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Lessons Learned in the Kitchen: Toronto's Top Female Chefs share their culinary wisdom and memories

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My first memories of cooking are of warmth, step stools and flour pots, my mother's fresh bread, the dusty bitter sweetness of cinnamon and my grandmaman's donuts. My first memories of working in a restaurant kitchen are less appetizing – after suffering through the hazing deemed appropriate for a 16 year old girl, dropped onto the pizza and prep station with her ears still pretty wet, I decided to give book learning another shot and left cooking for my own kitchen and fodder for my pen. There are, of course, braver women than I, many of whom are here in Toronto, creating and cheffing away for the benefit of our stomachs and our hearts. In celebration of International Women's Day we asked a few of our city's culinary queens to share with us their experiences, their inspirations and a little of their gastronomical love.

Mali Fernandez, chef and co-owner of **Embrujo Flamenco**, one of Toronto's most celebrated and authentic Spanish tapas destinations, remembers her love affair with food beginning in her grandmother's kitchen. "The passion that I developed for food was instigated by my Abuela, my grandmother. She was my female culinary influence." Raised in a family consisting primarily of women, Chef Mali was encouraged by her rather non-traditional, feminist father to "get an education, go to university and gain a career," unusual for a girl in a Spanish household at that time. Luckily for us her grandmother decided that of her sisters it would be Mali who she would pass on her traditions to. "It's funny, it was difficult starting out in the kitchen as my grandmother was tough on me at first. I used to stand for

days and days just peeling walnuts with my hands. I would get so bored and ask Abuela why? But she would always tell me to be patient. Finally, I graduated from walnut peeling to learning how to make the walnut sauce. I will never forget those moments. I do the same in the kitchen. Every dish is made with patience, great attention and care to taste. Every time I make the walnut sauce, it gets better and better with experience."

Winlai Wong, who once graced the cutting boards and burners at **Monsoon**, and who is currently Executive Chef of **Spice Route**, is considered by many of her peers to be one of, if not the, best in the city. For Chef Winlai, "being a woman in the kitchen has its advantages, there is a certain sensibility that comes with being a woman which is reflected in the choices made. Women can be more creative. Woman cook from their heart and souls." While she considers Alice Waters to be "a significant influence in the kitchen," she points out that as with "any female chef" she is "very much influenced by experiences and life... Preparing food for loved ones is a passionate exercise, in turn this informs one's approach to food and

cooking professionally...a major influence personally is my father, Master Wok Chef Manfred Wong."

Kyla Eaglesham, the wedding cake baking, high tea brewing, bonbon purveying owner of **Madeleines, Cherry Pie and Ice Cream**, "find(s) cooking to be a perfect vessel to convey emotion and passion. I cook and eat passionately and impulsively. Working in pastry I am able to use colour, texture, and flavours to bring emotions to life...I always say the perfect bite takes place in the company of good people and a warm environment...I am not sure if that is because I am a woman, but I do think that being a woman makes me very good at my job!" When asked about her culinary influences, Chef Kyla shares a tasty anecdote: "I remember being in cooking school and I asked my (male) chef if I should do something a certain way. He asked me why I thought so, and I told him that my Mum does it that way. He answered: your mum must be a very good cook...and then walked away. I realized that cooking school was simply reaffirming everything I had learned growing up. Today, my Mum works with me in my pastry kitchen."

Chef Cathy Austrich is a culinary instructor who guides her students outside of the classroom on gastronomical tours of Toronto, broadening perspectives and palates as she goes. "Definitely the way I approach food and cooking is innate with being a nurturer and providing the best quality and flavour for those I feed. I feel that food as a highly nurturing experience provides a very intimate level of creativity and desire for the best." While for Chef Cathy the art of cooking is not gender specific, "my students and I are associated with other female chefs such as Chef Therese De Grace, in our hospitality events and education platforms, leading my students to see the power of women in the culinary field."

Consultant extraordinaire, owner of **Kitchen Culture**, and host of the small screen's **Home Cookin'**, our very own **Therese de Grace** remembers how "from a young age my grandmother (the best cook in our family) expressed her love for us through the gift of food; all our family high points and low points from birthdays to funerals were marked with dishes for nourishment, entertainment or comfort." From a professional standpoint, Chef Therese credits a strong female Chef de Cuisine at a Michelin Star establishment in Ireland as one her most notable influences. "Being a young female, North American and small in stature, I was the perfect target for the gaggle of testosterone ridden boys on staff. The one time I almost started to cry, she shoved me in the walk in fridge and said 'look around you, you are one of the only girls here - if you don't develop a thick skin you are never going to last in this business, if you cry it impacts the way they treat all of us. You are always going to have to work harder and defend your gender in the kitchen if you truly want to become a Chef.' Her take-no-prisoners attitude and drive for perfection is something that has stayed with me for all these years."

In 1950, Chef Fernand Point declared "only men have the technique, discipline and passion that makes cooking consistently an art." Granted this is not 1950, but with 100 years of International Women's Day under our aprons, I wondered how this quote resonated with these women, who have made successful careers in an industry that has historically been (and in many ways still is) not only male-dominated but, for lack of a better term, female unfriendly. For Chef Cathy, the gender stereotypes simply don't apply. "Being of my generation, I have positively believed that I can influence change, locally and within my professions." The way to move forward from these no longer relevant attitudes is, for Chef Therese, by mentoring "young chefs, both male and female, to unite and embrace the positive differences a unisex kitchen nurtures. We need to foster a workplace where both sexes can flourish and share their unique talents to benefit the industry as a whole and keep that 'old school' mentality out of today's kitchens." Most importantly, 100 years into this day of applauding the achievements of all women (golf claps and horn blowing welcome), we remember how far we've already come. To end on a sweet note from Chef Kyla, "when I opened my business in 2004, 80% of entrepreneurs in Canada were women. I give a lot of credit to our Mothers who broke down barriers for us to carry the torch and not just work in kitchens, but run them as well." We'll raise a fork to that!

~ Julie Reitsma

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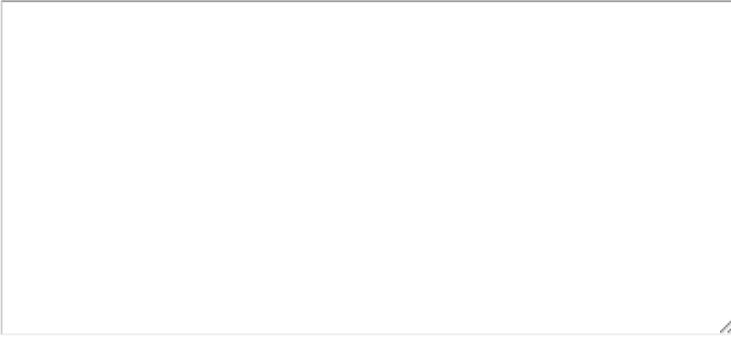
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