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THE ROUX SCHOLARSHIP

ENCOURAGING MORE WOMEN
CHEFS TO TAKE PART IN
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The Roux Scholarship is a long-standing aspirational competition designed to open doors for young chefs working in the UK. It was established in autumn 1983, when head chefs were largely grey-haired men and kitchens were well staffed, if not always equitably run.

Now, head chefs can be in their twenties, are often – though not often enough – women, and recruitment is a well-documented problem. This has a knock-on effect on competitions, not least The Roux Scholarship, whose judges are from diverse backgrounds but whose contestants are still largely young, white men: through the history of the scholarship there has been one female winner and few women in the final, despite the first round of judging being blind. This means only the recipe is shared with the judges, no personal information about the chef, their background, establishment or gender is given. This has always been the case and achieves a level playing field.

This paper is to address the reasons for this imbalance and to devise courses of action to encourage and empower women to enter The Roux Scholarship and enjoy the rewards and experience it brings.



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CULTURE CLASH

Lack of women entrants into the Roux Scholarship and other competitions is symptomatic of the industry; there are far fewer female chefs and they may be less likely to put themselves forward.

This is partly down to kitchen culture; many head chefs trained in a traditionally tough kitchen and refer to their brigade as ‘the boys’ regardless of whether there are women among them. Worse, the shouty swears chefs on TV still exist in real life, as does the stubborn belief that working 50 hours a week is a badge of honour.

Even where the express culture of a workplace is that employees should be able to leave in time to spend time with their family, it is difficult to do that without feeling guilty when others are adhering to a regime of punishing hours and boasting about it. In short, many kitchens are too macho – but they could be fabulous working environments. Meanwhile, forward-thinking managers who push to achieve more gender equality in their brigades are held back by staff shortages, particularly since Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, which have affected the hospitality industry across the board.

All these factors not only damage the brand of the profession but make it doubly unattractive to parents (half of whom are women!), carers (mostly women) and those whose career aspirations are balanced by a desire to have a more balanced lifestyle (men and women). The latter has been particularly emphasised by the chaos caused by Covid and attendant lockdowns, which gave a lot of people pause for thought and question their work-life balance. Many have chosen to pursue careers, or take on private chef work that allows more flexibility.

Holidays are another issue: it used to be that anyone who worked in a kitchen came in until Christmas Day and then had a month off, returning at the end of January. Now, some restaurants close for two weeks in August to allow holidays to coincide with (a) good weather (potentially) and (b) other people’s holidays.

Culture change is slow but it is also visible and that is empowering and uplifting to those who will benefit. It is time to question the status quo.



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ROLE MODELS, AMBASSADORS, MENTORS AND COMMUNICATION

It is not so long ago that role models were all middle-aged white men; as excellent and inspiring as Gary Rhodes was and the likes of Raymond Blanc and Michel Roux Jr continue to be, there is now a much wider pool of aspirational individuals to follow and they are also more readily accessible. Chefs of many cultures – both men and women – can be quickly and easily found on Instagram and social media and can be reached through those channels for discussion and advice.

Mentoring is time-consuming but produces wonderful results; mentees become more capable, confident and able to celebrate themselves, a positive attitude that is infectious for all around them. Although the value of mentoring is now recognised, it is still not common practice and this should be promoted and encouraged.

There are now many more hospitality industry ambassadors who get out there and shout about their profession or industry colourfully, plentifully and articulately. Ambassadors in other industries are common: TFL had ‘ambassadors’ on the streets during the five days The Queen lay in state.

The hospitality industry and the chefs’ profession need ambassadors to communicate with everyone, from five-year-olds to their parents and grandparents to spread the message that being a chef may be hard work but it is rewarding and open to anyone.

The area that facilitates these roles and many others is communication. It is essential that all parties convey to anyone who will listen that the industry and the chefs in it are not only changing the working culture but are actively encouraging women into the professional kitchen – to enjoy high profile, responsible roles and to be treated in a way that makes them feel respected and valued.



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The Roux Scholarship was created to open doors that winners would not otherwise have had access to, giving them the opportunity to work in a restaurant outside the UK and up their game as a result. Although that has proven immeasurably valuable to winners, many of today's chefs working in the UK's best restaurants and who enter the competition may not need that advantage. Therefore, the scholarship needs to encourage entries from those chefs who still find opportunities closed to them so they can profit from the incredible opportunity it offers.

