

The New York Times | https://nyti.ms/2FqBK5i

Current Job: Award-Winning Chef. Education: University of IHOP.

The nation's chain restaurants don't reap much critical praise, but many high-end chefs say they got a priceless, practical education there.

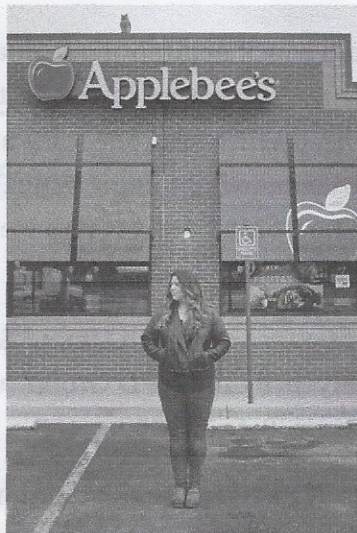
By Priya Krishna

Jan. 7, 2020

Cassidee Dabney has one of the more coveted jobs in her field: executive chef of the Barn at Blackberry Farm, an award-winning restaurant, both luxurious and deeply connected to the land, in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee.

But she got her start, and a certain prestige, at an Applebee's in Fayetteville, Ark. In her town, she said, "telling people you work at Applebee's was like telling them you worked at Per Se."

That job, making salads and French fries while she was in high school, has shaped how Ms. Dabney runs her kitchen at Blackberry Farm. She has also hired a number of employees with similar experience.



Ms. Dabney said she appreciated the absence of a kitchen hierarchy at Applebee's, and tries to instill some of that ethos at Blackberry Farm. Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

Ms. Dabney, 40, is one of several acclaimed chefs who prize the lessons they learned — many as teenagers — in the scaled-up, streamlined world of chain restaurants. They include Stephanie Izard, the executive chef and co-owner of Girl & the Goat and Little Goat Diner in Chicago, and Kia Damon, formerly the executive chef of Lalito in New York and now the culinary director of Cherry Bombe, a magazine that focuses on women in the food world.

The influential Southern chef Sean Brock loves eating at the Waffle House chain so much that he took

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Anthony Bourdain to one for Mr. Bourdain's television show "Parts Unknown," and explained how much the restaurant had taught him about hospitality. Even Jacques Pépin, the French chef best known for his TV cooking shows, values the 10 years he worked in research and development for a signature American chain restaurant: Howard Johnson's.



The Southern chef Sean Brock, sitting at left, is a devout fan of eating at Waffle House. He took Anthony Bourdain, to his right, to one for Mr. Bourdain's TV show "Parts Unknown." CNN

the appeal of chain restaurants for chefs/restaurateurs ASP, Lant

Chain restaurants are often accused of a sterile uniformity and a lack of attention to quality ingredients, nutrition and the environment. But for anyone trying to enter the restaurant business, they have particular attractions: formalized training, efficient operations, predictable schedules and corporate policies that claim to discourage the kind of abuses that have come to light in the #MeToo era. The pay is sometimes better than at independent restaurants, and the Affordable Care Act requires companies with 50 or more full-time employees to provide health insurance.

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They also have the jobs. In 2017, the number of independent restaurants in the United States fell by almost 11,000, to 346,100, from the previous year, according to an analysis by the NPD Group, a market research company. But the number of chain restaurants rose by almost 1,000, to 301,200.

lower enrollment in culinary schools
At the same time, enrollment in culinary schools is declining; at the New England Culinary Institute in Vermont, for example, enrollment dropped to about 300 in 2017, from 800 in 1999, according to The Associated Press.

As chains claim a larger slice of the restaurant business, they may become an increasingly common, and far more accessible, path to a career as a chef.

Ms. Dabney graduated from the New England Culinary Institute. But before that, she learned a lot from the environment at Applebee's. There wasn't a strict hierarchy, she said, because the kitchen wasn't centered on a chef, as in many independent restaurants.

Lesson / example
from
the
chef's

"There is this understanding that every person is important to making the restaurant run smoothly," she said. "Nobody thought the dishwasher was a lower status than them."



Ms. Dabney has hired several employees with experience in chain restaurants, like Tony Genova, left, a line cook who worked at Applebee's. Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

It's the kind of culture she has tried to instill at Blackberry Farm, where all kitchen employees are expected to help out in the dish pit if the dishwashers are falling behind, she said.

