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## Out of the Frying Pan: Coming Out As a Culinary School Librarian

Rachel Wexelbaum

There are many similarities between the culinary industry and the library profession. Both require a commitment to service, passion for one's subject, and an obsessive nature. Chefs and librarians both learn taste. While chefs must know how to identify every ingredient, down to their varietals, librarians must develop an appreciation of literature and know how to locate and evaluate appropriate resources for research. The tricks that they learn – be they with fire or Google – are as much an art as they are a science.

People who become chefs or librarians are not so different. Peel us like onions, and you will find a damaged core. Memoirs of brilliant chefs will often reveal painful childhoods due to extreme dyslexia, poverty, or dysfunctional family dynamics, their lives brought to order in the kitchen. While few written memoirs of librarians exist, many who entered the stacks as youngsters found refuge from pain there, and never left.

What I've never understood is the snobbery among librarians who work in different library environments. Many times I have encountered academic librarians who look down on public librarians, and academic and public librarians who look down on school media specialists. This type of snobbery does not exist among chefs; to build street credentials in the culinary world, one must work anywhere and everywhere to keep one's knives sharp. Even the great Marco Pierre White, master chef and mega-restaurant owner, mentor of Gordon Ramsay, Mario Batali, and Heston Blumenthal, will still take catering gigs for weddings and holiday parties, something that his disciples now refuse. At some point in their careers, every chef has done what the unsophisticated would consider a dirty cooking job: flipping burgers, manning the deep fat fryer, cleaning and fabricating



animals that had been bleating, clucking, or crawling minutes ago. Without that experience, they never would have learned what food is all about, nor would they have learned how to run the stations of a kitchen.

Some librarians have worked in only one type of library throughout their entire career. Many have only worked *in one area of librarianship* throughout their entire career. How do these librarians truly learn what libraries are all about?

Prior to my current position, I had worked in a culinary school library for eight years. When I would share this fact at library conferences, my academic librarian colleagues would look at me quite strangely. “I didn’t

know that culinary schools *had* libraries,” they’d confess. “Do the culinary students really read and write?” I would feel these librarians looking deep into my soul, contemplating whether or not I was truly a member of their tribe. Even worse were the foodie librarians, who would flock to me to schedule tours and reservations at our student-run restaurant, as well as the fawning library school students who begged for internship hours at my library.

“I would *love* to work with your collection!” they would squeal. “I *love* cookbooks!”

A few library school students repeatedly asked me if there would ever be a position open at my library. One went so far as to treat me to lunch any time she stopped over. Once she wore a revealing outfit. *Ma’am, I’m on duty*, I felt like telling her, *and no, there are no openings for women who wear revealing suits in my library*.

Still . . . what a rush from that experience! How did I achieve a position of power, where women would offer themselves to me for a few hours of library work?

Some people become librarians because they love books. Although I had been an active library user since I was two years old, I had never envisioned myself as a librarian. The first librarian I had ever met as a child was George the Adult Reference Librarian. My father and two older brothers often described George as “fruity” because of the way he talked and used his hands. Because of his mannerisms, I too assumed that George was gay. All day long, George would answer questions about books, and he would talk at great length about the books he had read. I was a little afraid to approach him, but I enjoyed listening to him even more than the storytime librarian, because George knew every book in the library. He would become very excited about some titles, waving his hands and rolling his eyes as he recalled their plots, and later, I would quietly look up those titles in the card catalog to read myself.

I never approached school librarians for anything as a high school student. I wanted to be an artist or an activist; I had no idea what librarians at my school did. Unlike good old gay George the Adult Reference Librarian, in my adolescent opinion, school librarians were only good for screaming at kids who could not be quiet or did not return their library books on time. I would watch some of my classmates working as library assistants, alphabetizing and shelving, adding new cards to the card catalog, putting up holiday decorations. Teachers did not take Honors/Advanced Placement students to the library for special library instruction; it was our responsibility to figure out how to do research ourselves. As I rarely saw

other kids in the school library looking for books, I decided to bypass the school librarian altogether by jumping our clunky security gate, taking the books that I liked home, and never returning them. Due to the hours I spent there, and the fact that I had read a good deal of the collection, I truly believed that my high school library belonged to me.

