



University of
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**Out of the Closet and into the Fire: Examining Heteronormativity,
Hierarchy and Belonging in UK Professional Culinary Labour**

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I declare that the work conducted herein was granted approval by the
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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Literature Review	6
Framing Queerness, Culinary Labour, and Professional Kitchens	6
Hegemonic Masculinity and the Culinary Workplace.....	6
Queer Labour	9
Queer Experiences in Hospitality Labour	10
Queer Domestic Cooking and Food Practices.....	11
Queer Food Media.....	12
Conclusion.....	12
Methodology (1592)	14
Research Design.....	14
Sampling and Recruitment.....	14
Data Collection	15
Reflexivity and Positionality	16
Data Analysis	17
Ethical Considerations.....	18
Limitations	18
Findings and Discussion	20
Kitchens as Heteronormative Masculinised Spaces	20
Hierarchy, Endurance and Occupational Legitimacy.....	21
Hierarchy as a Lived Experience	21
Endurance and the ‘Ideal Chef’.....	23
Banter, Humour and Everyday Discrimination	26
Humour as a Boundary-Making Practice	26
Emotional Labour and Hierarchy	28
Alternative Queer Kitchen Cultures	29
Pressure and Aggression	29
Queerness as Ordinary	30
Leadership and Hierarchy	31
Future Possibilities	33
Conclusion	34
Bibliography.....	36
Appendix 1	41

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Introduction

In recent years, accounts of bullying, intimidation and toxic work cultures in professional kitchens have attracted increasing public attention, from allegations against celebrated chefs to revelations about conditions at some of the world's most prestigious restaurants (The Independent, 2026; The Guardian, 2026). A Unite Hospitality (2021) survey found that 40% of chefs had considered leaving the profession due to bullying, and a Hospitality Action (2024) report found that 76% of hospitality workers had experienced mental health difficulties during their careers. Together, these accounts highlight the kitchen as a space in which pressure, endurance and mistreatment can become embedded in everyday working practices.

Scholarship has similarly framed the professional kitchen as a distinctive workplace, physically isolated and organised through a near-militaristic hierarchy rooted in the French brigade model (Trubek, 2000; Fine, 2008; Palmer, 2010). This model continues to influence British kitchen culture, shaping how labour is divided, how authority is organised, and how workers are expected to behave. Research presents the kitchen as deeply gendered, with legitimacy tied to a specific hegemonic masculinity. (Connell, 1995; Cano, 2019; Burrow, Scott and Courpasson, 2022).

However, while literature has examined the gendered nature of kitchen work, particularly in relation to the experiences of women in male-dominated kitchens (Cano, 2019; Harris and Giuffre, 2010), less attention has been paid to the experiences of queer chefs. This research project seeks to address that gap by focusing on queer chefs working in professional kitchens in the UK. It aims to answer the primary research question: **'How are queer chefs' experiences shaped by masculinised hierarchies and heteronormative cultures in professional kitchens?'** Drawing on semi-structured interviews with eight queer chefs working across a range of professional kitchen environments in the UK, this research examines how power, hierarchy, humour, endurance and belonging are experienced by queer workers in everyday kitchen life.

This study brings together scholarship on kitchen labour, gender, sexuality and workplace culture, examining the experiences of queer chefs, enabling a closer

understanding of how occupational norms are maintained within the kitchen, how exclusion is embedded in routine practices and how alternative futures may emerge.

To start with, chapter two, the literature review, will situate this research within a range of existing bodies of scholarship, including studies of hegemonic masculinity and culinary labour, and research on queer workers and food cultures. This literature highlights a gap in research on the experiences of queer chefs in the UK. The third chapter will then outline the research design choices taken in this study and the ethical considerations needed. This is followed by the analysis and discussion of the data, organised into two sections: the first examines the exclusionary dimensions of kitchen culture and how it is experienced by queer individuals within the kitchen; the second explores alternative kitchen cultures and looks to a more inclusive future. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the implications of these findings and possible directions for future research.

