

# THE WOMEN THAT CAN STAND THE HEAT

Females may run most home kitchens, but few hold positions of power in the culinary bastions of Auckland restaurants. Sarah Lang asks why there aren't more women among the city's elite chefs

**I**N AUGUST 2005, "White House Hires First Female Head Chef" made US news headlines. In January this year the British media got all excited when the gutter-mouthed colossus of celebrity chefs, Gordon Ramsay, hired his third female head chef; but perhaps that was because he once said: "Women can't cook to save their lives."

Globally many more men than women are yelling "Service!" in restaurant kitchens. Just one in three British chefs, and one in four US chefs, are women. In New Zealand there's bang on 13,000 chefs but no data by sex (except for Food Trades Workers as a whole which lumps together bakers, pastry cooks, butchers, small-goods makers, cooks and chefs: the tally's 16 men for every 10 women).

But talk to industry players and it's crystal clear men dominate our restaurant kitchens: especially at the zenith as head chef, executive chef or owner/chef. The 12 lifetime members of the NZ Chefs Association are all men, as are head chefs at most of the who's who of Auckland restaurants: including Clooney, The Grove, Toto, The French Cafe, Euro, Vinnies, Eight.Two, Partingtons, Antoines, Meridiths . . .

Why? The fairer sex make up almost half of chef course enrolments, so lack of appeal can't account for the dearth of girls rising through the ranks. And it's not as though there are no jobs: in fact it's hard to fill chef positions.

So what do the few star exceptions have to say?

Sonya Paget appears from behind the capsicum-peppered kitchen counter of her restaurant, The Narrow Table in Mairangi Bay. Open since October, the intimate, generally booked-up bistro feted for its fresh fare is a new chapter in the 37-year-old's life. Six of her 16 years as a chef were spent in Scotland, mainly at the prestigious Gleneagles Hotel and Golf Resort where a brigade of 70 chefs serviced four restaurants, including Scotland's only Michelin-starred establishment. Here Paget made Brit headlines as the first female sous [deputy head] chef at any British five-star hotel. Since then, among other monikers, she's held the executive chef position at the now closed George Restaurant in Parnell and at Auckland's Stamford Plaza, and has been a high-end private chef for the rich and famous, including Bill Clinton.

It's been an arduous climb up the ladder since ditching a law degree, shortly before her 21st birthday, to juggle four years of polytechnic chef study with junior-chef jobs. With several award wins (including New Zealand's premier cookery competition the Nestle Toque d'Or) adorning her CV she was offered a coveted Gleneagles



Award-winning Sonya Paget (above) and Natalia Schamroth (below).



job. Slowly, surely, she worked her way up: "Second commis, first commis, demi chef de partie, chef de partie, senior chef de partie, junior sous chef, sous chef, senior sous chef, head chef, executive chef.

"It's a constant slog to keep climbing. I had to do four times as much as the boys to get recognised: as a woman you have to stand out and be pushy to get promotion. No wonder there's hardly any female sous, head or executive chefs in New Zealand or Scotland. Big kitchens are tough; they feel like a bit of a boys' club. [The attitude is] if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." Heat both literal and figurative.

Once Paget became a head chef the sexist attitudes dissipated, but stereotypes persisted outside the kitchen. "When I was

executive chef we had a standing joke: I'd answer the phone 'Kitchen, chef speaking', and whoever it was, man or woman, would ask 'Can you put me on to the executive chef?' I'd go into the kitchen and say 'They want to speak to the executive chef, where is he?' and the chefs would laugh."

Women often get stuck in the pastry chef pigeonhole, Paget says, which is detached from the frontline hurly-burly. "But they still don't make it to executive pastry chef. Some go into catering or cafes, so they can control their hours while raising a family." Racking her brains for top female head chefs, she admits "not many of them have children. Being a chef's a really unbalanced life: long, unsociable hours, when you want to be at home with your kids".

