

PLANET JACKSON HOLE

KULTURE KLASH: New Impressions

By *Meg Daly* on July 20, 2016

One of the valley's only female head chefs could help pave the way for other women in restaurant kitchens.



Chef Hollie Hollensbe, 34, is Fine Dining Restaurant Group's first female executive chef. (Photo: Sargent Schutt)

JACKSON HOLE, WY – Is there a glass ceiling for women in the culinary world? If so, The Kitchen's 34-year-old chef de cuisine Hollie Hollensbe has shattered it.

Hollensbe is one of the only female head chefs in the valley and the first female executive chef at Fine Dining Restaurant Group. Her role at the helm of a renowned Jackson eatery may help open the door for other female chefs seeking leadership positions in valley kitchens.

It's a (wo)man's world

Jackson Hole falls in line with national statistics when it comes to gender disparity in the culinary world. A 2014 Bloomberg study found that women occupy a mere 6.3 percent of head chef positions at 15 prominent U.S. restaurant groups. While women attend culinary school at rates almost similar to men, the industry does not often blame sexism for the low number of female head chefs. Instead, numerous studies and articles pointed vaguely to "lifestyle" choices, i.e. wanting to have a family.

Gavin Fine, of the Fine Dining Restaurant Group, was all too happy to encourage Hollensbe's ascendancy. "After moving to The Kitchen, Hollie quickly made her way to sous chef and then to chef de cuisine," Fine said. "She's an incredible chef and leader."

Being head chef is a demanding job that requires physical and mental acuity, creativity, humor, and an ability to direct a team. Cooks are often on their feet for more than 10 hours a day, confronted by constant stress, heat, and grease, all at a typically dizzying pace. "Kitchens are fun, open places," Hollensbe admitted, "but they are not for the skittish by any means."

Hollensbe, who moved to Jackson two years ago, downplays the gender factor.

"I've never been treated any differently," she noted. "There are a lot of women in the industry these days."

While that may be true, there is anecdotal evidence that women cook differently than men. Celebrated British chef Margot Henderson told *Lucky Peach*: "In the food industry and in the restaurant industry, I think the male approach dominates and the female one is overlooked. In a lot of kitchens, food is treated as a problem to be solved, something to dominate."

When interviewed by *New York Magazine*, decorated NY chef Rebecca Charles said, "Women's food is, for the most part, more accessible, it's easier to understand, it's friendlier, it's more comforting, and it doesn't get bogged down in all these nutty freaking trends."

Although Hollensbe doesn't discern any divisions between male and female chefs, in some ways she mirrors other female head chefs who celebrate food for its abilities to comfort. She points to The Kitchen's duck confit as a different take on traditional comfort food. "We rub the duck in a Chinese five-spice blend and cook it like traditional duck confit. It is served with a stir-fry of julienned daikon, carrots, radish, baby bok choy, snap peas, Chef Joel Tate's lap cheong sausage, and a decadent soy/Mirian sauce."

Beyond its ability to comfort, Hollensbe also focuses on food's role bringing people together. "For me, there's nothing more comforting than how food gets people to sit down together to eat, drink, laugh, cry, share memories and just enjoy one another. The fact that I get to be a part of that experience is really special."

Team Beyonce

Hollensbe is passionate about using as much local and regional food as possible in her kitchen. Her veggies come from the Jackson Hole Farmer's Market, Aspens Market, and Vertical Harvest. Bread comes from Persephone.

"When we do that, we get these wonderful fresh products," Hollensbe said. "Vertical Harvest's basil, for example, is some of most beautiful I've seen."

Meats are often regionally sourced as well, including pork from Butte, Utah, whole cows from Carter Country Beef in Ten Sleep, Wyo., and duck from Ballard Farms in Utah. Knowing where your meat comes from means knowing what it ate. “I want to know [I’m using the meat of] animals that have been fed properly and lived a clean, happy life,” Hollensbe said.

In the kitchen, Hollensbe is a team player. Two nights of the week she is on grill duty cooking all the entrees, and other nights she is there to call out tickets, finish plates, and tell the servers where the food is going. “During our busy pushes, I jump in and help at all the stations—wherever my staff needs it,” she said.

Hollensbe studied at a Le Cordon Bleu school in St. Louis, MO. The program included an externship at the notable Old Warson Country Club where she learned from chef Aiden Murphy, the 95th ranked chef in the world. “Working there taught me a lot about the militant aspect of the kitchen,” she said. “It really is a brigade. [Everyone] has to function smoothly together.”

However, now that she is top dog, Hollensbe is more interested in creating a team rather than having people fall into ranks. “I love The Kitchen because it has a somewhat open kitchen,” she said. “You can see what’s going on. We don’t have that front and back of the house divide. We all get to interact.”

Staff interactions include regular “flour explosions” while making cookie dough and Beyonce dance parties during prep time. After closing, Hollensbe plies the bartender for an Insomnia (a White Russian with espresso). She speaks glowingly of her team, including general manager Jeremy Weiss and her sous chef, who also happens to be female, Helen Goelet.

Like other women chefs, Hollensbe’s greatest contribution to Jackson’s food scene may come down to the interconnectedness she champions. “It’s very much like a family,” she said of her team.

Palate piqued

Hollensbe’s current obsession comes from flavors that originate on the other side of the globe. “Right now I’m inspired by a lot of Asian cuisine for its spice blends and dynamic flavor profiles,” she said. “Our pork chop is one of my favorite dishes on the menu.”

Served with a sautéed kale salad with speck and Fresno peppers deglazed with sake, the pork chop is brined, grilled and topped with a ginger, yuzu and honey glaze. **PJH**