

Following the release of its "Gods of Food" issue last November, TIME found itself in hot water. Not a single female chef made the list of tastemakers or placed on its lineage chart of culinary influencers. When pressed about it, TIME's former news editor Howard Chua-Eoan explained it to Eater this way: "I think it reflects one very harsh reality of the current chefs' world, which unfortunately has been true for years: It's still a boys' club."

St. Louis is certainly no exception. The chefs who are written about most (including in this publication) and get the most attention nationally are overwhelmingly male. This despite the fact that, according to the National Center for Education statistics, enrollment for the 2013 school year at Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts' St. Louis campus was split equally between males and females. So, we wondered, what does it mean to be a "female chef" in St. Louis? And is the gender disparity in the kitchen still a problem?

We present our evening with the ladies of the chef's table, featuring:

Colleen Clawson, self-described "chef mercenary" and owner of soon-to-open Milquetoast (twenty years in the kitchen, previously at Sidney Street Cafe)

Marianne Moore, creative director for Dierbergs' culinary programs (fifteen years in the kitchen, previously at Wolfgang Puck Catering)

Grace Dinsmoor, executive chef at the Whittemore House at Washington University in Louis (23 years in the kitchen, previously at Modesto Tapas & Restaurant)

Cassy Vires, executive chef and owner of Home Wine Kitchen (thirteen years in the kitchen, previously at Ernesto's Wine Bar and the Viking Cooking School)

Simone Faure, pastry chef and owner of La Patisserie Choquette (sixteen years in the kitchen, previously at Ritz Carlton St. Louis and New Orleans)

Mary Boehne, corporate chef for Strange Donuts (ten years in the kitchen, previously at the Four Seasons St. Louis)

Carrie Whitcraft, sous chef at Winslow's Home (seven years in the industry, previously at Sidney Street Cafe)

Lisa Slay, executive chef, Remy's Kitchen & Wine Bar (37-plus years in the kitchen, previously at Blue Water Grill, Big Sky Cafe and David Slay's La Veranda in California)

Jenny Cleveland, chef and owner of Cleveland Heath (eight years in the industry, previously chef de partie at Ad Hoc in California)

On bad online reviews and the media:

Moore: People get very courageous behind the keyboard. It's very easy to put a bad review out there on social media, and it's like, "Why can't you just tell me to my face?"

Dinsmoor: And when you don't have the media support, it's easy [for a customer] to [go home] and go along with the bandwagon. If one magazine is writing about one chef all the time, how can you go online and give that chef a bad review?

Vires: I had to laugh a gentleman who emailed me a scathing, scathing email about how terrible of an experience he had at my restaurant. He was going on and on, and I was like, "I've got to call this guy," so I called him up, and we'll call him Joe, I said "Joe, I got your email, and I think you have the wrong restaurant. We don't brew beer." He just hung up.

Moore: But a person who writes that, they're bitter, they're petty, they're mad. Then you call them and talk to them and they're like, "That's not what I really meant." Well, I'm sorry, what did you mean?

Clawson: I think it's not entirely without giving us an advantage. It can help to bolster the responsibility of our industry, to be a reminder that this is the service industry, and in fact it is our customers who are potentially paying our bills and our paychecks at the end of the day. So that stuff is important, and we don't like to hear it -- none of us like to be criticized -- but maybe it makes us work that much harder and push ourselves that much more at the end of the day. Is it reasonable? No, probably not. And do people need to be sometimes handled with kid gloves when you'd probably rather smash somebody in their eye? But you can't do that, and that's not what our industry is. Our industry is about service and hospitality. If somebody came over to your house, and you were having dinner and they had too much to drink and was shitty with you, I mean, they'd still be your friend.

Vires: But you'd still ask them to leave.

Clawson: Yeah, you would. That's a luxury we don't really have.

Vires: I do.

On why they cook

Clawson: Everybody knows opening up a [restaurant] takes a tremendous amount of time and effort and work, and getting all of the right pieces to come together gets your head spinning. But it's totally worth it, you know?

