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## A Full Plate

The restaurant industry is a notoriously tough business. But these chef and owner moms can handle the heat—and then some—which is why they stay in the kitchen. BY KATHERINE BOWERS

**Fabulous meals** but little time to eat. Nonstop social stimulation but nearly nonexistent personal time. Pricey dinner checks but skimpy paychecks. So goes the yin-yang world of the restaurant industry, say moms who work in it.

"To me, it's about passion and being willing to work like a dog," says Terryll Gavre, who opened her first eatery in 1992, at age 29, and like other moms in the industry loves the camaraderie, the drama and the sizzle. The single mother of Paisley, 9, and Elliott, 6, broke into the business "the long, hard way." When she opened Café 222 in San Diego, she cooked three shifts and lived in an apartment attached to the restaurant. She'd mop the floor nightly after closing, then fall exhausted into bed.

Shila Morris can relate. She may be president and co-owner of Squeeze In, a Reno, NV-based family business with four locations—but she's the one who in a pinch unclogs the toilet, counts the cash drawer or steps in to serve.

### Butchering the Halibut

Restaurant work is physically grueling. Hauling 20-pound trays, busing tables or juggling a half-dozen steel frypans on a hot stove is not to be taken lightly. Daily, there are cases of delivered produce to check and heft into storage; occasionally, there's a 200-pound halibut to butcher. "It's a workout, and sometimes you're sore the next day," says Sophina Uong, executive chef of Picán, a 180-seat contemporary

southern restaurant in Oakland, CA.

Terryll's pedometer clocks 12,000-plus steps per day as she dashes between her test kitchen, Café 222 and the four other eateries she co-owns. On her forearm are the "stripes" she's earned—little burn lines where she accidentally bumped an oven rack reaching in to pull out a tray.

And try waiting tables with a "30-pound basketball in front," says Shila, who recently worked through pregnancy with her third child. "I kept finding myself 'held back.' I wanted to fill the ice bucket, but it gets too heavy. Guests felt guilty asking me to refill coffee." Daughter Annabelle arrived last October, joining brother Wesley and sister Emerie, both 3.

### Beating the Clock

The biggest challenge, however, isn't physical; it's the hours. Think long, unpredictable and inflexible—a tough trio for any parent. Chefs and other kitchen roles, known as "back of the house," work 12-plus-hour shifts, often six or seven days a week. Servers, "front of the house," come in early to set up dining rooms and stay until the last table leaves.

"Many women we interviewed came to work around noon and left as late as 2 a.m.," says Deborah Harris, PhD, a sociologist at Texas State University, who with colleague Patti Giuffre, PhD, studied the lives of 32 female professional chefs. The most lucrative, prestigious shifts (weekends) are the least family-friendly—not just for kids but for adult relationships, too. Hence the reason nonindustry partners are referred to as "widows" and a huge number of couples both work in the restaurant industry.

Plus, when your 60-plus-hour week isn't 9-to-5, traditional day care centers don't serve you. Each night, sommelier Orla Murphy-LaScola's 4-year-old daughter, Roan, is picked up at 5 p.m. from the restaurant by a sitter. Orla and her husband, executive chef Michael LaScola, co-own the award-winning American Seasons and the Proprietor's Bar & Table on Nantucket Island, MA. Michael returns home by midnight, Orla not until after 1 a.m. In the whole month of August, the island's busiest time, she estimates the couple

gets two or three days off max. The tough part, she says: “You miss your child’s bedtimes and bathtimes.”

These moms miss other things, too. “Many restaurants try to work ‘lean’ by employing as few employees as possible in order to be profitable,” says Dr. Harris. Which means women are pressured not to take time off for illness or family emergencies, and they often cover when someone else does.

### Kids at the “Office”

Surprisingly, restaurant moms often find family time at, yes, work. Sophina says Picán is one of her 11-year-old daughter’s favorite places to hang out. “I joke that she was born and raised in a Lexan box,” Sophina offers with a laugh. “The clear food-storage bins were her crib and playpen for many years.” Now that her daughter, also named Roan, is a tween, she brings friends to the restaurant. “They’re always in the pastry

department messing with the extra dough,” Sophina says.

