



Rainbow Room kitchen staff, 1994. Chef Claire Stewart is standing, middle row, third from right. Renowned for fine dining, the Rainbow Room was declared a New York City Landmark in 2012.

Dishin' Confidential

Secrets from a female chef on breaking into the male-dominated kitchens of the past

CLAIRE STEWART

A housewife? You think I want to be a housewife?!

My third-grade teacher had asked the class to draw pictures performing our dream careers. I drew a picture of myself baking—with cookie sheets, wearing an apron, surrounded by pots and pans. Mrs. Steinle went around the classroom commenting on the various sketches of cowboys, ballerinas, and astronauts. When she got to mine, she exclaimed, “How cute! Claire wants to be a housewife.” The treachery of her words cut deeply.

I had no word for “chef” in my vocabulary, as 1972 Sacramento was not a place of haute cuisine. I knew I wanted to cook. I also knew I expected to be *paid* for it. Mrs. Steinle had no knowledge of Stewart’s Place, my

efficient side hustle operated in our palatial ranch house kitchen. My brothers and neighbors were subject to my rotating menu of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with carrot sticks, accented by a full bar. I do not remember actually mixing drinks, but my familiarity with liquor says something about an era with no seatbelts or bike helmets.

Soon I would taste sweet victory when my oatmeal cookies won a Girl Scout baking contest. I was, however, a bit disappointed by the quality of my competition, considering my recipe was the one printed inside the lid of the oatmeal container. When I graduated from chef school years later, my mother presented me with my Girl Scout sash. I had earned exactly one badge: the cooking badge.

Work in local restaurants followed, where I found my people, those whom Anthony Bourdain called “vampires”—culinary creatures of the night, misfits and outcasts made normal in the confines of dirty hot kitchens. At the time, there were females in the kitchens of casual California-style health restaurants, but we certainly weren’t prevalent in the classical continental-style establishments of interest to me.

I had a rebuttal for every obstacle thrown in my path. Was I afraid of being the only female in the kitchen? (No. I had three older brothers. Sporty brothers. Brothers who determined it was more fun to beat me up if I had some training, so they held wrestling and boxing sessions to prepare me for battle. They never really hurt me, and heaven help the neighborhood boy who did hurt me.) Kitchens are noisy and violent? (See above.) The kitchen is hot as a sauna? (Have you *been* to Sacramento?)

I moved across the country from Sacramento in 1989 to study at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, New York. I lived in a triple dorm room with Stacey and Betsy—and unfortunately with Fred, Betsy’s hairy boyfriend whose presence was not welcome but too often a feature in the bunkbed I shared with Betsy. A year into the program, CIA students were unleashed to do a six-month externship before returning for another year, hardened by the “real world,” which was presumably even more demanding than the school world that threatened to chew up the mild-mannered. We may have been served lobster thermidor and wine in the middle of the day, but intimidation and humiliation were

considered teaching techniques. I was told by one teacher that the reason I was stupid was because I was “in the bathroom fixing my hair when God gave out brains,” to which I was required to reply, “Yes, Chef.”

Instructors weren’t the only challenging personalities. During my practical exam, a fellow student turned up the flame on my consommé which, had I not noticed, would have caused it to boil and become cloudy. When the instructor graded me, he said he was giving me a high pass because he saw what the student did and I had not “whined about it.” He winked and said he knew I would find a way to repay my classmate soon.

Divisiveness was indeed encouraged. I got in a wee fight and was brought to one of the deans to explain myself. I told the truth, that the student was talking trash about me loudly in the bookstore and she needed to stop it and never do it again. I got in no trouble, didn’t even receive a demerit. Students were sent home due to demerits, as big a disgrace as not passing your practical exam. As students we squabbled and fought, name-called, and then drank together at Augie’s, the campus bar named after Auguste Escoffier.

Man, I loved that school.