Literature Review

Framing Queerness, Culinary Labour, and Professional Kitchens

Understanding queerness within the professional kitchen requires engagement with several bodies of sociological scholarship: studies of hegemonic masculinity and gender roles in culinary labour; research on queerness in the workplace; queer theory regarding identity, visibility and normativity; and the emerging body of work on queer food cultures. Each of these fields offers important insights into gender, sexuality, identity, performance and embodied labour, and this literature review aims to synthesise such insights and showcase the research gap concerning queer professional culinary labour.

Throughout this work, “queer” is understood as an umbrella term representing individuals with non-heterosexual sexualities and/or non-cisgender gender identities (Jagose, 1996; Warner, 2011), recognising both its reclaimed potential and its increasing use as an inclusive, but non-specific category (Worthen, 2023). The term “professional kitchens” in this research refers to commercial environments in which chefs work, such as restaurants, hotel kitchens, catering companies, and other direct-to-customer commercial food production spaces (Palmer, 2010). This research will take a UK-specific approach, acknowledging the unique organisational, cultural and historical specificities of the British culinary industry and recognising that the experiences of kitchen labour emerge within specific labour markets and cultural settings (Centre for London, 2019).

Hegemonic Masculinity and the Culinary Workplace

To understand the dynamics of the contemporary professional kitchen, it is necessary to also understand how the role of the chef emerged. Cooking as a domestic practice has been historically understood as women’s work and associated with ideas of nurture and care within the home, while the professional kitchen is constructed as a male domain (Harris and Giuffre, 2010). This distinction between cooking in the domestic sphere as an act associated with women and in the professional sphere as an act associated with men is not incidental but was actively produced through the professionalisation of cookery itself. As Trubek (2000) documents, following the French

Revolution, cooking as a profession moved from being domestic work done in the private households of nobility into the public sphere of the restaurant. In this transition, the work of the chef came to be defined as skilled and intellectually demanding, in contrast to domestic cooking, which remained devalued, seen as unskilled and feminised (Trubek, 2000; Hollows, 2003). These historical distinctions continue to shape the culinary industry in the UK, with female chefs continuing to receive less critical recognition and fewer prestigious awards than their male peers (Druckman, 2010).

Contemporary literature continues to frame the kitchen as a highly masculinised environment structured around hierarchical organisation, discipline and endurance (Fine, 2008; Palmer, 2010; Cano, 2019; Burrow et al., 2022; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018). Accounts of the kitchen as a workplace emphasise the use of a strict, almost militaristic hierarchy, built upon the brigade model, rooted in notions of rank and command and with a heavy emphasis on obedience and order. Such structures shape not only how work is allocated but also acceptable forms of behaviour, speech and identity (Fine, 2008; Palmer, 2010). Cano (2019) extends this analysis to explore the kitchen as a site where a specific organisational hegemonic masculinity is performed and reproduced, arguing that this hierarchy is not simply organisational but also operates as a space through which chefs, particularly male chefs, are able to enact a hegemonic masculinity typified by aggression, competition and control. Such performances are reinforced through working conditions such as long hours, physical intensity and high stress that contribute to the normalisation of verbal hostility and collectively define what it means to be a “real chef” and exclude those who don’t conform (Cano, 2019; Burrow et al., 2022).

Another significant dimension of hegemonic masculinity within the kitchen concerns the valorisation of suffering within this environment. Burrow, Scott and Courpasson (2022) argue that a key aspect of identity formation for chefs is done through the performance of durability while undergoing pain, exhaustion, verbal hostility, abuse and extreme pressure. In this environment, suffering operates as a form of symbolic capital through which legitimacy and belonging are earned. The ability to endure harsh conditions becomes a valued resource within kitchen culture; those who

can withstand pressure are more likely to be seen as committed, credible and deserving by those around them. A report by the Centre for London (2019) identifies these norms and the exclusion of those who don't conform to them as a key driver behind the high rates of turnover within the culinary profession.