Orla’s young daughter has spent so much time at American Seasons that she wanders around like a pro. “If she wants a carrot, she’ll go to the walk-in, pull open the heavy door and help herself,” Orla explains. She loves to “help”—arrange silverware or taste-test the bartender’s sliced oranges.

In fact, kids who spend hours in a restaurant learn way more than how to boil an egg. They know how to greet people, attend to others’ needs and be flexible when plans change. It’s like an advanced degree in social development, say restaurant moms. When the Morris family eats out, the preschool twins “know they have to be patient after they give their order, that they can’t scream,” Shila says. “After we’ve eaten, we go thank the cook.”

“Food is culture,” says Deborah Hansen, the executive chef and owner of Taberna de Haro tapas restaurant in

Brookline, MA, and mom of Ines and Camille de Haro, 18 and 16. “I’m proud of what the exposure to fine food has done for their worldliness.” They’ve traveled to Spain often and learned to eat octopus, chorizo and cuttlefish.

### The Non-Negotiables

Is “workaholic” an alternate definition for “restaurateur”? “Yes, so you have to draw boundaries,” says Orla. She and Michael rely on sitters and not a full-time caregiver because “we didn’t want it to be too easy for us not to be available for Roan.” And during the three winter months American Seasons closes, the LaScola family spends tons of time together—cooking, traveling or just hanging at home.

Long ago, Deborah Hansen established “non-negotiable” family time: Mondays she works from home on administrative tasks, and Thursdays she preps all day and ducks out before service. “I make it home in time to prepare a nice supper

### LESSONS FROM THE FRONT



#### Cater to kids

When little ones are dining, keep the peace by offering something ASAP: a toy basket, crayons, a banana or bowl of sliced strawberries (with parent permission). Works if you’re serving or sitting at the table, right, moms?

#### Take care

A kitchen’s first-aid kit should include aloe and vitamin E for burns, Band-Aids for blisters and cuts, headache remedies and Gold Bond foot powder (did we mention kitchens are sweaty places?).

#### Develop a thick skin

Kitchen language in restaurants can be rough. And sometimes customers aren’t any kinder. It’s best not to take it personally.

#### Cross-train the staff

You’ll have a much stronger team when each employee can do one or two other jobs. Sounds like a good tip for all kinds of businesses these days.

for the three of us,” she says. “Now that the girls are older, they often invite friends, and I love that!”

Shila and husband/partner Chad stretch the family budget to employ a nanny, “the third person in our parenting team,” who cooks, cleans and does laundry. That means family time can be fun. The financial trade-off is that “we rent a small home where the twins have to share a room, we drive modest vehicles, we use lots of hand-me-downs and shop at Costco.”

### The Buck Stops Here

Which brings us to money. Those celebrity chefs earning millions from a string of restaurants and a cookware empire? A *teeny* part of the industry.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median wage of a head chef is \$42,480. Line cooks earn \$10 to \$20 per hour. Some urban haute-cuisine chefs earn \$100,000 to \$150,000 per

year, says Dr. Giuffre. But the norm is modest paychecks from small businesses that don’t provide health care, paid vacation or maternity leave.

Finally, there’s the fact that the industry isn’t welcoming to women. Sophina says she’s faced her share of sexism—whether it’s snide comments or being slotted into pastry, seen as a “woman’s domain.” And, she adds, “when a woman gets angry in the kitchen, she is automatically just a b\*\*”. When a male chef gets angry, he gets respect because he is a ‘chef.’”

Two decades ago, when Terryll tried to open her first restaurant, she couldn’t get a business loan. So her parents and grandparents put up their homes as collateral. Today, however, culinary schools are 50 percent women. And in televised contests women out-chop, out-grill and out-plate men. So are things improving? Yes, but it’s like watching water boil—*slowly*. ■