Also, now that employees are in such short supply and kitchens barely have the luxury of being adequately staffed, it is highly unlikely that a head chef would be willing to lose a member of her / his team for several weeks for a stage abroad. And realistically, in the 2020s, not all chefs would be inspired by this, namely the star prize, to enter and spend time working in a three-star Michelin restaurant away from family and friends.

The requirements of the competition are – and remain – a high standard of cooking and cuisine based on classical French culinary techniques, as The Roux Scholarship believes these are the building blocks of any chef's career. The purpose of the final recipe is for chefs to demonstrate these techniques but the task may be perceived as old-fashioned in comparison to the dishes that British chefs now create for their menus.



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OBSTACLES AND REMEDIES

GOING FOR GOLD

○ Kitchens are under-staffed and find it difficult to spare chefs for several weeks' break should they win The Roux Scholarship. Chefs who are parents and have caring responsibilities are reluctant to enter as the star prize is too difficult to take.

R The star prize will now be a choice of two options: the two-month stage or a bespoke training programme, comprising of short educational courses and experiences that are tailored to the winner's ambitions and skills gaps. The latter opportunity can be taken over the course of a year and is more manageable for employers and allows winners to further their education at their pace and their level.

○ While the final recipe is traditionally geared towards testing the finalists' skills in classic French cuisine, promoted by The Roux Scholarship as the building blocks of any cooking career, it may be perceived as out-dated and not a true test of their creativity as a chef.

R From the 2023 competition onwards, chefs will be encouraged to be more creative and modern in their approach, and to use a wider range of ingredients in the final cook-off, with a challenge that is less prescriptive than those in the past.

○ Entering a top-level competition such as The Roux Scholarship is inspirational and aspirational. It should not, however, be seen as unattainable. But many potential entrants, particularly women, have imposter syndrome, eg. "I'm not good enough, it's too exalted for the likes of me."

R It is important to get the message out that a contestant does not have to be working in a Michelin-starred kitchen. Give examples and ask former winners to talk loud and proud about their achievements – what it took to enter, get to the finals and how they benefitted from that and how it benefitted their establishment.

○ It is not just about winning. Participants discover a huge amount about themselves and the industry and make valuable connections. They test their skills, they learn from each other and from the judges (see below), some of whom are past winners and understand what it takes to enter The Roux Scholarship.

R Ask former finalists and winners to be more vocal about the experience itself. Encourage them to approach chefs – particularly women – who are potential entrants and encourage them to enter. Anyone encouraged to enter by someone who has done well in the scholarship will feel inspired and empowered to do so. 'Word of mouth' can be much more powerful than any social media campaign and activity.

○ The judges are perceived to be older white men whose profile is reflected in the boys' club image of the winners. This is despite the judging panel having invited such chefs as Angela Hartnett, Clare Smyth and Rachel Humphrey to be judges since 2017. The panel also includes former winners, so we need to give their experience a louder voice. To encourage more diversity, the potential applicants need to be able to 'see what they can be' and if fewer representatives from The Roux Scholarship are female or from diverse backgrounds then, this is not possible.

R Draw on the diversity that does exist between the judges, finalists and winners. Continue with social media messages that show that the competition is open to everyone; that it is a challenging but rewarding experience. Share in interviews with broadcast media and national press that kitchen culture is changing for the better.



OBSTACLES AND REMEDIES

GOING FOR GOLD (continued)

○ The blind-judged first round of The Roux Scholarship ensures complete equality and female chefs want to play on a level playing field. However, this does not allow for positive discrimination which is how other chef competitions (on TV particularly) achieve a more balanced gender split.

R Explain more clearly what the ‘blind judging’ means for equality and that the recipe application must be strong enough on its own. Encourage head chefs, restaurant owners and other organisations to offer support to those who struggle with putting their ideas on paper to make sure the recipe application is as strong as it can be.

○ Entering any competition takes time; entrants need to be able to plan and prepare, and to do that, they need support from their head chef.

R Hold more Q&A sessions via Instagram or Zoom to support chefs in their entry, share relevant pages of the website; add article to the website eg. ‘how you can support a chef entering the Roux Scholarship’. Draw on other organisations willing to offer support to entrants.

○ Most industries are good at talking to people in their sector but not always so good at getting the word out elsewhere. Young people not only communicate with each other via social media but also with those they look up to.