Moore: Is it worth it? Most days it is.

Faure: I get culinary students who come into my kitchen, and I'm interviewing them — whether it's for an apprenticeship or a job — and I say, "Why do you want to do this? What's the end goal for you?" "Well, I love to bake." And I'm like, "Well, fuck." You know what? I get into this kitchen — and this is on the record, Simone Faure says fuck — seriously though, I'm in my kitchen at two o'clock in the morning. I leave my husband

in bed and my beautiful three-year-old son down the hall, and I don't do it because I like to bake. There's gotta be something beyond "liking" what you do that keeps you going.

Moore: I taught culinary school for a few years, and you would get the same thing. What we got was, "I'm going to graduate, and I'm going to be a rock-star chef. I'm going to be on TV." Back in the day it was Food Network, Emeril, "Bam!" and that whole thing. You'd come in and you would try to teach these guys the fundamentals of what it's like to be in the kitchen, and they would have to do dishes. You would get the ones who were like, "I didn't pay for this class to do dishes," and it's like, "Bullshit." When you're that rock-star chef in that rock-star restaurant and your dishwasher calls off...

Dinsmoor: I still wash dishes.

Moore: Exactly. There has to be a fire, something in your gut that says, "This is what I have to do."

On having (or not having) kids

Dinsmoor: I'm not going to have a kid and have a marriage or anything — and that's something I chose a long time ago. But I have my relationships and I have my dogs, but this is my passion. This is No. 1.

Moore: I can tell you, sometimes I feel like I sold out because I was single, going through a divorce — a single mom — and I was like, "I can't hump it in a kitchen for twelve hours and try to raise my family like some do." For me, I know there are many women out there who have done it, and I give them tremendous props for it, and I ended up going for...

Dinsmoor: Quality of life.

Moore: It was, but with a special-needs daughter I couldn't do that. So I went to the events side of things. You guys are all going to laugh, especially you Grace, but I thought that was going to give me a different quality of life. And then here I am and I went down that path. There was a period where I missed who I am, and I've been fortunate enough to be able to get into a career where I can teach. I've gotten to the point where I know I'm not going to have a restaurant. I don't want to be a restaurant chef anymore. I think there are so many ways that we can impact this industry, whether we teach or really try to put together programs. We educate these consumers as well so that maybe in some part they get to spend time with you and they know what goes on behind the scenes. They spend time with Cassy, and they interact with her and they realize that there is a person that's attached to that who is busting her balls trying to give you a great experience.

Dinsmoor: Boobies. You mean boobies.

Moore: Some of us have balls...I think it's totally viewed differently in a male world. Men are allowed to go balls to the wall and work. They can work 60 hours.

Dinsmoor: Because why? The woman is at home.

Boehne: And not just that the woman's at home, but when you have a kid — I haven't had one — but [to Moore and Whitcraft] you and you have — you know that's your main focus in life. You go from being a cook to, "Now I am a mother, and I have to physically go home and take care of this person."

Faure: You're supposed to want to. And let's face it, you [to Dinsmoor] saying that "I don't want kids" strikes a nerve in most people, and whether they are willing to admit it or not, they're always judging you.

Dinsmoor: It's not that I don't appreciate children or don't want a baby, but I don't know. Maybe there's this selfish part of me that just has this passion and love for what I do. I'm not into it.

Clawson: It's not selfish at all.

Moore: It's a very respectable choice, and it's a very well-thought-out choice because I can tell you on the flipside, my youngest is eighteen now, and I miss birthdays, I miss holidays, I miss nights. But I made choices that were viewed as, "But you have a child?" I do, but I have a career as well, and I made some of those choices as I went through my life and, as I said, I thank God every day that I found a mate who supported that, but [my son] was four years old, and I had finished culinary school and I was working like crazy, and my husband was keeping things together at home. It was a tough choice I made, and sometimes do I look back on it and say, "What was I thinking?" But I also look back on it and say, "That's who I am today because of the choices I did make." I look at an eighteen-year-old -- I also have two older children who were pretty well grown -- and I look at him, and he's a pretty damn fine kid. It's OK.