Further literature suggests that hierarchies within kitchens not only normalise but may actively encourage negative behaviour that would not normally be acceptable in the workplace, such as bullying or harassment. Burrow (2022), for example, highlights how organisational isolation between different levels and the layout of the kitchen itself, isolated from customers and the outside world, can produce a 'geography of deviance', in which aggression is embedded into the everyday practices of the kitchen as a workplace. Such behaviour is often rendered invisible through the framing of verbal aggression as 'banter', presented as a rite of passage for junior chefs (Alexander et al. 2012). Ineson et al. (2013) find that the normalisation of harassment and sexual discrimination within the hospitality industry is facilitated by these hierarchical power structures, with power imbalances enabling the exploitation of authority.

Existing literature focuses heavily on gender, particularly masculinity and rarely addresses how queerness may shape experiences within these spaces. Scholarship on female chefs highlights that the adoption and development of alternative styles of leadership emphasising care, collaboration and creativity in contrast to the norms of individualisation, aggression and stoicism (Harris and Giuffre, 2010; Temizkan and Uslu, 2023). Women are often disadvantaged by these norms. Harris and Giuffre (2010) document how female chefs are often required to prove their competence in ways their male colleagues are not. Unlike their male counterparts, their belonging in the professional kitchen is not an assumed, implicit norm.

However, as Harris and Giuffre (2010) point out, gendered performances within the highly masculinised kitchen environment are not always straightforward. This research found that female executive chefs may both conform to and disrupt gender expectations, sometimes reproducing masculine norms while seeking to 'undo' gender. These findings offer useful parallels for the experiences of queer chefs, suggesting that gender performance is situational, negotiated and relational as opposed to fixed. Without existing empirical research on queer chefs, such parallels remain speculative.

The responses and strategies adopted by female chefs cannot be assumed to translate to the same for queer chefs, whose identities may position them differently within professional hierarchies. Although these findings highlight structural issues, they overlook how queer individuals may experience further harassment within the kitchen as a result of their sexuality or gender identity. Within studies of professional kitchens, sexuality and queer identity are notably absent.

It should be acknowledged that the hegemonic ideal of the chef is also racialised. As Trubek (2000) notes, the professionalisation of cooking in the public sphere is rooted in French fine-dining, and the figure of the chef is constructed according to this as implicitly white and European. This dynamic continues to shape notions of legitimacy in the culinary industry, with chefs from ethnic minority backgrounds often facing structural barriers and being excluded from positions of authority (Be Inclusive Hospitality, 2025). This is reflected in industry data: only 12% of Michelin-starred head chefs are from an ethnic minority background despite the prominence and celebration of ‘international’ cuisines within the British restaurant sector (Ray, 2016; Guardian, 2018). These dynamics intersect with gendered exclusions and often compound them. Druckman (2010) notes that female chefs are also underrepresented among award recipients, but this is exacerbated further for women of colour who navigate not just gendered barriers but also racialised ones (Women in the Food Industry, 2024). There has, however, been little attention paid to how intersecting identities shape the experiences of marginalised individuals, such as queer chefs, in the culinary industry.

Queer Labour

In order to situate the experiences of queer chefs, it is necessary to look to broader research on LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace, with research demonstrating that queer employees face both structural barriers and everyday microaggressions across sectors (Stonewall, 2025; TUC, 2024). Stonewall’s (2025) UK-wide survey, for example, reports that 39% of LGBTQ+ employees feel it’s necessary to conceal their identity at work and 26% have experienced negative comments. Similarly, a TUC (2024) report on LGBTQ+ workers in Britain reported that 48% of such workers had experienced bullying or harassment in the workplace in the past five years, with the figure rising to

79% for trans individuals. Such data highlights the importance of research into the experiences of queer workers in specific fields, in order to facilitate more inclusive work environments and understand how queerness interacts with specific working cultures and conditions. Fletcher and Everly (2021) demonstrate that LGBTQ+ supportive practices correlate strongly with job satisfaction, suggesting that organisational culture plays an important role in enabling queer employees to feel safe and supported.

Research focusing on the experiences of trans and non-binary workers is also helpful for understanding those of queer chefs in general, especially due to the prevalence of rigid binary gender norms in the kitchen (Cano, 2019; Harris and Giuffre, 2010). Davidson (2016) highlights how non-binary workers are often marginalised through policies and workplace cultures that assume binary gender expression, and such marginalisation is heightened in occupational environments. Similarly, Beauregard et al. (2016) argue that trans employees often experience ‘voice poverty’ with limited mechanisms for expressing needs or concerns. This research aims to build upon this scholarship in order to understand how trans identities impact individuals' experiences in the highly gendered kitchen environment.

