

We use our garden... our customers get to taste something taken out of the ground only two or three hours before, on their plate and seasonal.

Mary Allan, Head Teacher Hospitality Section

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Adele Wessell (AW): Can you describe the organization where you work and your role there?

Mary Allan (MA): I am currently Head Teacher of Tourism, Events, Aviation, Cookery and Hospitality for the Northern Region for Technical and Further Education [TAFE]. TAFE New South Wales is the largest vocational education and training provider in Australia. The campuses and training areas I am responsible for are Casino, Lismore, Wollongbar, Ballina and Byron Bay.

We have currently about 3000 students ranging from fifteen- to sixteen-year olds thinking about leaving school who may be doing taster courses with us, going through to Technical and Vocational Education and Training [TVET] which are year eleven and twelve students in their final years of school, who come to TAFE to do some VET units, through to adult education. We have a 63-year old apprentice here at the moment who has been a cook all her life and just wanted to formalise her qualifications.

¹ Interviewed by Adele Wessell, October 2014 in Lismore NSW. Please note, this interview has been edited for length and continuity, and should not be taken as a verbatim transcription.

AW: What are the differences between your own experience training as a chef and the experiences of the chefs that you're training now?

MA: I started work when I was about fifteen or sixteen. I started in a local restaurant in Ballina, which was called the Lobster Pot, about 35 years ago. I started there as a kitchen hand as most young people do. I didn't really want to go back to school. I loved cookery, I loved doing baking. My family owned the local hotel and they had cooks.

I had quite a passion at a young age to do cookery. Going through high school doing Home Economics, the teacher would say "you're good at that." That's all you need, someone to tell you you're good at something.

After I started in Ballina many years ago as a kitchen hand, I then decided to go to Sydney to Ryde College to do chef training there. There would've been 100 applicants, the majority were male and I didn't get into the college. At that time I believe the majority of the class that got through were male. At the interview one of the older chefs said, I think you'd be better doing Home Economics.

I started off as a Home Economist. I still loved the idea of cheffing. As I went through college in Sydney of course I used to wash up at the Artarmon Inn, working with chefs. But I do believe that doing Home Economics way, way back I realised why food changed, how food changed, I did recipe development, I did photography. They are the kinds of units now that chefs don't do. They know that if you pan fry it will caramelise. But when I first started I had to do a year of science.

After that decided I was definitely going to be a chef. I came back to the North Coast after two years of Home Economics and worked as a chef and then I went overseas and worked during the '80s, in Canada, in England, in Surrey. And from there I came back to the region, I went back to study and work at some local restaurants.

AW: What do you see as the role of chefs in food system?

MA: Every chef would want organic produce in their backyard, or they want really good reputable suppliers. Supply is particularly important, especially in our region,

you want to know that you can get it now, have it here tomorrow morning. That's a key thing and I think that's been a bit of a gap, that we have had to rely on the Sydney markets or the Brisbane markets a lot and for our local suppliers to go up and bring back the goods.

But I tell you any chef in their right mind would love their own paddock of their own vegetables or their own cattle growing, they know what they've eaten, how they've grown up.

The young chefs here thoroughly enjoy coming to training on their one day a week, as apprentice chefs. I know their trainers start talking about sustainability straight away. We offer sustainability units straight away, so you get that mindset coming here one day a week, you know that all your recyclables go here, all your waste goes here to the worm farm up the back or it goes over to the composting section. To be sustainable straight away, get them up to the gardens in the first couple of weeks and show them, this is the kale that has been planted this week, then when we go up in four weeks when it's ready to pick, what can we do with it?

I know that a lot of young chefs that come here don't know the difference between English spinach and silver beet. They get confused between zucchini and cucumbers, that sort of thing. They're very young, they've left school, working huge hours in a restaurant and then they've got to learn all of this new knowledge on top.

Commodity knowledge is something that we have to work on. Going way back we were very formally trained, we had units like commodity knowledge and we had to do hours on all the different types of cheeses and how you would use them, what you would look for purchasing them. Today our unit of cheese is four hours, just a brief overview. We have become time poor and the dollar has changed the way people are working, running a restaurant it is hard to make your money, you need the dollars to work for you. We need to engage to keep the business going.

AW: Do issues regarding alternative, local, or sustainable food systems feature as an aspect of your curriculum?