The three librarians of my elementary school, middle school, and high school all identified as “Ms.,” neither “Miss” due to their age nor “Mrs.” to imply that they were married. They all had short hair, short fingernails, and didn’t talk much. I wondered about them, too. All of my female English teachers were ex-nuns, perpetually single, or lesbians, so as a teenager it made sense to me that librarians who loved books even more than English teachers could be lesbians, too.

I have no idea how I knew who was gay or lesbian when I was a kid. I grew up during the 1970s and 1980s, when Elton John, Queen, and Boy George ruled Top 40 radio and MTV. I do not remember the gay kids being teased where I went to school, but I knew who the gay kids were. I felt myself staring at them sometimes, in the hope of connecting in some way. It was extremely difficult for me to make friends with anyone my age when I was growing up. While they talked about Benetton sweatshirts, I talked about André Breton. From 6th through 12th grade, I was taken out of class upon request of my teachers to speak to the school psychologist. *Honors student*, they would scribble in their pads, *active participant in many after school activities, lives for art and writing, no friends*. I think they were making sure that I was not a danger to myself or society, long before teen suicide or Columbine killers became headline news. The school psychologists did not understand me either. Instead of helping me learn how to make friends, they assumed that my problem was low self-esteem. They told me that I was smarter than anyone else and that all of these other kids would be scrabbling for clerical jobs while I went to college and became... *someone*.

I spent a lot of time in the library to escape from the people who hurt and confused me. I would cut gym class, curl up in the Oversize section, and read whatever caught my interest at the time. At 15 years old, I discovered Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind* in the young adult section of my public library. I will always be touched by this story because it is about two girls who meet in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and fall in love. That is the only romance novel that ever made sense to me, but it still took me a few years to figure out that I was a lesbian.

I went to college, and my world blossomed. I also got my first library job. As the main university library had a huge office just for hiring student

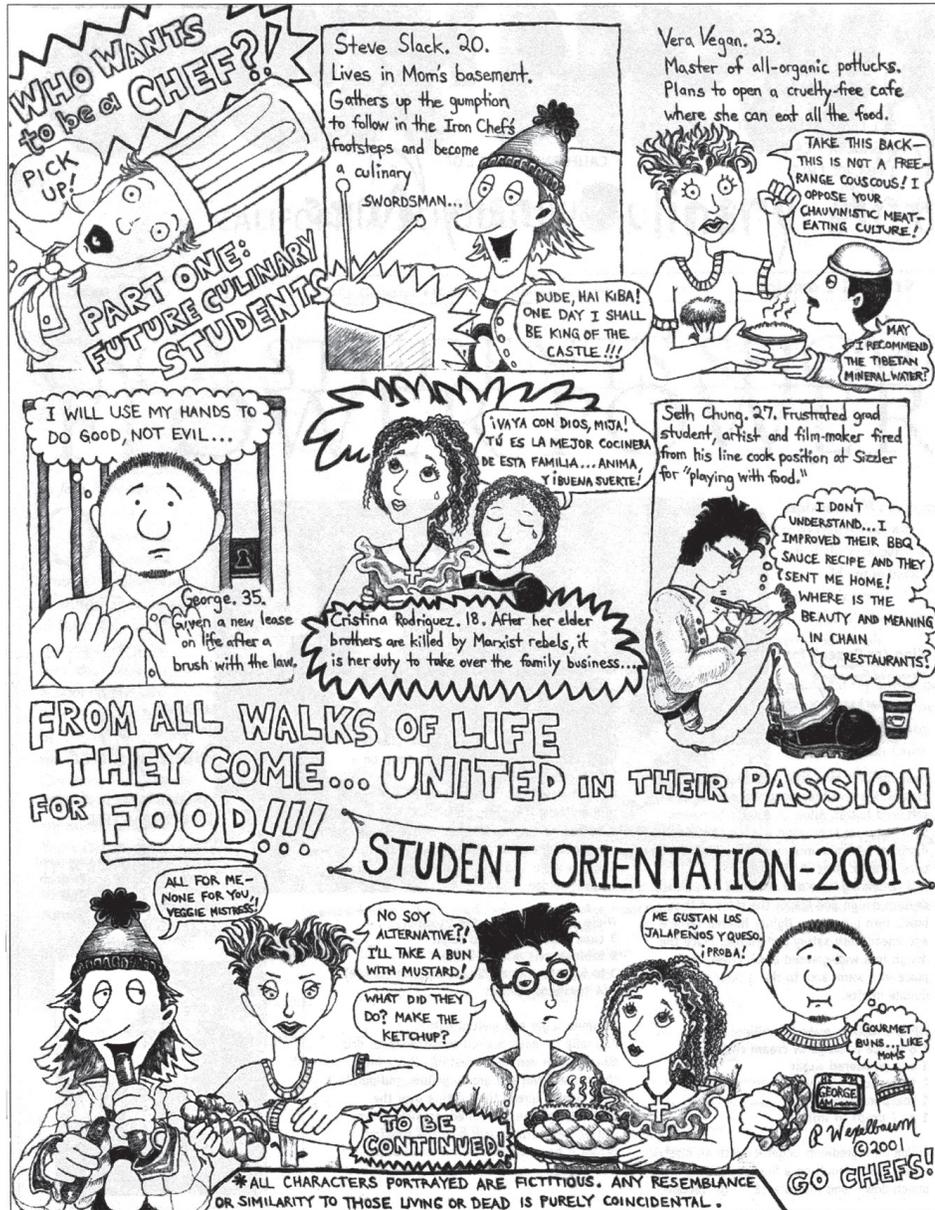
employees, I equated that big office with many job opportunities. I had no idea what I was going to do once they hired me, but I figured if I was an expert library user, the library *had* to hire me. Sure enough, right after I filled out my application, I was directed to sit before a white-haired old lady with glasses and a bun (the oldest, most powerful librarian in the university, I thought at the time) who gave me a job. “There’s a position open at the Chemistry Library,” she informed me in a gravelly Brooklyn accent. “When you get there, talk to a guy named Mark to set up your hours.”