Paget has three children, now

12, 10 and 4. Single, she relies on babysitters, but until 2006 (employing a nanny) she worked fulltime, taking leave only for illness and childbirth. "I was in labour and still ringing the kitchen!" She strains to point out her employers gave her support and flexibility, "not everyone's as lucky". Still, in 2005 Paget took a much-needed two-year "respite" from professional cooking, before establishing The Narrow Table.

A few offramps along the motorway, Natalia Schamroth's watching dinner-prep knives chop furiously in the kitchen of Birkenhead restaurant The Engine Room. A joint venture with her business-and-life partner Carl Koppenhagen, the compact bistro and its casual modern fare had gone down well since its February 2006 opening, but the diary's been

chock-a-block since it took out Supreme Winner and Best Local Restaurant in the 2007 Metro Corbans Restaurant of the Year Awards.

While Schamroth occasionally helps out the three (male) chefs in the kitchen, currently she's taking a front-of-house twirl. But the 34-year-old's no stranger to calling shots in the kitchen. Since starting out at 16, Schamroth's put in six years' hard yakka in Sydney kitchens and also worked in London and Italy. Bypassing sous chef she was head chef twice before she turned 30.

"When it's mostly boys they can leer at you, and girls take things a bit more personally." While she's never personally faced sexism, "I know lots of stories. Young apprentices in big kitchens get a hard time.

"But many women just don't want the stress of being head or executive chef: juggling the menu, suppliers, invoices, staffing. Many aim to be sous chefs instead." She knows some women who've stepped back after a few years as head chef "just needing a break".

Over the bridge at the Viaduct's swish Soul Bar & Bistro, co-owner/general manager Judith Tabron strides out of a meeting crackling with energy. The highly respected chef has presided over Soul for seven years, was owner/executive chef at Ramses Restaurant (1989-98), and has been head chef at Benjamin's Bistro, Sails and De Bretts Hotel.

Rewind three decades and the blonde 16-year-old apprentice chef quickly climbed the ladder to become (at just 23) a head chef in charge of 20 staff. Still feeling too inexperienced, she moved to London and began again from the bottom at Michelin-starred L'Escargot Restaurant.

Throughout her chef years, men dominated the kitchens. "Partly because it's hot, heavy, hard work. And the environment wasn't for every young lady. You hear all about the male chefs' sex lives and pick up the language — Gordon Ramsay's favourite word was a kitchen staple. And guess what, women don't really like to be told to f\*\*k off by men like Gordon Ramsay!"

"Luckily it didn't bother me. Have you read Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential*? He calls women like me who can handle the frontline heat a line bitch."

While Tabron's put several women through apprenticeships, she's had little success advancing them to top positions — one switched careers, another left to have children — and most of her head chefs have been men (one notable exception being Helane Mead, who came with her from Ramses to Mikano to Soul and now runs Ponsonby cafe Il Forno).

Today, among Soul's 17 chefs, two are women: one is kitchen

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**"It's a constant slog to keep climbing. I had to do four times as much as the boys to get recognised."**

**Narrow Table owner Sonya Paget**

manager, one is a pastry chef.

"Why are there so few women at the top? It's not that employers are passing them over, it's that they don't want the hectic jobs. It's one thing to cook but it's another thing to tell people what to do. It's funny: I was jumping over everyone to get to the top, then suddenly realised no one else wanted to get there!"

So will a male chef snort with outrage when asked if it's blasphemous, bawdy boys running women out of the kitchen? "No snort from me," smiles Geoff Scott, the highly likeable chef-owner of feted fine-dining establishment Vinnies.

"The real reason [there's few women at the top] is it's an extremely nasty environment: male chefs have the foulest mouths I've ever experienced and talk to women in a rather derogatory fashion. I've always tried to have women in my kitchens to teach the boys manners." But he admits that's an uphill battle.

"To survive in such an aggro, testosterone-fuelled environment you have to toughen up and not take the crap. I know a girl who almost turned into a bloke to play the game by the boys' rules." And yes, he'd call many kitchen environments sexist.

