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ANGELS AT THE STOVE

Are there any women chefs left? Where have they all gone? Have restaurant kitchens become male ghettos? Are the recipes all by men and the dishes by women? Do taste buds have a sexual orientation? These questions crop up regularly around the table, but there are no easy answers; the situation changes with every era.

Once upon a time, mothers were in the kitchen. They made delicious food that became famous. The *mères* in the *bouchons* of Lyon were undoubtedly the most famous, among them Célestine Blanchard, Mère Jean, Mère Vittet and, of course, Mère Brazier, who earned three stars, not just once but twice: on Rue Royale (now run by the excellent Mathieu Viannay) and at the Col de la Luère.

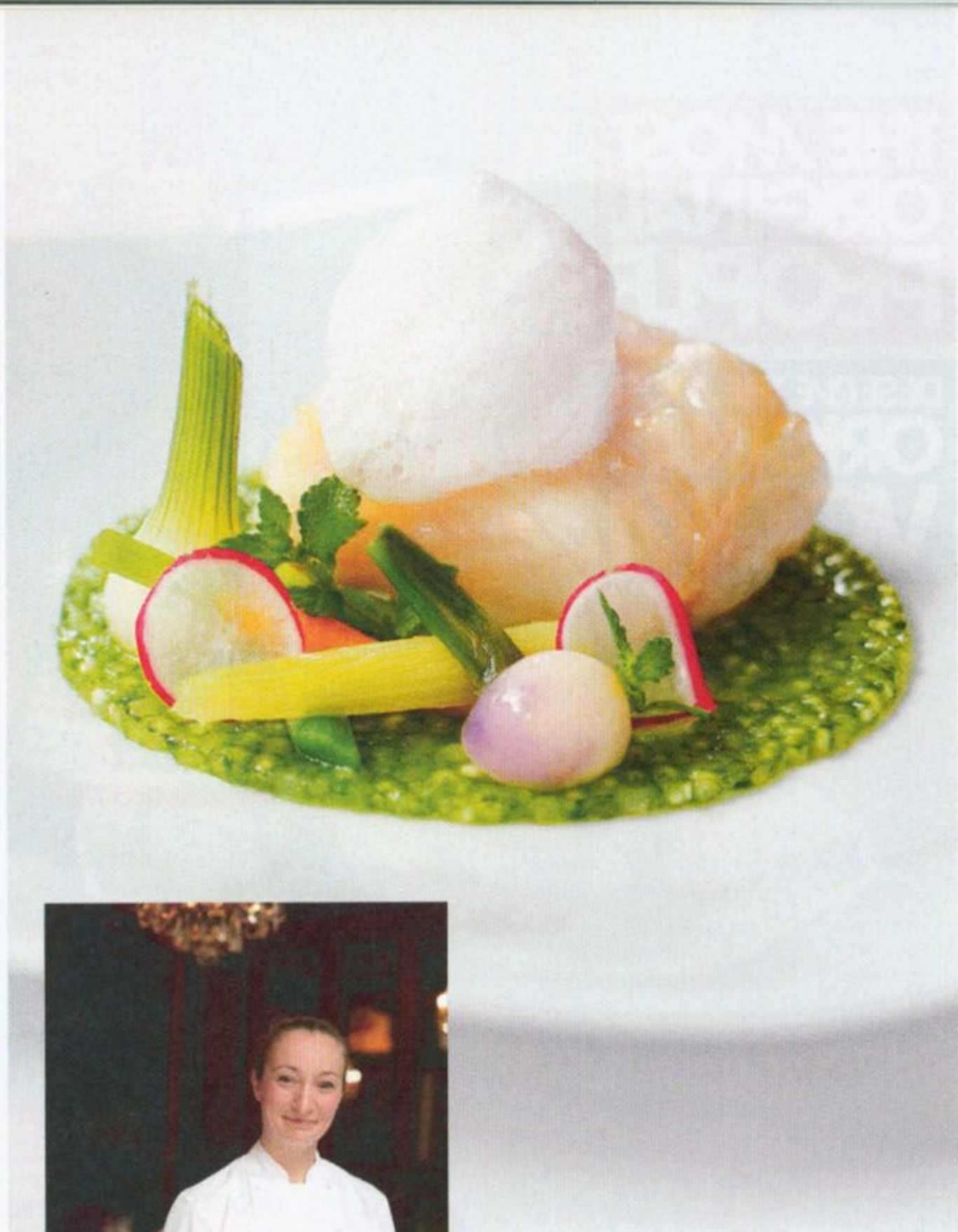
Women chefs flourished nearly everywhere around France: Mélanie Rouat in Riec-sur-Belon, Paule Castaing at the Beau Rivage in Condrieu. They ran the show; the men were elsewhere—at the front, at work, in the spotlight. Or else in the grime and ashes of the kitchens.

Then things changed. The profession of the chef came out of the shadows thanks to men like Paul Bocuse, who, with the help of Henri Gault and Christian Millau, showered honor, glory (and wealth) on chefs. That is when women chefs gradually started to disappear. A few remained, certainly, but barely enough to fill a table for 12.

Today, everything has shifted once again. With Anne-Sophie Pic (in Valence and Paris), Hélène Darroze (Paris, London), Adeline Grattard (Yam'Tcha, Paris), Flora Mikula (Auberge Flora, Paris) and Ghislaine Arabian (Les Petites Sorcières, Paris), the feminine front is active, feisty and trendy. Note the recent hiring of Amandine Chaignot at the Raphael on avenue Kléber in Paris and of Virginie Basselot at the Saint-James in Paris. Times have changed.

So how does this female energy manifest itself in the kitchen? Certainly in a gentler, more attentive, more loving way of cooking. While men feel the call of the gods and beat their chests, women have fewer scores to settle.

They just cook, that's it. Yet there is surely a masculine streak in these courageous women who had to stay afloat in what is known to be a hostile environment, something that drove them to fight, stand up for themselves and overcome the difficulties.



**Virginie Basselot, aux pianos
du Saint-James, Paris.**

Virginie Basselot, Saint James, Paris.

This same drive can be seen among women artists, sculptors, painters and fashion designers. And male chefs could not create a truly authentic cuisine without an inner *mamma*, giving and generous. Chefs like Fulvio Pierangelini, one of the world's best (currently working as a consultant for the Rocco Forte chain in Rome, Saint Petersburg, Geneva and Brussels), come to mind. He's a bit of a bear, but with an exceptionally delicate touch when it comes to creating dishes: his open-faced tomato ravioli are small miracles. They look like they could have been crafted by the divine fingers of the Virgin Mary herself.

Today, thanks to the power of the media and television coverage, the profession has become more mixed, more diverse in every way. Some dishes now have incredibly complex origins. "Sourcing" a recipe has become an anthropological exercise that no longer has much to do with femininity or masculinity. Gastronomy has become an immense sea of currents, layers and philosophies—ageless and asexual. |