I was a bit nervous at first. Chemistry Library? I ran through everything I remembered from my 11th grade Chemistry class, and I hoped that it would be enough to work at the Chemistry Library. But when I met Mark, my supervisor, I sensed that everything would be OK. Mark was as gay as Gay George the Adult Reference Librarian. He gave me a tour of the library, and explained my duties. From Mark, I learned how to work at the Circulation Desk and how to shelve bound journals. I learned how to take inventory, and how to show people how to use our online catalog. I learned all about reserve books and interlibrary loan. I also learned that Mark was not a librarian; he was a circulation supervisor, and his job was to supervise student employees who did all of the circulation work. “Whatever you do,” he whispered to me one day, “do *not* make Janet come out of her office.” Janet was the “real” librarian, the head of the Chemistry Library. She always dressed in plaid suits, smelled like lamb chops, and would shout at Mark if something didn’t go right.

I loved my Chemistry Library job. I walked through snowdrifts with a broken toe to be on time. I made sure that every book and journal was neatly shelved, in call number order, because anything less would have embarrassed me. I met graduate students and faculty from all over the world, who would come to the circulation desk to check out materials or pick up their reserve books. I gave tours of our library to visiting scholars, and saw firsthand how important this library was to the chemistry professors and graduate students. Every day, the graduate students would pick a table, remove nine or ten bound journals from the shelf, take their notes, and leave them for me to clean up. I made sure those bound journals were shelved in the right place, because sure enough the students would return for them. Most of all, I enjoyed my Chemistry Library job because of the conversations I had with Mark, crazy Janet, and Anna, the Slavic language cataloging librarian who worked in our library because she was allergic to the dust in the university library cataloging room.

