary career and are not considered "gendered" traits.

- Women, by nature, are resilient and known for cooking “from the heart.” How could the potential of women’s creativity be communicated to restaurateurs in a way that demonstrates the benefits to their organization? Restaurateurs can learn from each other by setting an example and showcasing woman-influenced dishes on their menus. Naming things like “Mom’s chicken soup” or “Abuela’s [grandmother’s] tamales” on the menu is an example that is widely used.

Phase 3. Hands-On

In this phase, each student will be given 60 minutes to prepare their recipe. They will have to cook enough for four people, as the instructor and three more students from the class will be tasting the dish.

Phase 4. Tasting

After students have finished creating their dishes, each one will take a couple of minutes to introduce and discuss the dish. The student is supposed to explain the reason why he or she chose it, what it represents in their lives, as well as its importance to his or her career journey. The goal of this exercise is to have students identify women’s roles in the development of culinary traditions. Despite the relative absence of women in the top tiers of professional kitchens, women have in some way or another contributed to the development of certain famous restaurant dishes through their traditional roles at home.

All the students will have the opportunity to taste another student’s dish. Each student will have another three students taste his or her dish, in addition to the instructor, for all the participants to have the experience of consuming as well as producing food “from the heart.” This is intended as an offering, an act of humility that is meant to be entirely different from a typical, transactional restaurant experience. (40 minutes).

Phase 5. Cleaning and Final Conclusions

Students will have 15 minutes to finish cleaning the kitchen, and with the time remaining, they will have the opportunity to express their conclusions about the lesson. They can express their opinions and points of view regarding why women are left behind in the culinary industry and what they believe can be done to change this, either systematically or individually, as future leaders in the industry. Hopefully, for those who want to manage their restaurants in the future, this will demonstrate the importance of giving visibility, credibility, and chances to women to show their natural abilities. Finally, this will also help all students remember the importance of acknowledging the origins of their passion.

Rather than a strictly theoretical class that introduces new concepts, this lesson is designed to enable students to be critical, think outside of their comfort zone, and confront the issues that women face in the restaurant industry. Students will be able to come away from this lesson empowered to help facilitate a change in the industry, with meaningful benefits to everyone involved.

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