

By the Book



Passion, vision and a common mission are powerful tools—a foundational truth that is stitched flawlessly into the past, present and future of the Women’s Foodservice Forum. Two decades ago, 14 women—a group whose skills, outlooks and experiences were marked by different cadences but who were absolutely singular in their belief about the value of gender diversity—for the first time put public voice to shared dreams. They dared to hope that, through individual efforts, contributions and accomplishments, women would be given more equitable access to the food-service industry’s leadership table.

Perhaps it all sounds quaint today, maybe even archaic, this notion that a mere 20 years ago, these women had to join forces and formulate plans to ascend to higher levels within their companies and the industry at large. But it was a markedly different social and business landscape, a point brought sharply to focus by one of the original 14: Julia Stewart. Then the vice president of marketing for Stuart Anderson’s Black Angus and today chairman and CEO of dineEquity, the parent of Applebee’s and IHOP, Stewart recalled potential sponsors’ concerned curiosity about the fledgling organization’s first conference agenda. “They asked if we were going to burn our bras.”

Rather than starting bonfires of separatist defiance, the group built bridges, forged relationships and refined skills and competencies, all with an end goal of bringing greater value to their careers and companies. Today, the Women’s Foodservice Forum has more than 3,700 members and an expo-

nentially greater number of success stories related to its long-held mission of Elevating Women Leaders. For those who monitor the so-called glass-ceiling breakthroughs, there is ample evidence that the hope-filled dream of so long ago is being realized: Increasingly, women are full contributors at the table.

At the WFF’s annual Leadership Development Conference held last month in Dallas, the organization marked its 20-year history with the publication of “Women at the Table: Women’s Foodservice Forum 1989–2009.” It is a remarkable book, an unflaggingly inspirational time-capsule chronicle of WFF events, milestones and markers. More than that, it is a personal compendium of C-level success, the stories told firsthand by many of those who dared to dream big dreams and then worked to create a legacy of strength. Hala Modellmog, Indra Nooyi, Jon Luther, Roz Mallet, Edna Morris and Julia Stewart are among those who contributed their accumulated knowledge to the project, endowing it with executive-level intelligence and, at its very core, the enduring essence of wisdom and humanity.

By definition, the book is oriented to foodservice, but it easily transcends industries. For that reason, I will order copies for friends, for nieces and for colleagues—those for whom the accumulated lessons of so many astounding individuals will resonate and inspire them to find and nurture their own best and true selves.

(Copies of “Women at the Table” can be ordered at www.800ceoread.com for \$24.95 each.)

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