

## Young Chefs' Reports 2019

**Aisling Kearns:** *About myself: I started cooking at the age of 18 but had previously made my way up the ladder working as a waitress, barista, bar girl, the whole lot, until I found a vacancy in the kitchen, where I worked hard to learn as much as I could about the industry. Having worked in a 5-star hotel for nearly three years, it wasn't until I had to take a leap of faith and go work abroad as part of a college internship. I worked in a Michelin star restaurant, Kitchen W8 in Kensington in London, and it was here that I learned about creativity, diversity, sustainability and hard work. It gave me a whole new perception of food and the industry that surrounds it. I came home to Ireland to begin working in a restaurant called Etto which is where my true knowledge began to develop. Working here gave me the confidence to apply for the 2019 Oxford Symposium: its theme being "Food & Power", I was hypnotized already.*

Report from the Symposium: I first heard about the Oxford food Symposium through my college friend Deborah Ryan, a previous Young Chef winner. Deborah talked so passionately and vividly about the Oxford Food Symposium that it convinced me to apply in my final year of college. At the start of the first semester in college the usual emails advertising job opportunities found their way into my inbox but the one that stood out for me was from lecturer Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, an Oxford Symposium Trustee, advertising the opening of applications for Young Chef Awards, 2019. I jumped at the chance to apply and wrote my introduction essay immediately.

July 2019 made its way around and it was time to start my adventure that is the Oxford Food Symposium. I started my trip in London, getting to meet three amazing young women from all over the world who had also received the Young Chef award. It was here that I got to listen to their stories about their lives, work, education and culture - and, let me tell you, it was a breath of fresh air.

We had the opportunity to attend an incredibly fascinating food exhibition in the Victoria and Albert museum, *Bigger than the Plate*. We had a VIP tour of London's Borough Market orchestrated by the one and only David Matchett who made you smile and feel so welcome even before meeting. We had a bit of homework to do about some of the producers in the Borough as some samples of their produce were going to be served on the final day of the Symposium and we, the young chefs, were asked to give brief descriptions of each. Heavy-hearted, though not for long, we left Borough Market and London and made our way to Oxford. This is where the fairy tale became a reality for me. Having grown up in a household of readers of literary legends it was a dream come true to see the historical buildings, libraries and universities in person.

Our first day in Oxford began with us working in the kitchen alongside Tim Kelsey and his team and our guest chef Liz Galicia from El Mural de Los Poblanos in Puebla, Mexico. I was certainly nervous working alongside Liz - especially as I had no knowledge of traditional Mexican food - but the team were so welcoming. All hands were on deck as we had to pick 32kg of turkey. Six hours later I began to have a hatred for the festive bird - but what an experience it was! We were so grateful to have Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire come pull us from the depths of despair that was the turkey for our own preview of Oxford town.

The following day, after eating like Kings and Queens the night before, the talks and discussions got underway and it was time to learn. There was one person I was hoping to meet and have the honour of getting to know and that was Harold McGee. His works, studies and ideas are what helped me graduate with a Bachelor's degree, and I'll forever be grateful. Marion Nestle is another key speaker with whom I was so enthralled by her work and

passion. To see a paper on Irish history and the Magdalene Laundries hit home, but made me proud to be there with everyone. At first, I was nervous about talking to people but it came so effortlessly and everyone was so kind and interested in who you were that I felt like I was right at home. I was like a kid in a candy shop.

To say I loved and thoroughly and enjoyed every minute of the Symposium does not do it enough justice and just as I stated in my application essay, I was shocked in ways I didn't think we're possible! I am eager to return for 2020s theme, "Herbs & Spices".

