QUEEN BEES

Women are making big moves in the culinary industry and helping other women rise to the top along the way. BY JAMIE COELHO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY LUONG

INSIDE ELLIE'S ON WEYBOSET STREET, ACROSS FROM PROVIDENCE Performing Arts Center, a woman mans the line in the sleek open kitchen overlooking a light-filled dining room. It smells like melted butter and bread coming straight out of the oven. María Ritchey helms this tight, but well-designed space as a one-woman show during today's busy lunch service in the restaurant that's run by Ellen Slattery. Ritchey started at Slattery's first restaurant, Gracie's, as a server, and wanted to learn the back of the house too. While Ritchey plans to pivot careers into nutrition while studying at Johnson and Wales University, the line cook position serves as a steppingstone for her to learn how to craft healthy meals under pressure.
In every restaurant kitchen and behind every food business counter, more women are standing front and center as head cooks, chefs, owners and culinary entrepreneurs. In Providence alone, some of the biggest names on the culinary scene have been women: Johanne Killeen of Al Forno, Deborah Norman of Rue de L’Espoir and CAV’s late owner Sylvia Moubayed, to name a few. Today’s women culinarians continue to make a name for Rhode Island on a bigger stage, including Gracie’s and Ellie’s proprietors, Ellen Slattery, and executive pastry chef Melissa Denmark; CAV’s Johanne Killeen; Executive Chef of Enoteca Umberto, Jennifer Beckman, executive chef of the Mourning Seaford kitchen and bar, Lori Kettelle of PVDonuts, Jennifer Lawrence of Six, and Gina Pizza, executive chef of Vanda — who all happen to be Johnson and Wales University graduates. There’s also a host of women food business owners including Kathryn Roberts of Easy Entertaining, SloFab Churwicz of Art + Craft, Tiffany Ting and Rebecca Brade of Hometown Pies, Milena Pagni of Rebelle Artisan Bagels, Matthew Chavarria of Rebelle Artisan Bagels, Janna Loomis of Chow Kitchen and the list goes on... Nationally, however, women only make up about 43 percent of all chiefs and head cooks in the culinary industry, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which projects 9.64 percent estimated job growth for chiefs and head cooks by 2026, the industry is booming and there will be a lot more jobs to fill in the future.

Careers in the culinary industry are on the rise, according to Johnson and Wales University’s internship director, Susan Marshall, who sees women pursuing career paths in food, not just in restaurants, but also in nutrition, product research and development, food and beverage management, entrepreneurship and more.

“The food industry is really blossoming,” says Marshall. “Traditionally we used to think of culinary education as working behind the stove. That’s not true anymore. For some it is, because that’s where they want their career path to take them, but we also educate or prepare students for other fields.”

The data for the most recent 2019 graduating class in Johnson and Wales University’s School of Culinary Arts shows 44.3 percent women and 55.7 percent men, and that breakdown in majors includes an associate’s degree in culinary arts, and bachelor’s degree in culinary arts, culinary arts, culinary nutrition, and restaurant, food and beverage management. Furthermore, figures for the baking and pastry arts program, which are separate from culinary arts, show a 49.5 percent female and 50.5 percent male breakdown.

ELLEN SLATTERY, PROPRIETOR OF GRACIE’S AND ELLIE’S

As the lunch rush starts to stream into Ellie’s in downtown Providence just before noon on a late-August Friday, a hive of activity is bustling below their feet. Coincidentally, in walks a female farmer with fresh picked flowers and a jar of sweet honey harvested from her own beehives at Moonrose Farm as a gift for the restaurant’s owner, Ellen Slattery, who sells the honey at retail. The upstairs restaurant floor at Ellie’s covers 1,500 square feet, and another 1,500-square-foot footprint exists underground. It is the busiest heart and soul of Ellie’s, that is when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time. It is the whole of when she’s not in the building, then it’s her own time.

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Slattery initially went to college for child psychology, and later realized that cooking was her real passion. A friend suggested she try working in a restaurant, and arranged for her to meet with the North End chef. "I had this overwhelming passion, I wasn't even holding a knife properly," she says. There, she learned about caring for products and handling food, and she decided that the restaurant industry was the right path for her future. She pursued culinary school at Johnson and Wales University and worked brunch at Joë Norman's Rue de L'Espoir as an undergrad.

A few years after graduation, Slattery — then Ellen Grayalny — and her family bought the original Gracie's building on Federal Hill. Her parents helped her renovate the space while renting out an upstairs apartment to tenants for additional income, and she opened the restaurant two years later at age twenty-six as a hommage to her maiden name. She later moved Gracie's to its current location on Washington Street, and opened Ellie's Bakery, named after her mother, on the same street six years ago. It evolved into the present-day Ellie's on Weybosset Street. Gracie's has now been open for twenty-one years.

Slattery, who is petite and polished with a stylish blond bob and impeccably manicured, has helped women succeed in a tough business. She realized that fewer women pursue the career path. "It could be the physical demand, the hours it's working at night," she says. "It's not really the best for raising a family."