My introduction to high-profile kitchens could only be described as “rough and rumble.” To catch a train to Grand Central Station for an externship interview at Windows on the World, I took a cab and saw my precious \$20 tick by in rush hour traffic. I breathlessly rushed between two elevators to get to the kitchen on the 107th floor. The elevator slid open to total pandemonium. I stood dumb. When a young man in chef’s uniform walked by, I smiled and asked

politely if he could tell me where the Head Chef’s office was. He stared at me coldly and said, “No.”

The kitchen manager kept his back to me throughout the entire interview, only spinning his chair around when I started to leave. It had been so long since he had spoken, I figured the interview was over. He did ask me when I could start. I had no money to return to Grand Central via cab, so I navigated, terrified, the subway to Rockefeller Center where I next had an interview at Rainbow Room. It, too, was pandemonium, but it was a beautifully controlled chaos held together by the best in the business. I gladly worked like an animal throughout my externship there and was offered a job once I graduated the following year.

I started my full-time job at Rainbow the Monday after graduation, earning enough money to afford a dingy studio in Chelsea. Living alone in Manhattan is a luxury few young people know today. We could serve an excess of one thousand covers a night, with evening service beginning at 5:00 to get patrons out in time to attend Broadway shows. Next came dinner service, and finally supper, designed for post-theater customers. We joked that management would next add twilight and dawn services.

For reasons unknown, the chefs called one another by their mother’s names (Mary Lou, Dot, Marion), particularly amusing since there is nowhere with as much testosterone surging as a hot line in a restaurant kitchen. When tensions between the tuxedo-clad wait staff and the chefs were particularly palpable, a kitchen rumble would be called. Someone would yell, “Rumble!” and fists would fly, waiters running back down the

kitchen-to-dining room escalator, ready to defend their brethren. Small amounts of blood would spill, there were some scratches and torn clothes, but everyone had to get back to work, so it never lasted long. I suspect they all held back. It was against honor code to introduce the knives just within reach. I was not expected to participate of course—these were *gentlemen* who would never hit a woman. Soon the chef would yell, “Ice ‘em down!” and the Commis (the most junior chef) knew he was to pile ice on the enormous rolling cooler of beers that signaled a return to service.

Next, I briefly worked in Oxford, England, where I came to appreciate the privileges of American citizenship. I was surprised when asked on job interviews how old I was and whether I was married. I quickly found a job at a well-known restaurant as a Chef de Partie, a chef who rotates working a dedicated station for the day, such as the Saucier or Grillardine. I didn’t have the proper working papers, so the Head Chef reported that my “special skills” were needed. I was a pancake expert, you see, and was needed to fill a void in this area of American expertise. On my first day of work, the self-proclaimed leader of the cooks announced that he did not like me, did not like women in the kitchen, and did not like Americans. I told him he would need to pack a lunch. He especially did not like my American accent, which was incessantly mocked with singsong voices and snickers.

My tongs disappeared constantly, my ingredients tipped over, my oven turned off. They really had nothing new. One cook (to be fair, he was not

English) had given me enough grief and I knew that it was time for me to engage. It is an old trick to take someone’s tongs and put them in the flame until just before white hot. He should have known this. The howl that he gave when he picked up his tongs moments later was quite loud and the names he called me were at least original.

The kitchen crew soon deemed more force was needed to put me in my place. Cooks were required to shout, “Sauté off the line,” or “Tournant back on the line,” to allow the Head Chef to track when someone was out of earshot, thus unable to hear an incoming order or pickup. In the middle of a busy service, I scampered into the restroom and, after quickly doing my business, found I could not get the door open to exit. They had locked me in. I had orders to be picked up and could hear more coming. Imagine their surprise when I soon arrived back at my station. Climbing up on a milk crate, shimmying through a window, and coming in the kitchen’s back door had not been that hard. “Saucier back on the line,” I called. The Head Chef, finally angered by his staff’s poor behavior, announced he was giving me the Fourth of July off, paid, the following week. He wrote me a generous letter of reference and sheepishly admitted he perhaps could have reined in his “boys” earlier. No #metoo back then.