Queer Experiences in Hospitality Labour

Although limited, there is a growing body of scholarship exploring queer workers specifically in hospitality settings; such research provides valuable insights into how sexuality and gender identity intersect with the industry's labour cultures. Sharp et al. (2022) explore how queer hospitality workers navigate self-expression and emotional labour, noting that queerness can both shape positive workplace relationships while harming others. Visibility in a customer-facing industry becomes two-fold; openness can foster solidarity, but also risks exposing queer workers to harassment such as homophobic and transphobic comments, misgendering and increased scrutiny. These experiences are shaped by the hospitality industry's wider labour conditions. Long working hours, emotional intensity and a heavy reliance on others can make the professional kitchen a space of both community and conflict (Fine, 2008; Palmer, 2010).

However, while these findings are important for understanding queer workers in hospitality as a whole, they cannot be assumed to apply to professional kitchens, as

there are some key differences, as highlighted in the literature, back-of-house roles differ substantially from their front-of-house counterparts (Fine, 2008; Burrow, 2022). They are less visible to customers or external oversight, and kitchen labour entails different forms of emotional labour. No research currently explores how queer identity informs interactions within these environments.

Queer Domestic Cooking and Food Practices

In addition to queer labour studies, scholarship on queer domestic food practices provides a useful lens for understanding how queer identities shape relationships to food labour and care. Queer domesticity is often framed as a site wherein heteronormative expectations of family, reproduction, and gendered labour are reconfigured or refused through the formation of households and kinship structures that do not rely on traditional marital or reproductive norms within the family (Cook, 2014; Meah, 2017).

Research highlights that queer individuals may construct alternative domestic food practices that emphasise ideas of a ‘chosen family’, creativity and non-traditional forms of care. Queer domestic cooking often facilitates care networks beyond biological kinship, and cooking within queer households has been suggested as a means of crafting alternative meanings of belonging through shared rituals, creativity, and collective nourishment (Levin et al., 2020; Binnie and Klesse, 2025). Although domestic cooking differs significantly from professional culinary labour, meaning that such research cannot be understood as applicable to queer professional chefs, both can be said to involve embodied practices, emotional investment and the production of identity through food.

Binnie and Klesse (2025) suggest that food practices such as the preparation of meals can be seen for queer individuals to play a key role in creating ideas of community and identity beyond heteronormativity. Queer culinary practices may therefore carry additional symbolic significance not often recognised in mainstream accounts of the emotional labour of cooking. This is not to say, however, that the home and domestic cooking always serve as a positive space for queer individuals; homes can enable identity exploration, but they are also sites of rejection, violence or forced

homelessness for many LGBTQ+ young people (Schmitz and Tyler, 2018; Gabb et al., 2020).

Importantly, domestic explorations of queerness in relation to cooking do not automatically translate to professional contestation, and professional environments may differ from domestic ones. As Gorman-Murray (2017) notes, queer lives are shaped by homonormativity, assimilationist pressures, and often unequal access to visibility or safety. A queer chef may express queerness freely through domestic cooking, personal aesthetic, or private relationships while maintaining conformity at work due to professional risk, and this duality remains underexplored.

Queer Food Media

Another growing field of scholarship related to this research is queer representation in food media, which offers helpful parallels for understanding queer identity in culinary professions. Television cooking competitions and celebrity chef culture often reproduce gendered norms and heteronormativity privileging a masculine authority (Hollows, 2003). Representation of queer chefs in British food media has historically been limited, contributing to perceptions of who counts as a 'legitimate' chef and who belongs in professional culinary spaces.