I never had a “coming out” process. “Coming out” implies that a person had previously been in the closet. I had nothing to hide. If I had not

apologized at that point for my curly hair, my Jewish ancestry, and my family background, I would feel no shame about my sexual orientation. I told everyone about it. Mark, my gay circulation supervisor, was a font of knowledge. We talked about dating, homosexuality, spirituality, and being out to people. I wish I knew where Mark was today; not only was he responsible for teaching me about library work, but he was also responsible



for teaching me a lot about being gay, and I owe him a great deal for all that he has taught me. I slowly met other LGBT faculty, staff, and students on campus, including a lesbian classmate whose girlfriend was a public librarian. I began to connect the dots – gay and lesbian people work in libraries!

But I became an English teacher instead.

If I could live my life over again, I would run away from home during my senior year of high school and go to art school. When I told my art teachers that I was accepted to the Honors Program at a state university and planned to become an English teacher, they looked at me as if I'd just said I was checking into an institution for a lobotomy. They told me I could get a partial or full scholarship to any art college I wanted to attend, and I was giving up a big opportunity. My parents told me that I was going to college to become an English teacher, and that I could do my art and writing as a hobby. The same girl who told her parents point blank that if they didn't like her as a lesbian they didn't have to see her again, bought that "art as hobby" story because I knew no better. No one in my family had finished college except for my cousin, who became a college professor, and I figured I should do what she did – especially since she was never happy with men. I still did not picture myself working as a librarian, even though I saw gay and lesbian folks working in all different capacities in libraries.

During the 1990s, openly gay and lesbian people still had a very hard time working in public schools. After college I joined a lesbian support group; quite a few women in the group worked as public school teachers. All were afraid to reveal their orientation to anyone, for fear of losing their jobs. I heard their stories, but did not take heed. I thought, duh, everyone knows that female gym teachers are lesbians and it's a non-issue. I was going to be an English teacher, and I knew that some of my English teachers had been lesbians. I was also pretty confident in my teaching abilities. I ran my own tutoring business and worked as a substitute teacher for all subjects, as well as a substitute middle school librarian. Naively, I thought that good teachers would not have to worry about getting fired as long as they did not do anything illegal. *I was not listening.* To make a long story short, I was a great English teacher, but was forced to resign because of my sexual orientation. I was basically told that I was not fit to be an English teacher because I was not like the other public school teachers.

If I had been older and wiser, I could have hired a lawyer and fought for my job, especially since Connecticut, the state in which I was living at the time, had a non-discrimination policy. But I was too intimidated by

the process, and did not think that I could afford a lawyer. I was young and scared, living all by myself in a small town full of people who felt completely comfortable telling you how they thought God should kill off the gay people while you sat together at the mechanic's waiting for an oil change. I fell into a deep depression and did not leave my dingy apartment for three months. I remember standing in front of the living room mirror and cutting the hair off the back of my head with kitchen scissors because I no longer had my English teaching job and I wanted to die.

What kept me afloat was my lesbian support group and an Internet connection. I was chatting with a lot of people online, including the woman who is now my partner. I could chat with up to nine people online at a time while playing a video game or typing a story. My typing and computer skills helped keep me from going into debt. My shrinking savings account motivated me to sign up with temp agencies for clerical jobs. These were the type of jobs that the school psychologist told me the "other kids" would have. I kicked that voice out of my head. I worked for Parking Enforcement, a Frito Lay packing plant, a mortgage department in a bank, and finally the bingo hall of a tribal casino. My coworkers at the casino had told me yes, if I was working in the Bingo Paper Sales booth, I had indeed hit rock bottom. There would be no fancy jobs for me, no fancy goals, for a lonely lesbian in a depressed New England town. Every day I went to work, I heard one or more of my coworkers spit the words "dyke" or "fag-got" behind the backs of customers or coworkers. One woman insisted on telling me, at least once during every shift, that she "liked dick," because she knew that I was a lesbian, and we worked in close quarters together. Apparently, the word "dick" was a protective talisman that would keep lesbians away.

One day I realized that I had options. I had a girlfriend in California who was begging me to move in with her. I had varied and extensive work experience, from culinary to educational to clerical. One day I got fed up with the coworker who kept shoving dick in my face, packed up my stuff, called my girlfriend, and we enjoyed a Ryder truck road trip across the country to the queer Mecca of Los Angeles.

