

Review of:

Cheffes de Cuisine: Women and Work in Professional French Kitchen

Rachel E. Black, University of Illinois Press, 2021. Pp. 227, acknowledgement, prologue, glossary, introduction, conclusion, notes, bibliography, index.

Review By: Nadia Sarwar

Despite women's dedicated, skillful, and ever-growing engagement with French culinary art and tradition, they have remained *le deuxième sexe* (the second sex) in terms of priority, recognition, and achievement in French professional kitchens. In her book, *Cheffes De Cuisine: Women and Work in the Professional French Kitchen*, Rachel E. Black asks, "if more women than ever are entering the profession, why are they so deeply underrepresented at the top ranks of the profession?" (2). Illustrating how French professional kitchens are highly gendered spaces, Black asserts that the occupational contexts of the French culinary industry have largely been influenced by "gender, nationality, sexual orientation, and race" (2). To document women's role in French culinary practices, Black records the stories of "exclusion and empowerment" (11) of local women chefs from Lyon, a city renowned for its heritage of French culinary traditions. Black analyzes the "heterogeneity and multiplicity of identities and experiences of women working in kitchens in Lyon" (13). Her ethnographic investigation encapsulates the voices of women culinary professionals from the past and present using archival data, oral history collection, interviews, and participant observation. In addition to conducting interviews with twenty-seven culinary professionals, including one key participant, Black herself worked in professional French kitchens to learn culinary skills and kitchen language. Black's ethnographic endeavours were largely designed to better understand the persistence of gender inequality in French culinary practices, the factors that restrain women from being in the top-ranked positions in the culinary profession, and the ways women define and negotiate their identity within such a male-centric occupational context. The question, "what was it like to be a woman in a professional kitchen in France?" (84) frames Black's investigation. Theoretically, her study is informed by feminist literary criticism, and, to a much lesser extent, by Crenshaw's theoretical approach to intersectionality.

In Chapter One, Black discusses Lyon's culinary culture in both historical and present contexts. She brings together the legends surrounding the first generation of women chefs and analyzes how those legends allow contemporary female culinary professionals to "give meaning and value to their work" (25) but at the same time restrict their culinary practices. She argues that although the legends of *mères lyonnaises* serve an important function to minimize the gap between "public and private lives" (48), they also strengthen gender-biased culinary culture. This chapter thoroughly examines the historical development of Lyon's culinary industry.

In Chapter Two, Black explores the gendered division of labor in Lyon's historic restaurants (popularly known as *bouchons*). Her interviews with the women working in *bouchons* reveal that women in Lyon's professional kitchens often play secondary roles to men. Building on her argument in the first chapter, Black adds that the gender performances enacted in *bouchons* are highly influenced by the traditions believed to be followed by the

mères lyonnaises: “Women’s work is not necessarily legitimate because of what women are doing now but because it fits into a narrative structure that was valid in the past...” (81). It was common for women to take on an imposed motherly persona in professional kitchens and Black argues that such gender stereotypes restrain women chefs’ creative practices in many ways.

In Chapter Three, Black examines how gender-biased apprenticeship in French culinary school shapes women’s experiences and empowers men over women. Drawing on her own apprenticeship experiences, Black explores the disadvantaged position of women in French culinary culture. In this chapter, she points out how women are viewed as gendered bodies and considered ineligible for most of the work in professional kitchens, in addition to facing challenges in securing admission to top-ranked culinary schools. Amid all these injustices, Black finds a ray of hope in the women who “are trying to shift these structures and create kitchens in which everyone can work together and flourish” (199).

Chapter Four is based on the author’s interviews with Tabata Mey and Audrey Jacquier, two women culinary professionals who have successfully reached the height of the culinary profession. Black briefly discusses the influence of race, class, and ethnicity beneath these success stories. However, she finds both Tabata’s and Audrey’s stories fascinating since they “show that some women do have a competitive spirit and a strong desire to prove themselves on the same stage as men” (145). Based on the experiences of these two well-established female chefs, Black argues that women’s participation in leadership positions is important to challenge the patriarchal hierarchies embedded in culinary workplaces. Black ends the chapter in a positive light referring to the role of contemporary media in constructing a favorable image of women culinary professionals.

Chapter Five features a compelling focus on the women who are creating new structures in the French culinary industry while subverting and challenging the masculinized norms of professional kitchens. This chapter centers on women from different generations who successfully implemented innovative culinary practices while incorporating feminization, collaboration, empathy, supportiveness, and patience in those kitchens. Black argues that these women have been reshaping Lyon’s culinary history while questioning patriarchal structures, challenging traditional kitchen practices, and embracing diversities in culinary practices.

Black concludes the book with mixed feelings regarding the present and future of the French culinary industry and women’s position in it. She is hopeful since more women are joining the culinary profession these days and reclaiming spaces in the culinary world. However, she is disappointed with the fact that women’s “achievements are not recognized or celebrated in the same way as men’s success” (179). Since women chefs still occupy marginal spaces, Black discusses the importance of empowering women in the French culinary industry by creating favorable spaces and ensuring various social support systems in culinary practices. If positive changes are enacted in Lyon’s professional kitchens, Black hopefully asserts, “For the gastronomic capital of France, the future is quite possibly female” (196).

Cheffes De Cuisine: Women and Work in the Professional French Kitchen is the outcome of Black's extensive fieldwork. The theoretical framework of the book is largely focused on feminist literary criticism and undertakes very little intersectional analysis. As a result, some aspects of the discussion, such as her analysis of the influence of race, class, and ethnicity on gendered identities, are not well developed. However, this easily read book incorporates a rich ethnographic account of French culinary history and tradition and thereby minimizes any gaps in the author's use of outside scholarship by paying serious attention to women's lived experiences in professional kitchens. Black's book is a valuable addition to folklore scholarship, women's studies, food studies and other related fields. For students, researchers and individuals across various disciplines interested in foodways and French culinary history and tradition, this book would be a good read to explore women's professional kitchen work.

Works Cited

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- Jordan, Rosan A., and Susan J. Kalčík, eds. 1985. *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.