



THE PROMISE OF WOMEN-LED RESTAURANTS

How do you identify?

BY ASHLEY CHRISTENSEN

WHO AM I? THIS QUESTION HAS been on my mind since writer and activist Julia Turshen interviewed me for her podcast, *Keep Calm and Cook On!*. We talked about the betterment of our industry, equality, self-care, work-life balance, and love. The last question she asked me was, “How do you identify?” I said confidently, “I’m Ashley Christensen.”

Afterward, my answer haunted me. It reminded me of how I feel every time someone asks me, “What’s it like to be a woman chef? What are the challenges of cooking in an industry dominated by men?” It’s how I feel when someone introduces me as “one of the best women chefs in the country” or invites me to cook a “women chefs dinner” alongside a group of badassess I know will work smoothly, neatly, without ego, and in harmony. In these moments, the word “women” feels like a marketing tool. I feel diminishment alongside the pride,

because the accolades are contextualized by gender. My male peers never have to deal with that.

Throughout my professional life, I have addressed my thoughts on these issues, questions, and labels through action, but Julia’s question showed me that there was a shortcoming in my approach of letting the work speak for itself.

Unlike the experience of many women in our industry, overt sexual harassment was absent from my journey in kitchens, and this was in large part due to the leadership and vision of the people in charge. As a defense, I was careful to not to say or do anything that would separate me from others in the room, whether by gender, sexual orientation, or beliefs and opinions. I put my head down and worked.

Opening my first restaurant, Poole’s Diner, was the hardest thing I’d ever done professionally, but it also cemented my

leadership approach. I worked like crazy to make it all come together, pushing myself to lead a scrawny but passionate team, and working alongside them with fervor to create an experience for our guests. I maintained my easy-to-digest persona, both to guests and to my team. It was genuine, and it dovetailed with my greatest professional goal of creating spaces that make people feel comfortable. But it wasn’t a complete picture.

After Poole’s had been running for a few years, I decided to open a new project, Beasley’s. I found an incredible space, but it was bigger than what I needed. The owner was willing to split it up, but I decided to take the whole space and create three separate concepts.

Within three months, I went from managing a staff of about twenty-five to a staff of over 100. I took on \$1.2 million in debt, made up of an SBA loan and private investment—from two women, I

might add. On the outside, I was all smiles and strength. I received a lot of attention from the community and beyond. I felt a responsibility to continue with the persona I’d been cultivating for years: warm and relatable and motivated by the work.

For the majority of my time as a business owner, I was a solo operator. As part of my “strength and positivity” narrative, I shouldered the terrifying risks, expensive mistakes, and disappointments. I was reluctant to share the reality of how difficult it all was with anyone. In the years that followed the opening of Beasley’s, Chuck’s, and Fox, I fell into a depression that I kept to myself.

My coping strategy for feeling completely overwhelmed, incapable, unworthy? Open more restaurants. The problem with defining your self-worth through work is that it can propel you into a cycle in which you avoid something

Photos by Cary Norton

by moving on to a new, all-encompassing challenge. Two years after those projects opened, we opened Joule, a coffee shop. Two years later, in 2015, we opened Death & Taxes and a two-story event space called Bridge Club. We simultaneously opened a commissary kitchen to help service the restaurants and the events business.

It was a time of incredible growth, and that was the outward message that I shared with the world. On the inside, I was overextended in every way—mentally, physically, and financially. The company, too, was showing symptoms of this illusion-based thinking. We made mistakes, and things felt out of control.

I won't be so dramatic as to call it a rock bottom, but I did get to a place where I knew I had to make a fundamental shift, or I'd lose myself and what I'd worked for. I had to ask for help and lift the veil. I had to accept the parts of me that felt weak, vulnerable, or offensive. That included embracing who I am as a woman—specifically a gay woman—in a

fuller, more realized way. I had to actively claim those things out loud.

It is a process. There are still moments when I find myself putting up a front. But thanks to a deeply caring, smart, hardworking team, and a dedicated partner in life (fiancée, actually), I've gotten better at leadership and am more fulfilled as a person. It's led to a realignment of how I lead. Strength, though still important, has made way for other qualities and behaviors, like confidence and transparency. I have coupled positivity with vulnerability.

In the last two years, I've been more honest with my teams, family, and friends than I ever could have dreamed of. I've been vulnerable about what I don't know, and invited capable people to the decision-making table to help me. I've gained confidence to speak out about things that may not be popular to everyone, but that are deeply important to me and my values. Most importantly, I've made three core promises for my business.



Mentorship

I restructured the company so I could actively mentor and motivate the team. If I hadn't come to terms with myself, I would have had a hard time accepting that I couldn't and shouldn't do it all. This new approach is working, by all the metrics that matter to me. It's made me realize that there is power in vulnerability.

Stewardship

Rather than figuring everything out inside a vacuum, I try to approach issues from a perspective of "let's develop a system that would be helpful for more than just us." I've been outspoken about the work we all need to do to create and maintain safe workplaces, and I've been vocal in questioning the way our industry measures success.

Hospitality

While I'm never going to hang a candidate's poster on my restaurant door, I have realized there are certain issues that are, at their core, issues of human rights. I can no longer stay neutral. Our guests provide us our livelihood, keep us

inspired, and hold us accountable to our mission. We provide them comfort, help them celebrate and commiserate, and push them toward a more inclusive idea of community. If they don't want to be pushed, they don't have to be in a relationship with us, and that's OK.

WHAT I LIKE MOST is that these promises are impossible to achieve without the perspective and commitment of a diverse set of voices, including women, people of color, immigrants, and gender non-binary people.

I would not have been able to set down this path in any meaningful way without first finding confidence in the parts of me that once felt like a weakness. I hope that, by finding my voice and using it, speaking out about what I practice and why, without fear of humiliation or harassment, I will encourage others to do the same.

I'm Ashley Christensen, I'm a gay woman, I'm a leader, I'm a voice and a catalyst for positive change, and I'm an employer of many badassess who will be a part of making our industry the best version of itself—I promise. 🍷

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