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Seven Percent of U.S. Restaurant Owners and Chefs Are Female — Director Joanna James Is Here to Change That

When James set out to make "A Fine Line," she originally wanted it to be about her mom, a career chef and restaurateur. What James learned along the way, though, led to something much bigger.

By Madeleine Deliee FEB 28, 2020



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Valerie James, chef-owner of Val's restaurant in Holden, Massachusetts, grew her business and raised her family in much the same way: independently. Her daughter, filmmaker Joanna James, remembers her struggles to build and maintain Val's during Joanna's childhood.

“For someone who was so good at what she was doing, to also have to face constant barriers and stress just seemed unfair,” James recalls. “It was like she was always being pushed against the wall, as opposed to having any support system around her.”

While James says this was more true in the earlier days, her mother's experience is, unfortunately, far from unique. While it's not revelatory news — especially to the women in the industry — that the fine dining industry is dominated by male chefs, James realized that the disparity between men and women running kitchens is not limited to high-end establishments. Only about seven percent of chefs and restaurant-owners in the U.S. are women.

While this fact made James appreciate her mother's accomplishments all the more, it also made James question why, in 2020, this is still true — and that very same question is what drives her documentary, *A Fine Line*.

When James set out to make the movie, she originally wanted it to be about her mom. But what she learned along the way led to something much bigger. As such, *A Fine Line* also follows a handful of top chefs — including Cat Cora, Mashama Bailey,

Sylvia Weinstock, Dominique Crenn, Elizabeth Falkner, and others — as they recount their own stories of having to fight their way up the ranks in the restaurant industry.

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What James unearths is the “bro-like” mentality that plagues professional kitchens and ensures many women get elbowed out. She believes that when cooking became more highly regarded — “not just cooks, but actual chefs,” she clarifies — and when, thanks to shows like *Top Chef*, chefs started to gain celebrity, women became far less welcome. The reasons why are stale: *It's heavy physical labor; the hours are long and demanding; there's no room for emotion when leading a kitchen* — but there are plenty of other jobs women hold that require comparable work, like healthcare, for example. Although, as James points out, that’s another field with less than 10 percent woman-driven leadership.

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Instead, there’s a lack of foundational support in the restaurant industry. Insufficient access to capital, media coverage, and mentorship mean women still struggle to launch leadership careers as chefs and restaurant owners. Valerie James made a point of supporting and mentoring women, offering paid parental leave even before it was a state mandate. It’s no small part of why she retained employees for ten years or more: her own experience as a struggling businesswoman and mother made her keenly sensitive to others on a similar path. “She incorporates a lot of policies and practices that carve more paths towards advancement for working women,” Joanna James says.

Valerie James in her restaurant, Val's in Holden, MA
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Other chefs, too, recall the seemingly impossible challenges of balancing work and parenting. In the film, Lidia Bastianich talks about her early, uncertain days of motherhood. James, a mother herself, says this is one of her favorite stories. “I loved how the doctor said to her, 'Kids want happy parents. Make it work. Figure it out,’” James says. This is a parenting truth: it’s hard to see how to balance work and life, but one often impacts the other — in skillsets, in dreams, in modeling for future generations. “I think what I’ve really taken to heart after making this film was hearing from these women, like Bastianich, like my mother, like Barbara Lynch,” James continues. “Where, for them, it was really about being a role model to their kids and showing them that, look, this is what my calling is. What I love to do, what I’m good at.”

Real empowerment is the chance to shine and show what’s possible. Unfortunately, the stories surrounding food notables like Mario Batali and Ken Friedman showed that the mistreatment of women in restaurants has not only been possible, it’s been common. “It was really alarming to hear some of the hazing that went on in some of these kitchens,” James says. “You’d be a fool to try to do some of that today, but it still exists.” James had already finished shooting *A Fine Line* when these narratives started to come out, but she felt it was important enough to go back and add more.

"It didn't fit right with me not to address it," she says. "We were doing the film festival circuit, but I didn't feel right leaving it like that." Joanna and her crew reshot, re-edited, and emerged with a new, more complex final cut. "I'm really happy now," she says, even though it meant releasing later than planned.

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Cat Cora

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Mashama Bailey
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As women obtain power, however, the system starts to change. It comes slowly, but James sees those who've made it extending a hand to those coming up behind them. Bastianich is one of the founding members of Women Chefs and Restaurateurs, an organization dedicated to building community and membership for women in the food industry; as James says about her mother's efforts, chefs who've struggled grasp the importance of mentoring and support. "I want the women who this film was made for to think 'Yes, congratulations to me.' To feel good about what they were able to accomplish," she says. "[I want] women and men alike to feel like there's so much more we can be doing together to really create more opportunity for women to advance and start to chip away at these crazy leadership disparities."

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But disparity breeds determination, which leads to ingenuity. Confronted with insufficient funding for her project, James turned to Kickstarter; from there, people stepped in to help. "We had amazing supporters who, when they found out what we were doing, they said, 'Look, we're gonna host a little party. I'll bring the food, wine, we'll sell some tickets.' And the money would go towards production or post-

production. It was really special, getting help from women in the actual community that we were wanting to serve and make this movie all about.”

James continues to take her film to audiences around the country; she’ll hit New York, Las Vegas, New Orleans, and D.C. in the next several weeks, and *A Fine Line* airs on PBS in March as part of Women’s History Month. She hopes the takeaway applies equally to both herself and her movie: “I think this is a lesson for all of us,” she says. “So that we, personally, are willing to step into leadership and confidently go for it, as opposed to stepping out because we think, oh, it’s too hard. I think we have to sometimes talk ourselves into believing that we can do it.”

Madeleine Deliee writes, teaches, and parents in the Washington, D.C. area. She's written for Playboy, CNN, The Washington Post, SyFy Wire, and many other unrelated outlets. She sometimes tweets about mostly geeky stuff at [@MMDeliee](#).

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