MA: We have different units that come into the second year. You need to do time with local businesses. That is important for students when designing and planning their own menus, knowing their suppliers, understanding their customer base.

Organic produce is the optimum product, in terms of what you're sourcing it is the ultimate. Consumers are much more aware. In terms of dietary requirements consumers now demand what they want. Many years ago when I was young if a vegetarian came in the executive chef would go "ah bloody vegetarians", but now it's become the norm, almost all menus will have gluten free and vegetarian meals. The students now do a unit called dietary requirements. It is important to have that knowledge, in some cases of life threatening requirements; it is a responsibility of all chefs.

For certain students being a chef will be a goal, older students who are looking for a kitchen, producing particular food, getting their supplies from a particular place. Young students, however, may just be wanting a job.

Towards the end of the two or three years, we lose about 30% of apprentices. They get their car license, lose it, all their mates are going out. They are in their twenties, and that is a huge loss. Going from second to third year, should be a year they excel. Some come back after a while more committed. It is a real shame. A percentage come back at about 25, asking why they didn't even listen to you and they finish their quals and then go to good restaurants.

As the Head Teacher I believe this (Wollongbar campus) is the jewel in the crown and coming from a cookery background myself, having the cows in the back paddock and being able to have access to my own supply of beef off our own property, it's just wonderful. To be able to take the students out of the front of the restaurant here and be able to look at the different ages of the cattle when you are teaching the meat unit, it's just sensational. To be able to walk the students up to the garden and to be able to discuss the different vegetables and show them the different growth from week two, after they've been planted, up to week six when they're at the optimal for picking, that is wonderful. Of course, we don't have access to that garden all the time. We have local suppliers, local lime growers, for example, to get the produce we want. But as

much as possible we use our garden, particularly for our restaurant nights so that our customers get to taste something taken out of the ground, only two or three hours before, on their plate and seasonal. And when they get up to their second year, or going on to their third year, we let the students go up to the garden and get their seasonal produce and we let them select. They need to know what quantities and what to pick and what ratio they are going to prepare it, what cooking method they are going to use to get it on the plate. At work those decisions might be made for them, but they get to make those decisions here.

Most of the young ones here are from rural and regional backgrounds, and some from quite isolated regions as well. They might be working in cafes only doing light dishes or at Byron Bay doing four and five star meals. It is quite a range. A lot of the young ones here need to go and travel the world and then come back, the growth will be enormous. They are able to solidify what they know and continue to learn. I believe knowledge is power and with that comes a huge range of things if they go through rest of their lives wanting to be a chef. Good passionate trainers are still working in the industry and still believe in food for us to aspire to and to get to where we're going as a training ground.

AW: What would you see as the emerging trends for chefs, what roles do you see them taking on in the future?

MA: Fresh is absolutely the best of the best you'll ever get. I believe what we put in our mouth is going to be very important for the future. I think health is going to be a key issue in our food, in our diets, in our planning and I don't think we can give students enough information about dietary requirements, obesity, tooth decay and so on. I think those issues are going to continue to grow in Australia and if we can start some of our chefs to cook particular meals for our plates I think that's a good thing.

Chefs love to talk and to be on show. We have about fifteen to twenty apprentices in a kitchen and there will be a top dog. The hierarchy is still there whether you're male or female. There is always a lull before service and then the rush and as a chef you love that. You can't wait for it to hit and then it's all over. You have to love that, to

want to do it and you have to love the hours when all your mates are going out. That kitchen team becomes a family and you will be going out with your work mates.

There are still not as many women at a professional level but this has changed. I would have given anything to go to catering college in early '80s and then I was told I had to go and do Home Economics, I had to wear white dresses, stockings, shoes, when I wanted to wear chef trousers.

Now I've done my time. Young chefs being only fifteen means that I am the dinosaur, but when I can explain something they realise I have knowledge. I can't do the pace as much but it never leaves you, cheffing, once it's in your blood, it's in your blood.

Getting those comments back, from your punters, it's really important and that's what all the chefs will say, when you get that praise at night it's a wonderful thing. You see the young apprentices, they come out at the end of the night and talk to all the tables, you see that glow, it's a wonderful thing.

I'm really blessed to have the position I have and to have such a wonderful team that I work with. I work for them as much as they work for me. What a beautiful thing to be able to work in the Northern Rivers.