\*\*\*\*\*

**Yolanda Wu.** About myself: *I was born in Argentina. My parents are immigrants from Taiwan. My first career choice was to be a ballet dancer. The dream of becoming a ballerina came to an end due to an accident. However, I always had an interest in cooking. Growing up, I would spend a large amount of time baking in the kitchen whenever I had time off from my intensive training schedule. Eventually, I started helping out at my uncle's Chinese restaurant in Buenos Aires while I was still in high school. Because of my multicultural heritage and education, I am fortunate to speak four languages: Chinese, Taiwanese, Spanish, and English. I did not realize what a gift it was until I decided to move to the United States to attend Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts and pursue a cooking career. My language abilities helped me to adapt when I started working at the kitchen. The time I spent at culinary school was priceless: the opportunity to attend different culinary events, volunteering, stagiaires, and competitions made those two years unforgettable. After culinary school, I continued working at restaurants such as Maison Akira, Bouchon Bistro Beverly Hills, Fleming's Steakhouse and finally I finished my time in the U.S. at The French Laundry in Napa Valley, California. During my time in Northern California, I met the owners of Jacobsen Orchard, Peter and Gwen. It was the first time I had a legitimate conversation with farmers. I came to an understanding that most cooks nowadays take fresh produce for granted and the learned of the importance of building a strong relationship with your purveyors. After I returned to Buenos Aires in 2017, I started working at a local butcher shop to learn a new skill set and decided to further my education at The University of Palermo where I am currently working towards a Bachelor's degree in Gastronomy and Culinary Arts. This program opened my eyes to the vast nature of how food and cooking is such a multidisciplinary concept and made me realize there are other possibilities that I can pursue. Where previously I had thought that it was simply about the skills that one learns. Indeed, the relationships that one has to foster: from whom you get your produce, the butcher who brings you your meat, and the fish monger who brings you your seafood are all equally important.*

Report from the Symposium: I had a wonderful experience attending the Oxford Food Symposium for the first time. This year's topic, Food and Power, goes hand-in-hand with my graduation paper, "Evolution of Gender Equity: The Female Role in Hauté Cuisine." As a result, I wanted to become more academically informed about injustices in the profession and help initiate change within the food system.

From the tour at Borough Market to the end of the Symposium, I benefited from everyone's friendly nature. At the Market, all the grant recipients had an opportunity to interview all the women purveyors for the Symposium's Sunday lunch—"From Her Hands". Some of them work with family business; others are entrepreneurs for a social cause, they generously shared their experience and showed immense dedication to what they do. Food and cooking is such a multidisciplinary concept, it is not only about the skills that one learns, but also the relationships that one has to foster. Young Chefs' grant is a great opportunity for professional and personal development.

This year's topic, Food & Power, taught me a great variety of knowledge of government policies, corporations, gender norms, cultural appropriation, professional hierarchies, history and human connection. The numerous lectures and networks at the table were eye-opening events to me. It was delightful to spend quality time with like-minded people and I was deeply inspired by being surrounded with great ideas and conversations.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Monica Bettson** *About myself: as a cook, I am inspired by the local produce, cheese and meats of Ontario farmers and the international flavours of my home, Toronto, Canada. I am self-taught, but I owe my cooking skills to the hundreds of food writers and cookbook authors whom I have learned from, and the immigrant chefs of Toronto whose food I have grown up eating. I have a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Ryerson University in Performance Dance, and a Bachelors of Education from OISE, University of Toronto. While my educational background has very little to do with food, I take the skills I have developed in these programs and apply them to my cooking every day.*

Report from the Symposium: I cannot overstate how much I enjoyed my experience at the Oxford Food Symposium, and I want to thank the trustees for the opportunity of a lifetime. I returned to Canada with more questions than answers, just as it should be. The Symposium was a reminder to stay connected to others, to never stop learning, and to continue to be amazed and inspired by the work of others in the food industry. The Symposium expanded my horizons, making my world a bigger place, and showed me the commonalities we all share through food, and most importantly, the joy of sitting down and sharing a good meal and a good conversation with others.

From the moment I opened the email from Harold McGee, letting me know I had received one of the Young Chefs' Grants to attend the Oxford Food Symposium, I was filled with excitement and anticipation. Travelling to England! Staying at a prestigious and beautiful University! Meeting people from around the world as fascinated by food as I am! Having the opportunity to cook in the St.Catz kitchen with guest chefs from around the world! As I write this, almost two months after the Symposium, I can say that the Oxford Food Symposium exceeded my expectations in every way possible.