R Continue to use social media energetically, creatively and often to ensure that potential contestants not only know about all the good things The Roux Scholarship is doing to ensure it is moving with the times but also to focus on those who have taken the plunge and are entering the 2023 competition. Post interviews with women who have participated, highlighting the advantages that come with doing so: ‘Join in, it is challenging, enriching and fun’.

○ See the bigger picture – one reason there are not many women entrants to The Roux Scholarship is because there aren’t many female chefs. Start with children and young people.

R Initiatives such as the RCA’s Adopt a School is already doing great work in schools and talks to pupils about chefs and what they do. Restaurants could also invite customers into their kitchens for a ‘behind the scenes’ look; children and parents could then ‘see what they can be’ if there are as many women as men, dedicated to their profession. By seeing people working in a calm and gender-balanced workplace, tomorrow’s generations can take the message home that it is not like Hell’s Kitchen. By the time they are choosing their GCSEs, children will be considering becoming a chef and their parents will encourage them. Encourage the catering colleges that host The Roux Scholarship finals to have an equal split between male and female commis chefs assist the finalists during the competition so they can see what it is all about.



TO SUMMARISE

The Roux family is dedicated to achieving a better gender balance among the finalists, through inviting and supporting more female chefs to enter. This will confirm a positive attitude and render unnecessary a positive bias. The message should be pro-women, without being anti-men.

The introduction of a more flexible training programme (as the star prize, as an alternative to the stage) that is tailored to the winner's career ambitions and skills gaps will be appealing to more chefs who would find it difficult to take several weeks out of work to do a stage abroad.

The new-style final challenge in the competition should invite more chefs to take part and demonstrate their individual creativity and style with a dish, without feeling daunted by an Escoffier-inspired recipe.

Over the course of the 2023 competition, The Roux Scholarship will grow its links with chefs and mentors who could form part of a female mentorship programme to underscore support of women in a practical and affirmative way. It needs the support of the industry to make this a success.

Promote the competition through social, print and broadcast media, highlighting women judges, finalists and mentors. Continue to ask past and present judges, former finalists and winners to encourage women chefs to enter.



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CREDITS

This White Paper has been produced following a Round Table Discussion that took place on 13 October 2022 at Caractère, London.

With thanks to our hosts **Emily Roux** and **Diego Ferrari**.

Moderated by **Sarah Peters FIH**, Head of Commercial Development and Head of Events at the Institute of Hospitality.

Organised by **Carolyn Boyd**, Roux Scholarship PR & Comms Manager.

Participants in the Round Table discussion were carefully chosen to represent different viewpoints in the hospitality industry and experience in The Roux Scholarship. They were as follows:



Emily Roux

Our host for the event, Emily Roux opened her restaurant Caractère with her husband Diego Ferrari in 2018, which builds on her extensive experience and training gained in some of the best restaurants in France.

Michel Roux Jr

Co-chairman of the Roux Scholarship, Chef Patron of Le Gavroche.



Rachel Humphrey

Executive Head Chef of Le Gavroche and Roux Scholarship judge, Rachel took part in several competitions as a young chef.



Sally Abé

Consultant chef at London's Conrad St James, Sally leads a mostly female kitchen brigade at The Pem restaurant and she is a great champion of promoting female chefs.



Sabrina Gidda

Chef and culinary consultant Sabrina was twice a national finalist in The Roux Scholarship in 2014 and 2015 and was formerly the Executive Chef at Allbright, a women's members club based in London and Los Angeles.

Miranda Quantrill

Curriculum Manager for Hospitality Westminster Kingsway College, Thermomix adviser and Disciple d'Auguste Escoffier, Miranda is a classically trained chef with an excellent competition career behind her.



Alisha Pereira

Alisha Pereira is Head Banqueting Chef at the Hilton Bankside Hotel with almost half her brigade comprising of female chefs. She has more than a decade of hospitality expertise including the Four Seasons at the Park Lane and The Dorchester, where she headed the banqueting team.



Peter Avis FIH

General Manager of the award-winning restaurant Galvin at Windows and 10 Degrees Sky Bar at London's Hilton on Park Lane, he is Vice-Chair of the IOH and continues to mentor young people and show them what great career hospitality can be.



David Glaser

A director of The Waterside Inn and the Roux Scholarship, David has a number of other non-executive directorships including special responsibility for Human Resources of a large Multi-Academy Trust. He has a special interest in promoting diversity among employees and students.



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