C H A N G I N G

Sara Kramer and Sarah Hymanson of Los Angeles's Kismet are part of a new wave of female chefs creating a kinder, gentler restaurant-kitchen culture. Tamar Adler reports. Photographed by Eric Boman.

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C O U R S I

NEW CHEFS, NEW RULES Hymanson (FAR LEFT) and Kramer—photographed at Kramer's home in Los Angeles—run an abuse-free kitchen at their restaurant Kismet. Across the country a rising generation of female chefs is doing the same. Hair, Jerrod Roberts; makeup, Kristina Brown.

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PRODUCED BY SUZANNA REES

I'm at a small table in the airy dining room of Sara Kramer and Sarah Hymanson's eight-month-old Los Angeles restaurant, Kismet. The two chefs are leading a pre-service meeting. Kramer wears a rose-pink baseball cap, Hymanson a pink scarf tied around her red hair à la Rosie the Riveter. "I wanted to remind everyone to be aware of the kind of culture we want to create, and to be careful of using language in a gendered way," Kramer says, as casually as if she were correcting a waiter's pronunciation of *labne* (thick yogurt cheese made from organic cream here every few days). "Sometimes we get into sticky territory with things like *Thanks, ladies.* I don't want to choose categories for people with which they might not be comfortable."

It is definitively the first time I've heard this kind of service note in a restaurant, but the staff simply nods. One waiter lightheartedly suggests the Obama-era "folks." Another: "Hello, humans." The servers disperse to put rosé in the walk-in. There is, in fact, remarkably little drama or stress in the restaurant overall. This is significant, even historic. Drama—usually in the form of abuse—has been the restaurant's stock-in-trade, what it runs on. I've heard horror stories, as has anyone in the industry: pans thrown at heads; a cook headbutted for an overcooked risotto; corporal punishment when a pigeon terrine lingered in its water bath too long.

But the status quo is teetering. A tide of women chefs is rising, en masse, to the top of their field and changing conventional restaurant culture. There have, of course, been women at the helms of kitchens for decades: trailblazers such as Alice Waters at Chez Panisse, Odessa Piper at Wisconsin's L'Etoile, Judy Rodgers at Zuni Café, to name only three. Today, however, the few have become the many. According to the National Restaurant Association, the number of woman-owned establishments has increased by more than 50 percent in the last decade. Last year was the first the Culinary Institute of America enrolled more women than men. I can't list all the women running kitchens today, because there are hundreds, or thousands. In New York, Daniela Soto-Innes has made a name for herself at Cosme and Atla, and Suzanne Cupps recently became executive chef of Untitled at the Whitney. Los Angeles is lousy with women chefs—Kramer and Hymanson; Niki Nakayama; Suzanne Goin; Jessica Koslow; Jessica Largey; Nyesha Arrington in Santa Monica. . . . On the coast of Maine are Sara Jenkins and Melissa Kelly; in

Boston, Barbara Lynch and Ana Sortun; in Savannah, Mashama Bailey; Per Se alumna Julia Sullivan just opened Henrietta Red in Nashville. It goes on.

As restaurateur and Cherry Bombe editorial director Kerry Diamond puts it to me, food isn't just having a female moment: "Food is having a feminist moment." Untitled's Cupps explains, "For us, it's not just 'This is how we've done it, so this is how we do it.' It's like 'Let's try something new.' " If we were to speak in tribal terms, women chefs are chiefs from new tribes, with new norms. Examples are everywhere, Diamond says, "from Missy Robbins at Lilia rejecting the tyranny of the star system to Alissa Wagner at Dimes creating a mini empire on Canal Street and balancing being a chef and a young mom."

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The world is braver and newer. The old era is drawing to its end. But what is beginning? That question has led me to Kismet, where Kramer and Hymanson cook a Middle Eastern–inflected cuisine while challenging the notion that abuse is essential to success.