Faure: My son is home with right now with Maria, who, God bless her soul, takes good care of him but refuses to learn English — which you know, personal choice. Maxim, my son, has a speech delay, and my husband speaks French to him, I speak English to him, Maria only speaks Spanish to him, and when momma comes home, I say, "Oh my gosh, you're so dirty, it's time for you to take a bath. Why don't you go to the bathroom?" He just kind of looks at me blankly. Then Maria walks in with a towel and goes, "OK, Maxim, a baño, vamanos," and he goes right into the bathroom. I'm like, "Maria, I'm going to need to cut your hours!"

Moore: I can't tell you how many times I've looked in the mirror and said, "I hope I'm not fucking this up." Seriously, your situation is the same thing I went through with my son. It was, you know, "Wow, I hope that at some point he looks back on this and he's not pissed off at me." That he doesn't have to work it out in therapy.

Whitcraft: I have an eighteen-month-old, and I always threw myself into what I was doing 1,000 percent. With cooking it was like, "Oh my God, I'm actually good at this. I'm

going to fucking rock this joint." That's what I always wanted, and then I met my husband, we worked at the club together, got married and now we have this little girl, and I'm so torn because I want to do my job 100 percent, and I want to be her mom 100 percent, and I have to come to terms with the fact that you can't really truly do that.

Vires: I just want to say that, just like there's no shame in Grace and I saying we don't want to birth children, there's no shame in saying, "I want to be home with my child."

Moore: It's an eternal struggle.

Dinsmoor: Maybe I'll be 48 like my mother.

Faure: No one should criticize a person for saying, "I don't want to have kids." Sometimes people get pushed into it, and I don't mean physically, I mean psychologically.

Dinsmoor: I call it "the baby pains."

Faure: My biological clock is ticking? Well, I hit the snooze button a few times, because there was no way.

Moore: I have thirteen years between my middle and my youngest. I was totally in the clear and I went and did it again. For me it was a choice, but you wonder what you want - - to bring a child into the world -- but you feel like for some ungodly reason you have to. There is nothing wrong with being a committed, driven career woman.

On abuse from male chefs and being the only woman in the kitchen

Dinsmoor: I grew up working under assholes, Coke cans flying across the kitchen, getting slammed against the walk-in, abused, harassed. I just took that, and I just fed off that. I thought, "You're going to be better than that. You're going to inspire. You're going to encourage. You're going to take young people and teach them a better way of life, especially in the kitchen." Now you can't get away with stuff like that. You'd have a lawsuit on your hands.

Vires: OK, show of hands, who's been physically assaulted by a chef?

Dinsmoor: Most of us. I took that. I was young, I was eighteen, nineteen years old, and I just thought that was how it was. I still went to work. I still gave it my all, and I still begged for everything that I wanted. I begged to get on the line to cook. I didn't want to be stuck in the pantry station. I said, "I'm ready, I can do this," and I begged to do the prep list. I begged to do the inventory. I pretty much taught my way through the industry under male chefs who were burnt out and didn't want to do their jobs. They took me on as this young girl: "Well, I can just push her around; she's going to do all my work for me." No, I was going to take your job. That's where I'm at. I'm in a private club now. I'm out of the restaurant scene altogether after twenty years in the business, and it's weird not being

at the public eye. I have a food cost. I have a budget because it's in my head. Their money is my money. It's how I run businesses. My goal is to continue to drop costs and become profitable. I don't know who's looking at me, and that's how I always look at it -- whether it's diners in my restaurant or in the restaurant where I've been the executive chef for or the people at this table and -- I always take it very seriously that this is my one chance to get it. I want to get it done right. I'm upset that I don't cook hardcore as much as I used to. I'm not on the line, but I have a lot on my plate, and this is my one chance, and I have to impress myself in order for others to say, "Let's get her out of there. Let's do something else." And I think that being a female and talking with people who have spoken to me about restaurant this and restaurant that, and then they're just gone, I think it's you know, an issue.