I had a lot of rough edges as a 20-something lesbian. I was loud, aggressive, and had a New York accent. This made my job search in California a bit difficult. When I interviewed for an assistant editor position at a publishing company, I almost got the job, but was turned down because one of the people on the hiring committee thought I had an anger management problem, and would not be a good fit in their calm, quiet office. I held back my choice words for this company and sent them a brief, polite thank you letter.

One week before my unemployment checks ran out, I discovered a tiny advertisement in our local newspaper for a library assistant position. As there was a small public library not far away, I thought it was for a job there. It was only \$8.00 an hour, for 20 hours a week, but I did not care. Warm memories of my college job at the Chemistry Library bubbled up inside of me. I called the number and asked if the position was still available. A friendly voice responded that yes, the position was indeed available, and that my duties would be data entry, shelving, and assisting students with homework and research. Was that something I thought I could do? Absolutely, I responded.

“By the way,” the friendly office manager said, “we’re a culinary school. Is that still OK with you?”

Books, food, chefs. What *wouldn't* be OK with this position? I told the office manager that I would be very happy to work at a culinary school, and I was invited to come for an interview the same day. I met the librarian and my two fellow library assistants, and was given a tour of the school. At that time, the library was a small room with only a few shelves of books, a magazine rack, a worktable, and six computers. None of the books were catalogued, as the librarian and her assistants had just put the shelving together. The books were arranged by color-coded label, by subject. While the morning class cooked and baked, the afternoon students came in and out of the library to check email, to find recipes, to do homework. I saw right away that there was a lot of work to be done in that small room. I told the librarian that I was interested in the position, and that I would also like 40 hours per week. I owe a lot to that librarian for looking into giving me more hours, realizing that I needed and deserved them.

I quickly filled my time. Not only did I complete the entire database for the collection (we did not have an OPAC yet), I selected books for the collection, became acquainted with the culinary curriculum, and learned that the students needed a lot of help with math and computers. I asked if there was a tutoring program for the students, and as there was none, I established one. I trained the other library assistants to tutor the culinary students in any subject covered at the school, and I worked with the math – and computer-phobic. I designed all of the instructional materials and flyers to advertise our tutoring program and computer assistance. I became a favorite with the chef instructors and the administration, and the students would bring me breakfast and treats every week because of the service and quiet, contemplative library environment that I provided for them.

No one at the culinary school cared that I was a lesbian. In fact, one of the head chefs was a lesbian, and at least two other chefs were gay. All

three of them were popular instructors, and they welcomed me into the fold. The librarian would regularly ask how my partner was doing, and would invite us both to holiday parties. My fellow library assistants were more fascinated by my knowledge and talents than my sexual orientation. I built my reputation like a stone fortress, and no one would dare knock it down. I loved the library that I helped build, I was grateful for my coworkers, and I cared deeply about the culinary students who worked so hard to achieve their dreams. I decorated the library with posters that I drew and colored myself, and when word got out about me being an artist, I was asked to do comics for the school newsletter, then asked to take over as faculty advisor of that newsletter. Within one year, I became a celebrity at work.

After my first year, the librarian decided that she wanted to retire. I ran the library for a short time until the administration decided to hire a library director with a Master of Library and Information Science for accreditation purposes. For the first time, I had the opportunity to choose my boss. I got to read the resumes of various librarians, and to interview them. One candidate with a PhD reviewed the shelves with her back to me during most of her interview. Another candidate admitted to me that she was afraid of the kitchen. Not only was I choosing a librarian that I thought I could work with, I was also choosing someone who would understand the chef instructors and culinary students. After three lemons, the perfect candidate showed up. She had over 30 years of library experience in many different types of libraries. She was also an East Coast transplant from New Jersey who had her own rough edges. We looked each other in the eyes, and I told administration that she was the best candidate. We worked together for eight years, building and modernizing the library as the culinary school grew.

One year after I started working at the culinary school, with my new boss as a mentor, I went to library school. My first class, *Introduction to Libraries*, brought two important things to light for me. First, there are many different types of librarians, and many types of libraries. I wanted to taste them all. Second, all different types of people use libraries, and it is the librarian's job to serve their information needs. We learned about the information needs of the disabled, of senior citizens, of immigrants. Although we were a library school program in California, not a single article in the Special Populations unit addressed the information needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people. Finally, after reviewing an article about the information needs of blind Asian American senior citizens, I stood up. "Hey," I shouted, "what about the gay people? Why is

there not a single article in our packet about what libraries have to do for gay people?”