In the restaurant's bright kitchen, where I help trim beans and pick parsley, Kramer confesses she was hesitant to bring up "ladies" in the staff meeting. She didn't want me to think it was for my benefit. "But we have this symbol on our bathrooms"—a genderless stick figure—"and still the old language exists." Kramer and Hymanson spent ample time in male-dominated kitchens in New York—both worked at Blue Hill at Stone Barns; Kramer at Diner, Marlow & Sons, and Roman's; and Hymanson at Danny Bowien's Mission Chinese Food. Their own kitchen would hew to new principles, they decided. At Kismet, there is no yelling and "no demeaning people," Kramer says. "We don't tell people to check their lives at the door. If you're having a bad day, we don't expect you to muscle through. We want you to bring reality to your job." I haven't heard such a balanced perspective from anyone but my therapist. She continues, "People have sacrificed a lot to work in this kind of a space. I want to respect that sacrifice by letting them not always be their best version. I know that I'm not always the best version of me." She looks worried I'm about to whoop or cry, "Hallelujah!"

"It's absurd that that sounds revolutionary," she adds. "I wish it didn't."

At n/naka, a 26-seat restaurant some 45 minutes in Los Angeles traffic from Kismet, one of the world's few female kaiseki chefs, Niki Nakayama, has launched her own quiet revolution. A serious woman with dark hair and firmly set features, she is famous back in Japan and perhaps the only person anywhere cooking the style of food she does, the way she does. Five out of the seven people in her kitchen are women. One is her wife, Carole Iida-Nakayama; another Carole's 70-year-old mother, Mieko, in a Japanese apron, calmly grating truffle into small cups on a counter. After watching everyone do everything, I can't imagine job titles. A tall, shy-looking man named Jeffry grapples silently with a large silver fish. It turns out he's also a sommelier, and a few hours later he stands at my table, genteel and talkative, and guides me deftly through an elaborate sake tasting menu. "He likes cooking too," Nakayama says, with too much self-possession for me to inquire further. I do ask Iida-Nakayama, only half seriously, whether she and Nakayama, both quite small, find it hard to give direction to the men in their kitchen. "All the ones that end up here have a lot of sisters," she answers with a terseness that is the house manner. "They're used to taking orders from women."

N/naka's food is subtle and precise—it is a richer version of a traditional kaiseki meal, which includes two sushi courses and six cooked courses. The food sometimes astonishes—like spaghetti alla chitarra tossed with shreds of abalone, cod roe, and truffle, maybe the most delicious pasta I've ever tasted. But what lingers longer on my mind is what I hear from a young, curly-haired Japanese woman named Yuki making tartare. She couldn't find a job to learn sushi in Japan, only ones waiting tables. Are there any famous female sushi chefs in Japan? "No," she answers. Then she reconsiders and nods at Nakayama. "Only Niki-san."

Then there's the mold-breaking Mexican chef Gabriela Cámara up in San Francisco, whose two-year-old restaurant Cala has already been called one of the best in the country. She opened her first, Contramar, in Mexico City, at 23—"The guests didn't believe I was the owner," she tells me—and distributed tips fairly among her (male) waitstaff, most of whom came from rough backgrounds where women were routinely disrespected. "They thought it was weird that I didn't take a percentage. They couldn't believe I looked after their medical situations at home. But I thought that was the correct way of going about things." At Cala, which is in San Francisco's Civic Center, "caring for others" is the core of her business. Seventy percent of the staff are ex-convicts;

FOOD FOR THOUGHT Preparations from some of the new guard: crème fraîche panna cotta at Julia Sullivan's Henrietta Red in Nashville, lobster-avocado-tomato gelée from Niki Nakayama's n/naka in L.A., and a salsa verde from Gabriela Cámara of Cala in San Francisco.

Cala also houses Tacos Cala, an affordable option for neighbors. "I don't know if I run my restaurants like this because I'm a woman or because I'm interested in other humans," she says a bit impatiently. She muses that it may be easier for women to take care of people "because that's how we've been acculturated." Plus, "we're less scared of innovating because there are low expectations in terms of what a woman can do. And a woman can do a lot."

