

‘Haute Cuisine’ It's a man's world. By Angele J Freeman



“*Haute Cuisine*”(2012) , is a film based on the career of Danièle Mazet-Delpeuch, a French Chef and the first female to cook for the President of France, [François Mitterrand](#). Her character was named *Hortense*, a French feminine given name that comes from a Latin word meaning gardener, played by Catherine Frot. Her character depicted an older professional chef and cooking instructor who lived in the French countryside where she cultivated her own farm, cared for livestock and even grew black truffles, a specialty and favorite of the President which we would find out about later in the film.

As the original story goes and is followed in the scenes to come, Hortense was recommended to the President by his former chef, Joël Robuchon, who'd met Hortense before and exchanged contact information. The president in his older age, was looking specifically for a female chef but when Hortense received the phone call from the Chairman of French Haute Cuisine, she was only told the position would be for a ‘public official’. To me, this lack of

information alluded to the idea that since Hortense was ‘just a woman’ she didn't need to know and thus was given very little information about the job. In the seemingly uncomfortable and dangerous car ride to the train station before Hortense would finally come to know who she was cooking for, she began to ask her drivers for additional information about this ‘public official’ she would serve, but no one seemed to have answers. Hortense stated jokingly when repeating to the secret agent drivers who came to retrieve her abruptly from her countryside home to fulfill her mission, that she was told whoever this public official was requested “...a woman who could cook, and preferably with large breasts”. Hortense laughed, probably to hide her discomfort. The fact that the men could not give her any additional information as well as their rushed demeanor, signaled she would be working for someone important and perhaps in a very fast paced and serious environment. This car ride before Hortense would arrive at the Élysée Palace, the official residence of the President, was foreshadowing the climate of the events to come.

When Hortense finally arrived at her destination, she was given a tour and a list of rules and etiquettes to observe at the palace. She sat with an advisor to the president and was given a brief of the position and what it would entail. The advisor stated to Hortense that the President requested her to run his private kitchen that handled meals for the president's personal guests which included friends, family and staff. Although Hortense stated she was “deeply honored”, she also doubted she was the right person for the position, despite her high recommendation from someone the President trusted and her own personal accomplishments. Hortense, doubting herself even at her skill level, goes to show that some women, no matter how much they achieve, often succumb to self-doubt and intimidation which was also precursor to events later on in the film. Hortense stated “ I learned to make simple food with my mother and granny...” and the

advisor stated that was precisely what the president wanted. The president was looking for “home- cooking” and the advisor was finally able to convince Hortense she was the exact woman for the job.

In the consequent scene, Hortense was led to the West wing of the palace, dubbed the “wild west” for the “gunslingers”, which was the tour guides choice of words to describe the main kitchen and the male chefs who presided therein. Hortenses’ introduction to the very ‘egotarian’ (which Alan Richmon in a 2017 GQ article describes as “...a new breed of chefs who seem to have decided that they should be cooking not for your pleasure but for their own...in this competitive, male-dominated school of cooking, the dishes that customers are served may be highly inventive and intelligent, but too often they are more self-indulgent than inspired.) -environment she would be working in could not be complete without the boastful mention of the level of prestige she would quickly become acquainted to. She was brought into the main kitchen, which served over 70,000 meals per year by a staff of 24 male cooks, who used “...copper pots and pans that dated back to Louis Philippe”, the former king of France. In addition she was introduced to the heavy commercial equipment that needed a pilot with a license wearing white gloves to operate. Hortense was finally brought into the main area and was to be introduced to the head Chef who did not greet her immediately or at all for that matter, as he was busy taking a phone call. In the main kitchen area, the men, young and old, only looked at her and did not say a word. It was no secret that Hortense had entered a domain in which she was not welcomed. She was left standing there in the middle of the kitchen as the male chefs whizzed past her as if she did not exist, but only after sizing her up. She was finally greeted by another male who would accompany her on the rest of the tour after receiving another rejection

to be formally introduced to the main kitchens' Sous Chef, a ranking under the Head Chef who after finally ending his important phone call, still refused to greet her.