However, food media can also serve as a site for the contestation of these ideas. Kutlu's (2021) analysis of queer competition on the Netflix series 'Nailed it!', for example, argues that using humour, performativity and increased visibility, queer contestants and hosts and judges queer the cooking show, challenging conventions that associate culinary legitimacy with seriousness, discipline and technical perfection. Additionally, Vester's (2020) concept of 'queering the cookbook' looks to the cookbook as a site for examining how queer culinary narratives can disrupt traditional discourses within domestic cookery. While this does not directly reflect professional kitchen cultures, it helps shape cultural understandings of queerness in culinary contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature on professional kitchens, queer labour and queer food collectively highlights the complex interactions between gender, sexuality and identity within culinary labour. Research on the professional kitchen emphasises the

masculinised, hierarchical, and high-pressure nature of the environment and showcases how exclusion operates within these spaces, to create the notion of an ‘ideal chef’ (Fine, 2008; Palmer, 2010; Cano, 2019; Burrow et al., 2022). While these insights illuminate gendered dynamics within the kitchen and previous scholarship explores how female chefs navigate these dynamics, the experiences of queer chefs remain largely ignored. Research into queer labour also provides a useful lens for understanding these experiences. Studies into LGBTQ+ employees in the UK demonstrate the prevalence of structural barriers and microaggressions, suggesting that queer workers may experience increased vulnerability in often hostile or exclusionary work environments (Stonewall, 2025; TUC, 2024; Ineson, 2013). However, professional kitchens remain absent from this body of scholarship. Further insights are provided by literature on queer domestic cooking and food media, highlighting how queerness may shape relationships to food and care. Both domestic cooking and food media can serve as a site for both maintaining and challenging heteronormative and gendered norms through practices and narratives that serve to challenge normative assumptions of gender and sexuality in culinary spaces.

Despite the key contributions of existing scholarship, several gaps persist. Studies of gendered kitchens rarely engage with queerness, queer labour studies, while helpful, fail to consider the professional kitchen, even in studies of queerness in hospitality and research on queer domesticity and food media cannot fully capture the unique dynamics of professional culinary labour. This study aims to address these gaps through the examination of how queer chefs in the UK navigate and negotiate kitchen spaces and the prevalence of masculinised hierarchies and heteronormativity in such spaces. In doing so, this research seeks to contribute to understandings of how sexuality, gender, and professional labour intersect in the professional kitchen environment, advancing both queer labour studies and the sociology of culinary work.

Methodology

Research Design

This dissertation adopts a qualitative research design in order to understand how queer chefs experience the kitchen. The research was informed by a relativist ontology and a broadly social constructionist epistemology, meaning that it does not assume a single, objective reality of the professional kitchen but rather understands kitchen culture, hierarchy, professionalism, and queerness as socially produced and differently experienced across participants (Burr, 2015; Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were used as the method of data collection, and the resulting data was then analysed using inductive thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022).

Sampling and Recruitment

This research focused on the experiences of people who identified as queer and who had current or previous experience working as chefs in professional kitchen environments. For the purposes of this research, a professional kitchen environment was understood to be a commercial kitchen in which food is prepared as paid labour; this included restaurants, pubs, hotels, or similar hospitality settings (Fine, 2008; Palmer, 2010). Defining the kitchen in this way ensured that all participants had direct experience of the kitchen while allowing for variation across different types of culinary environments. Queerness was established through self-identification during recruitment and again at the beginning of the interview, when participants were asked how they identified, as opposed to the imposition of an external definition of queerness. This self-definition was important for a research based in lived experience as it enabled identity to be understood on participants' own terms (Jagose, 1996; Creswell, 2013).

Participants were recruited through purposive snowball sampling, with initial contact made through LGBTQ+ hospitality networks, social media, and personal introductions. Snowball sampling was suitable for this research as queer chefs can be seen to constitute a relatively hard-to-reach group, and the sensitive nature of the topic meant that direct, unsolicited recruitment would have been less likely to be effective

(Atkinson and Flint, 2001). This approach has been used effectively in similar studies of queer workers within different employment contexts (Sharp et al., 2022; Davidson, 2016). Gaining access, however, proved more difficult than initially anticipated. Several potential participants did not respond after initial contact, and those who agreed to take part often did not attend scheduled interviews or were late. These challenges can be understood as significant in themselves; they may be read as indicative of the stressful and demanding nature of kitchen labour itself, often associated with exhaustion, unsociable working hours, and unpredictability, leading to difficulties planning commitments outside work (Centre for London, 2019).