In other states, perhaps I would have been told to sit down, or to leave the room. In California, our *Introduction to Libraries* professor actually apologized to the class, and humbly admitted that she had not thought about gay people as library users, although she knew many gay librarians. She asked me to look into it. Not only did I find many articles, but I took my library school's class on *LGBTIQ Library Resources and Services* (taught by Ellen Greenblatt herself) and wrote a lot of papers – including a Master's thesis – in library school on LGBTIQ resources, users, and librarianship.

I was fortunate in that everything I learned in library school I was able to use at work. I learned how to catalog everything in the collection, and wrote a cataloging manual for it. I trained the student employees on how to provide good reference and customer service. I analyzed our collection and recorded its history. I developed a bibliographic instruction program for our students. We addressed copyright issues, accreditation issues, ADA issues. I worked in a small library, and had the privileged opportunity to learn how to do all of these things.

The library director recognized something in me. She saw that, at the rate I was going, I would soon outgrow my current position. We would participate in events for academic and special libraries together, and talk about what we learned. Some things that interested me, I realized, I would not have an opportunity to explore at the culinary school. Our programs were too specialized, and our users had very specific, but simple needs. Soon I would finish library school, and my boss said that she was not kicking me out the door, but she encouraged me to visit as many libraries as possible and apply for open positions at libraries that interested me.

At first I did not like hearing this. The culinary school library had become my comfort zone; it was the best job I'd ever had, a job that I had created in an institution that I had built, with collegial coworkers who did not care that I was a lesbian. At the same time, I had done practicum hours at an academic library and an archive, and decided to apply for academic librarian positions.

I felt quite fortunate because I was looking for a position while I already had a job. I did not understand why I received so many rejection letters, but I did not take them to heart. I knew that many times libraries hired from within, or, due to budget cuts, could not fill a position they had advertised. I also knew that my CV, while full of valid library work experience, threw many Human Resources Departments for a loop. I identified

myself as a culinary school librarian, and people interpreted this in different ways. Few people understood that our library was an academic collection, as well as a special collection. I kept fine-tuning this point in my CV – that I had many years of academic library experience under my belt with progressive levels of responsibility. I stressed that I was considered faculty at my institution, as I taught courses and engaged in research. In fact, I had a letter from our Vice President of Education stating this fact, so that I could get a library card from UCLA to do more in-depth research. I indicated the title of my Master's thesis on my CV, however, as well as the relevant LGBT-related work experience and publishing record that I had accumulated. As I did not send out applications to any institution without an LGBT Resource Center or LGBT Faculty/Staff organization, I did not see my LGBT affiliations as an issue on my CV. I was simply an odd duck, coming from a non-traditional library.

One day, I learned of a position announcement for a Collection Management Librarian at Saint Cloud State University in Minnesota. I read the job description, and could match it point-by-point with my own experience. I also did some research on the city, and discovered that it had hosted a GLBTA Film Festival for the past seven years. My partner and I had a long talk about the position; I told her that the job opportunities for academic librarians in California were drying up due to the state budget cuts, and that this position – though far away – would be an excellent opportunity in a potentially gay-friendly area. If I got the position, great. If not, I would still have a job.

I came a long way. Not so long ago, I was getting dick shoved in my face at work in a bingo hall. Thanks to librarians and chefs who believed in me and gave me the opportunity to rise to a position of power, I regained my confidence. I spent three days in St. Cloud to get a feel for the place; I not only got to know my potential coworkers, but also the local Jewish community and GLBTA community. Every day, the city and the people grew on me. On my last day, when asked if I had any questions or concerns, I briefly recounted my forced resignation as a high school English teacher in a small town, and told everyone straight up that if they had a problem with me as a lesbian, then I could not accept the position. I was hired, not as a token, but as a potential asset to the library, the university, and the community. They were not wrong.