"Female chefs who've fought their way to the top display single-minded determination, real guts and grit, considerable physical strength, plus strong creative and leadership skills. But it usually comes at a cost. The incredibly long hours are unrelenting — socially being a chef's a disaster — and it impacts on your family life or even having a family in the first place."

So how do the women who've done it advise breaking through the glass ceiling?

Tabron: "You've got to be a single-minded hard worker with a passion for the industry, the drive to achieve and belief in yourself."

Schamroth: "Be strong, confident, do your homework and chef overseas."

Paget: "You need confidence, persistence, a desire to be the best, willingness to put in the hours, physical strength, and can't get fussed about dirty nails!"

Someone with all these ingredients is Sarah Harrap. A life in the kitchen was always on the cards: her father is former New Zealand Chef's Association president Martin Harrap. Sarah's been whipping up tasty treats since she was a preschooler. At 17 she's no novice: for four years Sarah worked part-time alongside her dad: cooking fine-dining dishes for private parties, and



Judith Tabron from Soul (above) and student and pastry chef Sarah Harrap (above right).

assisting in the pastry section at his all-male-staffed North Shore restaurant Murray's at the Bay. In March, Sarah won a 2008 Restaurant Association Education Trust secondary-school-students scholarship: the \$3500 fees paid for her diploma in patisserie at Auckland University of Technology.

While studying she's working

part-time in SkyCity's pastry kitchen; the next step is two years' experience in a general kitchen overseas to specialise in chocolate, then back to fulfil her dream of opening up a handmade chocolates-and-pastries store. On the way she hopes to add the confidence that shines from top female chefs.

"I keep getting told I need to be

more aggressive in the kitchen but you just learn it being there. I've always known it's a male-dominated field and I've gone in with my eyes open."

Back at The Narrow Table, Paget's just dug up a "fabulous" head chef to take the weight off her shoulders in the restaurant kitchen. Yep, a man. Ponders Paget: "The

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Godfathers of Cookery were all men: Georges Auguste Escoffier, Paul Bocuse, Antonin Careme; they started the first restaurant kitchens and the brigade [hierarchical] system. It'll always be a male-dominated field, just like policemen, firemen. But there'll always be women, too: the ones who really want to be there and can stand the heat."

## THE DISH

### Cooking up a storm

Peter Gordon is making one of his trips home to appear at the Food Show next month. Another star attraction is Australian-based French chef Gabriel Gate. Local chefs will be out in force, including Peta Mathias, Ray McVinnie, Annabel Langbein, Ruth Pretty and *Cuisine* food editor Lauraine Jacobs. On top of the free cooking displays there will be plenty of exhibits, many offering sampling and the chance to purchase product at discount prices. The Food Show runs from July 31 to August 3 at the ASB Showgrounds, tickets on sale

from the end of June. Day one is a special preview day, with only 3000 tickets available at \$35 each. Visit [www.foodshow.co.nz](http://www.foodshow.co.nz) for details.

### Sour energy

V has added a new flavour to its range of energy drinks: lemon. It comes in a distinctive yellow bottle, and will sit alongside the other versions: original, berry and black.



### Bags of fun

Sandwich bags aren't ordinarily of much interest to us. Stick a picture of Sesame Street's very own Elmo on the front of some and that's a different story. These Multix Resealable Sandwich Bags come in packs of 20 for \$2.49 and make lunches for children — and grown-ups — just that little more interesting. From The Warehouse and selected supermarkets.

### Winter warmer

Wattie's wants to help *Viva* readers celebrate the colder months with a special giveaway. We have three Wattie's Winter Warmer prize packs available, each containing a selection of the Very Special microwave soup range and a luxurious knit loop deep orange scarf from Country Road. Each prize pack is valued around \$80. To enter, write your name, address and phone number on an envelope and send it to Wattie's competition, *Viva*, New Zealand Herald, PO Box 3290, Auckland. Entries close July 2, winners announced July 9.