One of her line cooks, Tony Genova, worked for Applebee's as well. "You can totally see the difference between him and someone who hasn't" worked in a chain restaurant, Ms. Dabney said. "It's his movements, and getting twice as much done."

She added that people in her kitchen who have worked for chains "are not in it for the Food Network or the fame," as people who come from fine-dining restaurants often are. "They are in it because they genuinely love cooking."

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Tiffany Derry, the chef and owner of Roots Chicken Shak, in Plano, Texas, said chain restaurants can teach cooks important business skills they might not learn at independent restaurants. JerSean Golatt for The New York Times

Another example

As a short-order cook at an IHOP in Houston and Beaumont, Texas, from ages 15 to 19, Tiffany Derry, the chef and an owner of Roots Chicken Shak in Plano, Texas, and the yet-to-open Roots Southern Table, in Dallas, said she learned “how to be quick, have a good memory, and know the timing of everything.”

“Chain restaurants have a playbook for every position,” said Ms. Derry, 36. “There is no guesswork.”

She also acquired the business skills needed to open her own restaurants — how to cost out a dish, do inventory, make revenue projections and input invoices — and now teaches her employees the same.

Several chefs pointed to the rigorous customer-service standards of the chains where they worked.

“It was pretty much that the customer is always right,” said Katsuya Fukushima, who worked the griddle and the drive-through window at Wendy’s from ages 16 to 18, and is now executive chef and partner at several Japanese restaurants including Haikan and Bantam King in Washington, D.C.



Katsuya Fukushima, the executive chef and partner at several Japanese restaurants in Washington, D.C., said he learned valuable customer-service skills working the drive-through window at Wendy's. Jennifer Chase for The New York Times



Mr. Fukushima also worked at the famed tasting menu restaurant El Bulli in Spain, but said Wendy's taught him "a lot that is more real-world." Jennifer Chase for The New York Times

"You are always saying, 'Thank you for coming to Wendy's,' and upselling, asking if you want cheese or fries with that." It's a level of hospitality he doesn't always see in fine-dining restaurants.

Mr. Fukushima, 49, worked at El Bulli, the famed tasting-menu restaurant in Spain, a little more than a decade after his Wendy's job. But he said the experience was somewhat unrealistic. "We had 40 cooks for 62 diners," he said. Chains teach "a lot that is more real-world."

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Ms. Izard, 43, of Girl & the Goat, can still recall the four mottoes she was taught as a host and server at Olive Garden. (She worked at the Tucson, Ariz., and Ann Arbor, Mich., locations from ages 19 to 21.)

"Hot food hot. Cold food cold. Money to the bank. Clean restrooms," she said. "It's all still very true and straightforward. I go to our restrooms all the time, and someone is cleaning them every 15 minutes."

She has even tossed around the idea of bringing a version of the Olive Garden birthday song (which she can still recite by heart) to Little Goat Diner.

Pépin

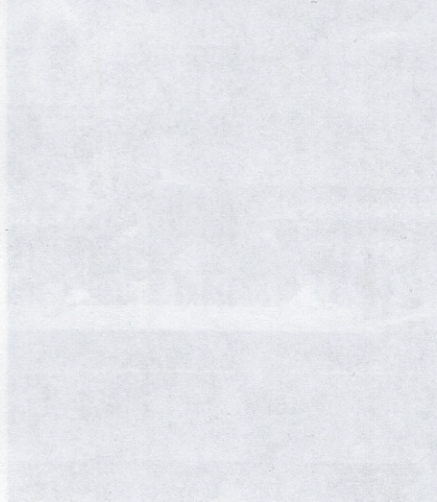
Mr. Pépin, 84, had grown up in a restaurant family, trained in Paris and worked at Le Pavillon in New York when Howard Johnson hired him in 1961.

In the company's commissary kitchen, Mr. Pépin said he learned how to can ingredients to keep them fresh when transferred between restaurants, to cook meats sous vide. He went on to use these techniques when he helped open Windows on the World, atop the World Trade Center.

"If you open your mind, you will learn wherever you are," he said. "When you come out of culinary school,

a lot of students say they want to work at Per Se, but you can learn just as much at Hillstone,” an upscale chain with locations in several cities. (Many chefs have voiced admiration for its food and service.)

Some chefs said they keep their eye out for people with certain chain restaurants on their résumés.