Slattery knows this firsthand. She's been through it all raising her own three children, Makayla, eighteen, and Aiden, fifteen, from her first marriage, and Molly, ten, from her second marriage. Just a year-and-a-half into creating Gracie's, she became pregnant with Makayla, and soon was balancing new motherhood with running a restaurant. "That was super challenging. It's just trying to make time, and at that location, we were so small that I had to be there every day from open till close, operating all facets of what we were doing," she says. "The hardest parts were the long nights. Working a Saturday night and feeling like you have enough energy the next day to devote to your family."

Adding a second full restaurant has been another big adjustment,

KAITLYN ROBERTS, ASHLEY VANASSE AND DANIELLE VARGA OF EASY ENTERTAINING

There's been a baby boom at Easy Entertaining. The catering company and cafe run by women on Valley Street in Providence didn't expect all the babies to arrive at once but that's what happened. Despite the hectic balance of family and career, the women are thriving as mothers in a profession they love. The women got maternity leave benefits through Temporary Disability Insurance (TDI), which paid 60 percent of their pay, then Roberts made up the 40 percent difference in their paycheck, and they were eligible for leave for up to twelve weeks. "Which, if I did say so myself, is extremely generous for a company of this size," says Roberts, as companies with fifty or fewer employees are not required to hold jobs for new mothers after maternity leave.

Before Roberts founded Easy Entertaining, she was enrolled in law school and realized she didn't want to be a lawyer. She decided to go to culinary school in Italy instead, and turned out as a personal chef in Barrington in 2006. A life on the line... CONTINUED ON PAGE 113.
Queen Bee

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I thought to myself: "This is what I've
in a restaurant wasn't the life for her. " I
definitely knew I didn't want to work
all about." 

THE SEASONS

And I thought to myself: "This is what I've

JAMIE: WHAT'S THE CRAZIEST THING

YOU'VE SEEN HERE?

KEN: I've seen many things at the Boom
Room. We have that camera down there.
The dance floor is on a TV screen. I
will never forget this one couple came in.
It just so happened, the husband loved
to dance, and the other husband
didn't. So they got in there dancing. The
are now here, they didn't know there's a
TV screen. They started kissing on the
dance floor, and the other husband ran
to danc e, and his wife didn't, and the other
wife loved to dance, and the other husband
didn't. So they got in there dancing. The
are now here, they didn't know there's a
TV screen. They started kissing on the
dance floor, and the other husband ran
out there and there was a fight and I had
to break it up. The TV screen just shits
in the bar, we don't broadcast it anywhere.
But I keep the tapes in case I ever need
cash money.

JAMIE: HAVE YOU HAD A LOT OF CELEBS

IN HERE?

KEN: We've had many actors and actresses
coming in here. Arnold Schwarzenegger,
Marla Smiler, Jack Lemmon, Jay Leno,
Bill Murray, Lauren Bacall. Johnny Depp.
The king and queen of Sweden. Tommy
Hilfiger. Bob Grunenwald. Sebastian
Vollmer. Prince Albert of Monaco was another
one. He introduced himself to me as "Al!"
And I said, "I'm Ric!" and we shook hands.
My boss came upstairs and said, "Do you
know who you were waiting on? That was
Prince Albert of Monaco." I said, "Oh, Al!"

JAMIE: WHAT'S THE BEST TIP YOU'VE

GOTTEN?

KEN: I've given sport talk to the Bruins
or Patriots. A free trip to the Caribbean
from a favorite customer. I traveled from
Antigua to St. Thomas to Saint Martin and
Saint Thomas.

EDDIE: Some people are very generous.
You get regular customers who come in,
you get a tip and leave you $100, just because they love you, and then you'll
have someone who has had hundred Heinek­
en and leaves you $1. We had five guys in
last week for a bachelor party. They ordered five bottles of Veuve. I was like,
"How many glasses?" They were like,
"Just six glasses for a bachelor party."
I ordered five bottles of Veuve. I was like,
"How many glasses?" They were like,
" honestly, it's a girl wanted champagne, she
had a drink out of the bottle. It was
unbelievable. They had girls putting their
heads back, pouring champagne on them.
They're the Boom Room Room.... "- J.C. O.
“We’ve always heard, and if someone is in the weeds, we’ll help you,” says Varga. “I’ll get the lawnmower,” says Vanasse with a laugh.

All three women work different schedules. Some staff members work both a set routine, like Varga, while in the building from nine to five to accommodate lecture hours, and Vanasse, four mornings and some weekends and prefers to do organizational work at home after her children are in bed. Roberts spends mornings with her children and comes in weekdays by nine and tries to leave in time for dinner. Being able to function in this way is all about delegating.

“Being a business owner is very isolating and it’s kind of like being a mom with a new baby,” she says. “You have to do everything for it all the time, and it’s all your responsibility. So I try to put the ownership on other people so they feel like real decision makers. If you have senior leadership who can make big decisions, then the business is going to be able to grow, we’re going to be able to bring on more employees and do more.