Boehne: What about other female chefs in the kitchen?

Clawson: Very frequently you're the only chick, and that's an interesting dynamic.

Boehne: I find females, in general, to put their heads down and work harder. Not to be so sexist, but I usually hear chatter and bullshit come out of the mouths of dudes about one thing or another.

Vires: I've never worked with another female in a kitchen. I'm trying to think back, and I can't think of another female I've worked with. The trouble I've had is, I call it my "dark days," where I felt that in order to be a female executive chef I had to be harder, harsher, meaner, crasser, all the things. Because I've got to be better than every male chef I've ever worked for. I was a dick. I mean, I really hated myself, and it's been a pretty recent thing where I've said, "You know, that's not me." I don't have to make these guys hate me to get them to work for me because I'm good at my job. I'm a damn good cook and a great boss, and I'm just going to be me, and they're going to respect me and work for me. That's worked out way better than when I was being a dick.

Slay: You set the tone; you set the pace. It's like, "This is what I expect in my kitchen. and you either do it or you don't." I don't have time for you to do what you want to do. This is what we are doing, and I will work with you, and I will teach you every single thing you need to know, and I will groom you and I will do whatever, because obviously I enjoy that. I've been around for a very long time. But there've been some guys who — I'm not going to mention their names who — have been kind of like assholes.

Boehne: Kind of assholes or actual assholes?

Dinsmoor: Egotistical assholes.

Slay: A customer will come in, and he'll be like, "Tell the chef he did a great job." And the server will come back and say, "Hey chef, this guy wants me to tell you this." And I'm like, "OK, great. I'm glad they really enjoyed everything." Then I go out to the table, and I'm like, "Oh, hi, I heard you enjoyed everything," and they're like, "Who are you?"

Vires: "What do you do here?" I pay the bills.

Dinsmoor: I have delivery drivers walking right past me, going to the youngest guy to sign an invoice while I'm in a chef coat.

Boehne: Everyone thinks that you are just being a bitchy female, and you're not. If you have an issue and nobody is hearing you, you walk out there, and you face them, and you look them in the eye and say, "I need a runner right now." You have to be that example.

Faure: For people who are not where we are mentally and emotionally right now, you see women as emotional and yelling and bitching. "She's just yelling because she is a woman and there is a possibility she is on the rag."

Moore: There it is!

Slay: I worked at Blue Water Grill and my partner worked at the restaurant. I was banging my tongs when food was sitting in the window too long and I'd scream because that's what everybody did.

Vires: I broke my bell once.

Slay: I was banging my tongs so hard that I pinched my finger. It was bleeding and it hurt so bad, but I couldn't let that show. She went, "You know, you really looked like an asshole tonight," and I was like, "Really? Oh shit."

Dinsmoor: But the guys in the kitchen wanted you to be an asshole. They liked it. They egged it on.

On being mistaken for a waitress or the pastry chef

Boehne: Coming from the pastry background, I found it to be a whole other battle. One, because you're female. Two, because you're in pastry. Of course, you're female, so you're in pastry. It's a hard pill to swallow because I worked on a line. I've done it. I can cook.

Vires: People say that all the time, "Are you the pastry chef?" I do think that people see me in a pink coat or a blue coat and think that I'm a pastry chef. That's the blatant sexism that I see. "Oh, you must be the pastry chef." And I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with being a pastry chef, but it's similar to seeing a woman doctor and thinking they're the nurse. No, I own the place, thank you.

Whitcraft: I applied at one place and the chef was like, "Thank you, but we don't need any more front-of-house." I was like, "Great, because I am not applying for front-of-house."