Nonetheless, Hortense attempted to make herself comfortable and was introduced to her pastry chef apprentice, who would be working with her in the private kitchen. This young pastry chef introduced her to the various high tech equipment at their disposal, but equipment that Hortense would not even use, at least not in the film when preparing the traditional dishes at the president's request.



Hortense, showing interest in cooking actual cuisine that the president would want to eat, requested to have a private conversation with the president which was initially rejected. She was told, "If the president wishes to see you, he'll say so." Hortense, rather than wanting to cook meals that pleased her own ego and show off her skills, wanted to cook meals that the President actually would enjoy. Eventually, the president invited Hortense to sit with him where he talked about his childhood and foods he preferred that he described as "a simple kind of cooking". He despised complicated "concoctions" and "superfluous decorations" and even told Hortense a story about the main kitchen insisting on serving him desserts with sugar roses that he would always intentionally leave on the plate. He hated the roses so much that he eventually wrote a request for them to be eliminated, as the chef insisted on including them despite his gestures. This lack of regard reminds me of the 'egotarian' mindset mentioned prior. Ultimately the president advised he would be happy with food that was similar to what he was served by his own grandmother.

After many successful lunch and dinner executions, Hortense received many accolades from the President himself and guests alike, but her success was soon disrupted by the health advisors to the president who deemed her style of cooking and use of animal fats and fatty cuts of meat to be detrimental to the health of the president. One of my favorite scenes of the film and perhaps the most memorable, was when the president himself without any accompaniment, walked down to the private kitchen to chat with Hortense as he'd heard she received the first black truffles of the season. The president sat with Hortense, as they discussed her expertise on truffles, while she served him a simple but decadent toast with truffles and red wine, which he

savoured. He also mentioned to Hortense that he realized her position was becoming difficult and insisted that “they” were making things difficult for him as well. He left after mentioning that adversity kept him going, and that it was in fact the “spice of life”.



Eventually, the restrictions and stiflement of Hortenses’ creativity, lack of ability to interact with the president and build a more personal relationship to gain a sense of direction when cooking for him, as well as the lack of regard and support from the male chefs and other male staff and advisors to the president, caused her to eventually write the president a letter of resignation. Hortense was even accused of being the President's mistress which is why some believed she got the position in the first place. When the main kitchen heard Hortense would be leaving thus allowing them to preside over both the main and private kitchens, they applauded as if they'd finally won the battle and had defeated poor Hortense.

This film, especially the fact that it is based on true events, shows the very real experience of female chefs and their lack of representation in a professional kitchen setting, as well as the fact that they are not welcome when they venture off into what seems to be a male territory. Kitchens are often constructed in a way that separates by gender and social status, and media platforms such as the Food Network only perpetuate these outdated customs by depicting men as professionals, scientists and businessmen, while only depicting women in roles such as house moms and women cooking on a budget for the family. As mentioned by Rebecca Swenson in *“Domestic Divo? Televised Treatments of Masculinity, Femininity, and Food”*, professional kitchens remind us of “well trained, innovative male chefs who are ‘masters of cuisine’, who sweat and work hard to feed paying customers and gain international reputations.” Amy Trubeck in the same article traces this image of the professional chef back to 18th Century French cooking, which was heavily steeped in elitism and a standard for what would become “Haute Cuisine”.

This film tells a real story about a woman whose position challenged these ideals although she was met with much opposition. Chef Danièle Mazet-Delpeuch cooked for the president for 2 years before she would succumb to the pressures and challenges of her role. This film amongst others, as well as programming such as the Food Network, show that media has the power to perpetuate gender roles and stereotypes, or be catalysts for change. Once women are not only depicted in films and on television in the same roles as men, and shown executing the same tasks successfully, only then can the world accept women as equally if not more so capable for these roles in real life. After all, a woman's place is in the kitchen.

References

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Rebecca Swenson (2009) *Domestic Divo? Televised Treatments of Masculinity, Femininity and Food*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26:1, 36-53, DOI: [10.1080/15295030802684034](https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030802684034)