She treats her staff as equals, not employees. “I hire people I trust to make good decisions with expertise. They take it seriously, and everyone here treats it like their own.”

MILENA PAGAN, OWNER OF REBELLE ARTISAN BAGELS AND LITTLE SISTER

Rebel is French for “rebel woman,” and if you get to know bakes and entrepreneurs, Milena Pagan, then you realize it’s the perfect definition to describe her spirited, no-nonsense personality.

The twenty-nine-year-old Puerto Rican native graduated with a degree in chemical engineering from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and was working in merchandising strategy for CVS when she decided to change careers and pursue baking. She had never even worked in a restaurant, but coached herself on the science of mixing, rolling and proofing dough for twenty-four hours, then boiling and baking bagels through experimentation and obsessive trial and error. She started out selling in a parking lot with a few bagels for friends and sales at storefronts like Stock Culinary Goods, PVD Donuts and Laughing Gorilla Catering.

“I wanted to do the popups as a way to test the market and build the confidence I needed to make the investment,” she says inside her storefront, Rebelle Artisan Bagels on the East Side of Providence. She wears quirky transparent-rimmed glasses and her thick curly brown hair with vibrant purple streaks is tied up in a ponytail. She periodically interrupts the interview to adjust the cafe’s music, clean up a table or point a customer in the right direction near the coffee station. “So when I quit my job and said I was going to do this, I gave myself six months to decide, go or no go. We came up with a metric or criteria that we had to hit, and if we hit that, then we would feel confident going into a storefront.”

And Pagan knocked it out of the park. “I remember when I did my first popup at PVD Donuts, I thought we were going to be the closest we were going to be coming to testing this out, because it’s on the East Side, and we had such success,” she says. “I can’t remember how much money we made, but I remember walking away from it, and we had our momentum and we hit our average ticket. After that, we were like, for sure, we need to start a brick and mortar storefront.”

Pagan is a numbers person, strolling from her MIT education, so she’s able to analyze sales projections to simulate what her near logical model should be. She launched a Kickstarter to help raise funds for the initial storefront, and quickly got the shop up and running a few months later, promptly paying back rewards to constituents. Once in business, she found ways to increase her average ticket per customer by adding Nitro brews, soups, bagel sandwiches stacked with house-cured lox and pastrami as well as veggie options for lunch, and additional pastries like lemon bars, pop tarts and cookies.

She was able to start whittling profits and reinvest in the business by upgrading glass cases, installing bright new lighting and purchasing better equipment. Eventually, her husband was able to leave his job at Wayfair to help with the business. “Being profitable is so exciting in so many ways. It means that we can get set down and be like, ‘What are things that we should buy? What are things that would help us?’ If something breaks, we fix it,” she says. “We bought new ovens, because the old ones were about to die out.”

Then she decided to go back to school to get her MBA in business administration from MIT, which is helping her understand the legalities that come with owning a business. Although she’s put the degree on hold to open a second business—small-scale ash and sourdough bagels baked by Little Sister at the East Side between Hope and Rochambeau, where she plans to return. “I want to learn from the world class experts: How can I make my operation more efficient? How can I make my brand really tight?” she says. “How can I think about legal implications of running a business?”

And she doesn’t keep all of that to herself. Pagan’s passed on some of that business sense as a friend and mentor to Victoria Young of Vic’s Craft Ice Cream, who is a graduate of Johnson and Wales University’s baking and pastry arts program. They share financial and business contacts, one of whom is a woman who bought the building where Vic’s opened in Barrington and the building where Little Sister is located and purposefully rehired women-owned businesses to help support their endeavors.

Young and Pagan teamed up to rebrand Vic’s Craft Ice Creams products and market them in new ways like doughnut-inspired flavors in partnership with Knead Doughnuts, and strawberry pop tart and junk cookie ice cream in partnership with Pagetown Rebelle. They installed freezers selling cups of Vic’s Craft Ice Cream at storefronts around town including Knead, Rebelle and Stock Culinary Goods.

Pagan says her goal is not to own multiple Rebellies, but she would like to expand her brand into other businesses. She’ll get the chance this winter when she opens Little Sister, which will offer breakfast sandwiches, lunch and dinner options and a set routine, like Varga, who is in the building from nine to five to accommodate day-to-day responsibilities to understand finances and talking to accountants, and doing real estate research.

She’s currently wrapping her brain around constructing and designing the new restaurant herself, licensing regulations and permits, accounting details, paying less and understanding confusing taxable taxes to be paid to the city of Providence for items like tables and chairs, which she says makes no sense.

It’s a good thing Pagan didn’t set out to be just a baker. “Maybe we have ten years into the future and your business is really successful, what do you want to be famous for?” Pagan says. “Some people want to be chefs. I’m not really a chef. I’m famous for being a pastry chef. Customers want to see her in the kitchen, and enjoy her recipes,” Pagan says. “I didn’t want to be that. I want to be Ken Oringer. I want to be a restaurateur.”

As Little Sister opens its doors in the near future, Pagan is confident there will be more siblings to come.