Faure: On the level that we were at the hotel, most of the pasty chefs were men. Most of them were European, so when I would go on these retreats or conventions or the World

Pastry Cup or whatever, it would be all dudes, a big sausage fest going on in the world of pastry. And when you're a woman — and throw on top of that I'm a beautiful brown girl — it was, "You're the pastry chef at the Ritz? Really?"

The big question:

Do we still need to talk about being a "female chef"?

Vires: I was kind of thinking, you know, "Why the hell are we doing this?" because I believe fervently that none of this has anything to do with the fact that we have boobs. We're just really good at our jobs, and I really hate the conversation, and I hate the fact that I so often get asked in interviews, "What's it like to be a woman in the kitchen?" Well, it's a different chef's jacket. I get it tailored.

Dinsmoor: It's something I don't think about.

Slay: I have an off-the-record answer for that. When the guys are all back there complaining about it being so hot I say, "Well, I never got jock itch." They're like, "Oh shit, my balls hurt!"

[Editor's note: After some cajoling by the other chefs, Slay allows this comment back on the record]

Dinsmoor: There were all these open boxes of cornstarch in dry storage. I threw them all away.

Moore: But you know, fundamentally, everybody sitting around this table — and so many more women — are damn good at what they do, but why is it such a freaking fight?

Vires: But it's always a fight.

Whitcraft: We're equals, and we can work the line.

Boehne: Right now we're in an industry that's transitioning, and it's turning into more of an equal balance.

Dinsmoor: But that's been a long time.

Moore: I've been around for a while. It's a boys' club.

Boehne: What was that article up in New York where they named the top ten chefs in America and every one was male, and they were like, "What the hell?" Name the best chef, and if they really are ten guys, I'm fine with that, but if you just Googled best chef in America and this is the list you came up with...

Cleveland: I think the male-female thing — is it an issue or is it not an issue — well, look at how small the group of women in the industry in top positions in St. Louis [that] they were able to pull together.

Vires: I'm not saying it's not an issue. I'm saying I don't like to make it an issue. In my daily life, I don't think about this. I wake up, I put on my shoes, and I cook.

Faure: We don't think about it because everyone else around us is thinking about it for us. But take Ferguson, let's say. I don't think about racism on a daily basis. It's not in my home, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. Feminism, issues with women — it exists.

Clawson: We don't often include this in our conversation, this undercurrent of something that everyone knows it's there, but no one wants to talk about it, because if we talk about it then everyone has to look at it. And if you look at it, that makes it real, and if it's real, then we might have to change. Change is real terrifying.

Faure: At the end of the day I'm not saving lives. I'm making chocolate shoes. No one is going to die because they didn't get one of Simone Faure's chocolate strappy sandals. At the end of the day, what I'm doing on the plate is not as important as what I am doing in the minds and hearts of my cooks. I honestly, honestly, honestly believe that I got into doing this so that I could inspire the kids that are coming into the kitchen. Especially the girls.... You [to Moore] just got a promotion, and I was always taught that when you get a promotion and you move up, you should be pulling somebody up behind you.

Cleveland: What you said earlier about whether or not we want to make being female an issue — nobody in this room wants to because none of us think that way. But does it make you uncomfortable that you work so hard for it to not be an issue. We work so hard to just be equal, and I don't feel like it's ever been an issue for me being female in a kitchen.

Slay: I feel the same way.

Moore: Me too, but it sucks when the boys' club comes in and gets the job that you wanted.

Slay: I have videotapes from Channel 5 [KSDK] from 32 years ago about what's it like to be a chef, and I'm like, "I don't know. I'm a chef. Leave me alone. I'm busy, gotta go." It's not something I really thought about. And I have an article in my car from twenty years ago that was in the paper about female chefs, and there was myself and Zoë [Robinson] and twenty years ago we are talking about the same thing. It's like: What's the big deal?

Vires: I've had someone look at me point blank and say, "I'm sorry. We've never had a female in our kitchen, and we're not about to start now." And I'm like, "OK, next application. Let's go to the next job." I'm not going to stop trying because of that.