One of my favourite experiences from the Symposium was getting to know and learning from my fellow grant recipients: Yolanda, Kardelen and Aisling. Our commonalities - being relatively young (I say that as the oldest of the bunch), being female and working in the food industry - were few compared to our differences. We came from four different countries, spoke at least six languages between us, and had worked in restaurants of all cultural backgrounds and price levels. Yet we spent the week enjoying London and Oxford together, learning from each other and our fellow symposiasts, and finding commonalities in our love of food.

Before the Symposium began, the young chefs met up in London, where we had the chance to visit the Victoria & Albert Museum's food-related exhibition, *Bigger Than The Plate*. It was great to see my favourite subject given a place in a museum, and the visuals of the exhibit were stunning. The next day, David Matchett, Borough Market's development manager and Symposium Trustee, gave us a fascinating tour of the millennia-old market. We tasted tea, sampled cheese, toured a bakery, and sampled honey from around the world. The highlight of the tour was meeting female chefs and food producers, whose stories we

recorded for the final meal of the Symposium; *With her hands*, a lunch featuring all-female produced cheese, bread, honey, preserves and more. One conversation that stood out for me was talking to the daughter of Elsbeth Biltorf, founder of Rosebud Preserves, a preserve company in Yorkshire. Her drive and independence as a small business owner was inspiring, and I was smitten by her unbelievably good preserves. I'm still working my way through a jar of Damson plum jam, and I'm trying to make it last as long as possible.

Our weekend in Oxford started off with a welcome drink with Ursula Heinzelmann, one of the Symposium trustees, in a tavern from the 14th century, surrounded by students, professors and unbelievable architecture. (As a fan of several children's books set in Oxford, the ambiance of the University was magical.) Ursula and all of the other trustees were so warm and welcoming over the weekend, and gave us so much great advice. "Don't forget the cooking," she reminded us, before we started in on a weekend of extreme academia. She also told me not to talk myself down because I didn't attend culinary school, and after spending the weekend learning about the many varied and winding pathways fellow Symposiasts took to arrive at food, her advice could not have been more perfect.

I could not believe how wonderful the meals at the Symposium were; the care and planning that went into every aspect of the meals was spectacular. The four young chefs had the chance to assist with the preparation of the first dinner, by Liz Galicia of El Mural de los Poblanos. I learned about food from the cradle of Mexico - the Puebla - and tried many dishes I had never had before, like crickets, mole poblano and anise-scented tamales. The entire weekend was an opportunity to remember that despite living in the very diverse city of Toronto, Canada, and having many opportunities to travel, there are still so many flavours and cultures for me to explore! While shredding turkey in the afternoon for the mole, one of my fellow young chefs translated for a member of the Mexican team, and we chatted about food, using a Google image-search to talk about ingredients. It was a special moment between three people from South, Central and North America.

Beyond my fellow young chefs, I met so many other fascinating people at the symposium; a cocoa bean trader from Canada, an educator from a London museum, a Danish food historian, farmer's market managers, professors, students, chefs and cookbook writers. Over meals and drinks we talked about the difference between blueberries in Southern Ontario and Scotland, the colourful history of the Savoy Hotel in London and the magic of *tartine* bread and morning buns. Looking around after one meal, I thought to myself "how lucky all these people are to have such cool jobs," and then realised I'm one of these people and I'm so lucky and my job is pretty cool too!