My first professional kitchen title was as a Banquet Chef, responsible for multiple simultaneous events, at an enormously profitable restaurant in New Jersey. I worked ceaselessly and was never paid overtime, the other side of a management title. I found myself

surrounded by drunks. The leader, whose name I do not think I ever knew, was called Captain Morgan. He looked exactly like the man on the bottle, and it was clear he was familiar with the product. It was there I got third-degree burns when a pan of bubbling hot duck à l’orange cascaded down my forearms, its hot goo sticking to, then removing my skin. More collateral added to the burns, cuts, and scars that laced my arms.

Hazards extended beyond the kitchen in this so-called glamorous profession. I worked for New York City’s first family, cooking weekends at Gracie Mansion. One late night I returned to my car parked in a commercial garage on the Upper East Side. Snow was starting to fall and I was nervous about my drive home. My Honda Civic was idling nearby while the attendant was unable to process my bank card. He yelled at me to walk to an ATM and get cash. I insisted it was too late to go to an ATM by myself in the middle of the night and it was his issue with the card system anyway. He continued to berate me (inexplicably calling me an expletive I cannot repeat here) and turned to the warmth of his little parking-man hut to make a phone call. I leapt into my car and peeled off. He was welcome to call the police, whom I was sure would at least get me home safely. He ran up the driveway behind me, screaming insults and shaking his fist. It was not until blocks away that I stopped shaking. I would like to say that I mailed money the next day, but I’m sure I didn’t. It was the expletive that got to me.

Any port in a storm, they say. I once rented a room in a wonderful apartment overlooking Riverside



LEFT: During a year-long tour celebrating her 80th birthday in 1993, famed chef Julia Child visited the Rainbow Room, where Claire Stewart was one of only three female kitchen staff. As Stewart recalls, “She came into the kitchen to meet the chefs and made a beeline to me, asked my name, and spoke with me and the two other women. She asked the chef why she didn’t see more women in the kitchen. I had worked briefly for her before at the Aspen Food and Wine Festival. She said she remembered me, which probably wasn’t true, but her graciousness was unbelievable. A year later she came back to Rainbow, headed into the kitchen, and asked to see the girls. I happened to be the only one that night and she spent time with me asking about my job and what I wanted to do in the future.” BELOW: Stewart’s childhood menu (1972) announces grand ambitions: “Welcome to the luxury of Stewart’s Place food.”

Park. The owner was an opera singer. It turned out that she was an *insane* opera singer, who rented hourly use of her grand piano to random musicians who felt free to wander into my bedroom, use the shared bathroom, and eat any food in the kitchen. When she initially interviewed me, I mentioned that I would be keeping late hours due to my job. The very first night I came home and headed for the shower, she stood in the doorway and slyly declared that she knew what I was doing “out catting around late in the evening.” She left for a European tour, leaving her multitude of cats with no food and no litter, trusting that the unemployed actor in the other room and I would care for them. We did. We both moved out as soon as she returned. She kept our deposits.

It all seems so long ago. I worked in professional kitchens for over thirty years. Stacey and I remain best friends, the type of friends who once served in combat together. The profession has evolved, though. Executive chefs can no longer

announce they are eager to see who they can get to cry first.

There is one constant I carry with me always: The great Chef Charles Koegler told his students repeatedly, “Let your work speak for you.” Late into my forties, I returned to school to complete my bachelor’s degree in English and later a master’s degree in Liberal Studies. I was a wife and mother and had a new full-time job teaching culinary arts. I found myself in classes with PhD candidates half my age. The first day of each semester at least one hipster would smirk as we did introductions, sometimes openly asking what I was doing there. I asked them how it was living in their parents’ basement. Professors were usually more circumspect, but I could tell they were wondering if I could keep up. Invariably, midway through the semester the professor would take a shine to me, maddening the pedigreed others. I always did the reading. I was never late. I never missed class. I followed instructions. I listened.

I was not and am not an intellectual. But I know how to work. I just



put my head down and work. That ethic earned me a master’s degree in a top graduate program. And tenure. And a great job. Today I teach restaurant management at the City University of New York, enjoying a different and far more sedate life. I can still throw down if I need to—and I always let my work speak for itself.

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