Before Suzanne Goin became the chef and co-owner of A.O.C., Lucques and Tavern in Los Angeles, she worked at the first California Pizza Kitchen, in Beverly Hills. Rozette Rago for The New York Times

Ms. Goin, shown here in the kitchen of A.O.C., has hired others who worked at chain restaurants. Rozette Rago for The New York Times

Almond EX. Suzanne Goin, the chef and co-owner of A.O.C., Lucques and Tavern in Los Angeles, was a hostess at the original location of California Pizza Kitchen in Beverly Hills when she was 20. She said she has had positive experiences with former employees of Houston’s (which is owned by Hillstone), as “there is a real system for managing people,” she said.

Show Comments of (A.M.) Ms. Derry, the Dallas chef and restaurateur, said she liked working with people who came from Pappas, a family-friendly chain that started in Houston, because of its rigorous training. “You spend a week on the grill, a week waitressing, a week in financials,” she said. “You know every aspect of that restaurant.”

But Ms. Derry doesn’t look back fondly at every part of her chain experience.

“I cooked the same food every day,” she said. “It was a lot of defrosting this, mixing this batter together, and boom, that is your day.” When she stepped into her first fine-dining kitchen, she wasn’t familiar with many of the more expensive ingredients, like monkfish.

As a contestant on the TV show “Top Chef” in 2010 and 2011, she felt pigeonholed by her chain background. Despite her several years working at independent restaurants, she felt she was labeled the chef from IHOP.

Ms. Damon, 25, of Cherry Bombe, felt a similar stigma as she moved from chains like Chipotle and Panda Express to independent restaurants.

"I wasn't taken seriously," she said. "I had all the skills — the durability, the endurance, knowing all the correct temperatures — when I applied to be at 'serious' restaurants, but they didn't see me because I didn't come from school, or another type of restaurant." Chefs assumed she couldn't make fine-dining-caliber dishes, she said.

Chipotle, on the other hand, was much more democratic, she said. "It was like, 'Hey, you are older than me, but we still have to deal with the same terrible customers and we still make the same \$7.25, so how about we try to work together?' There wasn't a lot of room for ego."

As she moved on from chains, Christina Machamer — a personal chef in Napa Valley, Calif., who worked at a Red Lobster in St. Louis as a teenager — said she sometimes had to make sacrifices: lower wages, or forgoing pay while training.

"I worked at an independent restaurant that is no longer around, where it took me too long to run food to my table so the chef threw a potato and it hit me in the head," she said. "That kind of stuff doesn't happen in a chain restaurants because of corporate structure. You tend to be treated more fairly."

Ms. Machamer, 37, believes that the demanding conditions at many independent restaurants could be contributing to the labor shortage in the industry by discouraging workers from staying. (Statistics on restaurant pay are hard to come by, but wages for cooks appear to be fairly uniform, on average. TDN2K, a restaurant analytics firm, said the average hourly wage for line cooks at full-service chain restaurants was \$13.75 in the third quarter of 2019. The average hourly wage at both chains and independent restaurants was \$13.26 in May 2018, according to the federal Department of Labor.)

After working for chains, some of these chefs continued their education at culinary school, while others went straight to higher-end restaurants.

Ms. Damon, who did not attend culinary school, said a chain experience can be just as valuable as schooling, especially considering the high cost of education.

"You have people teaching you how to sauté and store foods, and it is strict because there is a whole nationwide system," Ms. Damon said. "And a lot of the curriculum in culinary school is not reflective of what is going on in the everyday world."

Ms. Machamer is still paying off her loans for culinary school. "And when you graduate and work for that Michelin-star chef, you aren't going to make enough to be able to pay your loans."

There may always be a divide between those who work at chains and those who go to culinary school. A spokeswoman for the International Culinary Center in New York reported that every one of its professional culinary arts graduates placed in restaurants in 2018 went to independent restaurants, not chains. A spokesman for the Culinary Institute of America said that of the graduates across its three United States campuses in 2018, 97 percent of the 400 who reported working at restaurants ended up at independent businesses.

But Ms. Derry believes that the more casual, business-minded approach of chains is the future of dining. A number of chefs with high-end restaurants, like José Andrés and Rick Bayless, have started their own chain operations.

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"We should be expecting more chefs to not only know how to make a great plate of food," she said. Chains are where the rest of that education can happen.

"If you are sourcing responsibly, but not making money, it doesn't make sense," she said. "And at the end of the day, we are doing this to make money."

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