The lectures and presentations of the Symposium left my mind buzzing and full. Some highlights included the opening presentation by Joanna Blythman on *The Power of Enjoyment in the Face of Industrialized Food*, which reminded me that "eating well is about culture, not nutrition" and "enjoyment of food comes from an understanding of food from kitchen to table." Lively discussions followed every presentation, and many conversations led back to an idea that resonated with me in a year of Food and Power as the overarching subject: "you can't use a food system to cure social inequality." The range of subject matter of the papers was fascinating, and left my brain overflowing each night when I returned to my room: from industrial food systems to gender in cooking, sustainable gastronomy to staging, feminist restaurants to food identity and politics. The final presentation of the weekend was by Zita Cobb, one of the founders of *Shorefast*, a charity that brings cultural

and economic resilience through social businesses to Fogo Island, a small island off the East coast of Canada. It was wonderful to learn about a part of my home country I was not familiar with, and I was struck that I had travelled all the way to Oxford to learn about Canada. Zita discussed the idea of an international network of intensely local cultures, that rang true for the international learning and networking I experienced all weekend.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Kardelen Soyalp**

*About myself: Coming from a culture of diverse cuisines and currently working in the field of Research and Development on Turkish Cuisine, converting old recipes with new techniques, helps me widen my vision about food and other major subjects related to food. I did my first internship in Amass Restaurant from June-September 2017, and my second in De Kromme Watergang from July-September 2018. I worked voluntarily in YEDI, and in the Seed Exchange in Denmark, Roskilde through August 2018, also in Markthalle neun (Berlin) for two days preparing Turkish Food - tarhana soup, çig kofte - and worked as assistant chef at the Izmir Gastrofest with Aylin Yazıcıoğlu. General interests include photography, learning about new cultures, creating recipes, exploring new places, and meeting new people.*

Report from the Symposium: I first heard about the Oxford Food Symposium through OSF Trustee Gamze İnceci. I have always been trying to learn new things and expand my vision in the world of gastronomy, and the Symposium seemed like the exact point to do that.

My passion for cooking began in my childhood when my parents divorced, I was upset and my mom was working I was spending all my free time in kitchen cooking for my sister. Then the kitchen became a place that I could forget everything and be happy. I always loved my sister's smiling face when she was trying the food that I cook for her. After I started working as a waitress in a coffee shop for a summer job and ended up there working for 4 years while I was studying at the same time. I was the manager before I quit there. Then I did an internship in the summer of 2017 in Amass, Copenhagen. I learned about sustainability and not to waste and discipline in the kitchen. They gave me a path to walk on.

I worked voluntarily at food festivals. Later, I did another internship in De Kromme Watergang, Netherlands. There I learned about different varieties of seafood and had an amazing time and made another family. I studied Gastronomy and Culinary arts major in İstanbul and graduated as the first one in the faculty of Fine Arts.

I have always believed in the power of food. Food can bring people together, also it gives you a power to control. When I learned the theme of the symposium is ' Food and Power' I was thrilled to join, so I applied for a Young Chef Grant. I was dancing in the restaurant when I learnt that I had got it.

My trip to the Symposium started with a tour of London's Borough Market with other Young Chefs and David Matchett to meet with powerful, amazing women producers and learn about their product that we present for Sunday's market lunch. We spent time in the successful and amazing 'Bread Ahead' bakery. That evening we travelled to Oxford. The next morning we entered the kitchen to help prepare the Mexican Dinner with Liz Galicia and her team from Puebla. St Catz head chef Tim Kelsey and the team were so kind and helpful. Spending time in his kitchen was an amazing opportunity.

The next day started with the speech by Marion Nestle, my idol. She was talking about *Food and Politics*, offering us a way to see and understand the world. Then we all joined the other Symposiasts, and everyone was so friendly and welcoming. I was always in love with food-science and I was literally memorized by Harold McGee's every word, and being able to meet him and have a conversation was a lifetime experience.

I learned a lot from talking to everyone. I met a lady in Saturday's lunch who was making jewelry that looked like vegetables - an amazing soul and so creative. I was also amazed by the young speakers' courage and energy when they spoke in front of so many people. I looked forward for every meal because it has an atmosphere like dining in one of Harry Potter movies, and always there was someone new sitting beside me.

When I returned to Istanbul, I encouraged everyone to join. So, my advice for newbies is to meet with everyone and try to absorb as much as they can - not forgetting to enjoy the sunset over St. Catherine's College. I'm looking forward to joining again and seeing everyone and meeting with newcomers.