

# A man's world?

Three successful women chefs share their experiences climbing the culinary ladder

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It's hardly breaking news that the food industry is a male-dominated field. What's interesting is that the tides are reportedly changing: The number of women entering culinary schools is rising steadily, more and more women are working in the industry and a female executive chef is far from the jaw-dropping news it was 20 years ago. But even as the modifier "female" before the word "chef" becomes more annoying than warranted, it's still the case that women are a minority in the industry and are less likely than men to fill leadership positions in the kitchen. It's also less likely to see the names of female chefs in the headlines or winning the big awards. (*Time* magazine's 2013 "Gods of Food" article comes to mind. You guessed it — not a single "god" was a woman chef.)

This isn't to say that there aren't some seriously talented female chefs nationally and in the Asheville area



**SWEET SUCCESS:** Katie Button, Karen Donatelli and Michelle Bailey have all paid their culinary dues working in predominantly male kitchens. Photos (left to right) by Jayson Im, Nathan Metcalf and Highlands Inn

who are filling those top-level positions. Katie Button of Nightbell and Curate, Michelle Bailey of Highlands Inn and Karen Donatelli of Donatelli Cake Designs are a few of those local rock stars — though none would go as far as to identify herself as such. *Xpress* spoke with each of them to learn more about the changing face of the food industry, their own experiences and how gender has (or hasn't) affected their careers.

Button, a 2014 James Beard Rising Star nominee, says her gender isn't something she thinks about much (likely, she's too busy being the executive chef and co-owner at her two downtown restaurants). However, she says, "The thing I do think about a lot is what you see is a huge drop-off of women making it past a certain level. ... You see a lot of women working at that level [of] sous chef, things like that. But it's making it to the chef de cuisine, executive chef, restaurant owner, that's where you see a drop-off still. I hope that's going to change."

Bailey, executive chef at The Highland Inn and winner of the statewide Fire on the Rock compe-

tion, has been steadily working through the ranks in the Asheville food scene since her graduation from A-B Tech in 2007. She also says that her gender hasn't played a big role in her work and how she views her career. Even so, she says, "it is pretty obvious to anyone who's been around kitchens or worked in this industry that there aren't a ton of female chefs." At any given workplace, she adds, "I'm always either the only [woman] or one of two. I guess I always thought this is the way it is." Bailey has a staff of about 25 in her restaurant. She says a little less than a quarter of the staff are women, "which is pretty good for a kitchen," she says.

"The whole thing is really interesting," says Bailey. "If you go far back in time, it was the woman's job to prepare food for her family ... so it's interesting this shift in the other direction. I don't know what to think about that. Maybe the chef is the new rock star, and people are into that kind of thing. I certainly don't think that for myself." While clearly passionate about her work, Bailey is quick to point out that, on some days, her job description more closely resembles that of a janitor than a celebrity.

Bailey isn't the only chef who appears to have taken a bite of gourmet humble pie. Button noted that after attending the recent Cherry Bombe Jubilee, a conference held in March that celebrated women and food, she couldn't help but notice all the famous female chefs downplaying their accomplishments and attributing their success to good fortune. "You hear all these women say how lucky they are," says Button, "And we're so much less likely to say, 'Yeah, but gosh darn it, it's because of all the hard work, dedi-

cation and passion.' It's not luck. Yeah, sure it plays a role in it. ... But I think men are more willing to say this is mine and own it, and say, 'I got here because of me,' and I think that's something that we can learn a little bit."

When asked if she falls under the "lucky" or the "owning it" category, Button admits that she "definitely leans toward the lucky side. It's hard to break that. You don't want to be arrogant. I think women are more apt to recognize what they don't know. What I know is what we do at Curate and Nightbell, and what I don't know is a whole world outside of that. I guess I should say I don't know yet."

Donatelli has a slightly different take on the matter of good fortune — perhaps because her rise in the food industry came at a different time. While she is far from arrogant about her success, she says that her journey had less to do with luck and more to do with perseverance. She apprenticed at the Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach, Fla., while still in her teens.

"Women were not in the kitchen [at the Breakers Hotel] unless they were dishwashing or some other job," says Donatelli. "But as far as the actual preparing, that was the man's job." Donatelli says she felt a pressure to prove herself much more than her male counterparts and was often given less-than-thrilling tasks such as chopping blocks of chocolate instead of the more complex techniques she longed to learn — many of those techniques, she says, she had to teach herself.

Other people in her position would have likely quit, says Donatelli, but she was determined to stick it out. "The chef in the pastry department was a French pastry chef, very demanding, very European, classical. ... Let's just say it took a lot to stay, but that's what I wanted," she says.

"I think it's important that women are encouraged in business," she says. "And I feel very strongly about that. Women have so many things that we have to do, whether it's family, personal, trying to run a business — I think it's important to empower women in whatever they choose." X