This is certainly on full display at Untitled, where I sit for several hours before the open kitchen watching cooks quickly compose ragouts of oyster mushrooms and English peas, nimbly pull chickens from the rotisserie, and mix salads of tiny summer vegetables. The 36-year-old chef Suzanne Cupps is an irrepressibly collected person one senses could lead a busy dinner service without once staining her chef coat. She studied education and math at Clemson University. "For a few years I thought my degree was unrelated," she says while serving me a lunch of beef tartare topped with broccoli rabe flowers; cracked spelt–and–tomato salad with tiny squashes; and roasted carrots with cashew butter. "But," she says, smiling the sparkliest smile I've seen outside a toothpaste commercial, "now I teach."

The cooks here—currently half men, half women, but some days all women ("It's not intentional," Cupps insists. "We get great applications")—are serious but relaxed. Cupps speaks quietly. It is hard to picture her yelling or cursing or throwing a pan. A cook named Lily tells me that Cupps pushes everyone. "And if you get in trouble, she's always there to swoop you up."

"I'm not going to get what I want by screaming," Cupps says. "I get better food by challenging cooks in different ways. What I love most about this job isn't when a guest says *I love that dish,* but seeing a cook transform." I hear a similar sentiment from Nashville's Julia Sullivan, whose Henrietta Red opened in February to adoring reviews. "My goal is to create a culture of teaching," she says. "One cook told me that he thought I would be a more effective leader if I were more aggressive. He said if I made myself the common enemy of all the cooks I

would manage better." Sullivan shrugged it off. "I don't want to come to a place every day where people hate me. I want to laugh, and I want to enjoy cooking."

Cosme's and Atla's Daniela Soto-Innes, who at 27 is widely considered one of the finest cooks in New York today, tells me that when new people come in to audition for a job they are thoroughly confused. "I don't wear a chef coat. I wear yoga pants. I say *Hi!* I give hugs. Then the music starts"—indie, reggae, and hip-hop blasts throughout prep—"and it's even weirder. Then we stretch for service. We stretch, and we do 100 squats."

Padma Lakshmi loves Soto-Innes's cooking—contemporary, slightly technical, playful and friendly Mexican food. "I don't have any hard evidence for this," she tells me, "but I think her food is more feminine." I've resisted this whole idea, just as I've resisted paying much attention to the dubious World's Best Female Chef award. (Do we need the distinction? Isn't it worrisome and essentializing?) But Jess Shadbolt and Clare de Boer of Lower Manhattan's new—and wonderful and entirely female-run—King are unfazed. "A lot of people are cautious to draw lines between our being women and the restaurant," says Shadbolt. "Pete Wells"—in an adulatory *New York Times* review—"compared the egolessness of what we put on the plate and us being women." *Egoless* is, I realize, just the word to describe my meal at King—mackerel in saor, simple perfect asparagus, a monkfish tail on buttery white beans, cooked to near collapse. It is all the inheritance of the food at Ruth Rogers's River Cafe in London, where Shadbolt and de Boer cooked together before coming to New York. "Kitchen culture," Shadbolt says, "bleeds into every part of a restaurant. Whatever a head chef thinks of him- or herself ultimately defines the place and reaches the customer."

My tour could continue. There is still Vivian Howard, running two restaurants while writing and raising a family in rural North Carolina; Vivian Ku at Pine & Crane in L.A.; Victoria Blamey, who recently took over Chumley's in Manhattan. And there are the men who have seen the light. Alma chef Ari Taymor just published a long personal essay in *LA Weekly* about the importance of "the wholeness of my life," the value of community, and a warning against anger and violence in the kitchen; Husk's and McGradys' Sean Brock has just forsworn alcohol and rage and now meditates and practices radical self-care. Will balance and calm, tolerance and compassion be the chef's new ethos? Will pre-service stretching become the new pre-service shot of Jägermeister, triple espresso, line of coke? And will it stick? After all, as Gloria Steinem said almost half a century ago, "One final myth: that women are more moral than men. We are not more moral; we are only uncorrupted by power." □