The final sample consisted of eight participants. All identified as queer, with additional self-described identities including gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, non-binary, asexual, and combinations of these. Most participants were young adults, with the majority occupying junior roles within the kitchen. The majority were based in major urban centres in the UK, and there was a range of different ethnic backgrounds represented, which was important given the racialised dimensions of the ‘ideal chef’. Two of the participants identified as non-binary. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect participants’ anonymity; the participants and their self-described identities are as follows:

Participant Pseudonym	Self-Described Identity
Nic	Non-binary and pansexual
Rhianna	Lesbian
Leah	Lesbian
Sam	Gay man
Alfie	Queer
Annika	Bi woman
Leo	Gay man
Jamie	Non-binary and queer

Data Collection

Participants took part in semi-structured interviews, designed around the central research question: **‘How are queer chefs’ experiences shaped by**

masculinised hierarchies and heteronormative cultures in professional kitchens?’

The interviews included questions around participants’ background in kitchen labour, their experiences of hierarchy, how they viewed the wider workplace culture, humour, relationships with colleagues and management, emotional labour, and the ways in which queerness informed experiences of belonging, exclusion and identity within the kitchen (see Appendix 1).

The semi-structured interview format meant that while a common set of questions guided each interview, questioning could vary depending on participants’ responses (Mason, 2002). This enabled participants to reflect on what felt most significant in their own experiences as opposed to being limited to a fixed set of questions. Some interviews, for example, focused more heavily on experiences of overt discrimination and abuse within the kitchen, while others emphasised a kitchen based in care and alternative forms of leadership. This flexibility was important as participants did not all experience queerness or kitchen culture in the same way, and a more structured format would have limited the research’s capacity to capture these nuances.

Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams to improve accessibility and accommodate participants from across the UK. This flexibility was especially important given the irregular and demanding working patterns associated with professional kitchen labour, and it meant that interviews could be easily rearranged when participants were late or unable to attend at their initially scheduled time.

Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflecting on the research process, my own positionality as a queer researcher may have shaped the data collection in some important ways. A shared identity between the researcher and participants is likely to have facilitated openness and trust, with participants potentially feeling more comfortable when discussing experiences of sexuality, gender identity, and discrimination with someone they understood to occupy a similar social position (Browne and Nash, 2010). However, this shared identity does not mean shared experience, and there was therefore a risk of unconsciously reading the experience of participants through the lens of my own experiences and

assumptions (Merriam et al., 2001). The semi-structured format of the interviews was key to managing this, using open questions and allowing participants own phrasing rather than drawing on prior assumptions, allowed each account to be seen on the participants own terms (Mason, 2002). Encouraging participants to self-describe their identity at the start of each interview served to foreground their own meanings and understandings of their identity rather than those of the researcher.

Data Analysis

The interview data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). This method is well established as an appropriate method for research into workplace cultures and has been used in similar studies of queer employees and research on kitchen labour (Sharp et al., 2022; Harris and Giuffre, 2010). Thematic analysis was the most appropriate method of analysis for this research; it enabled the identification of common patterns that emerged from participants' accounts while allowing for variation and disagreement. This made visible not only experiences of exclusion but also forms of care, solidarity and alternative leadership. An inductive approach was particularly suitable given the under-researched nature of queer professional culinary labour. This enabled themes to emerge from the participants' narratives, as opposed to from a rigid coding framework. (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Humour, for example, which emerged as a theme during the coding process of this data, had been a previously under-researched dimension of exclusion within kitchens and the inductive approach enabled an exploration of its role.

Interviews were first transcribed using the inbuilt MS Teams software and then manually checked and corrected for accuracy. These transcripts were then read through multiple times to gain familiarity with the data. Following this familiarisation process, open codes were generated inductively across the seven transcripts; the codes that emerged included concealment, collaboration, banter, fear, and care. These open codes were then grouped into axial codes informed by the emerging narrative (Saldaña, 2024). The axial codes were then developed into higher-order themes through an iterative process of moving between transcripts, coded extracts, and emerging patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the design and conduction of this study. Queer individuals within the kitchen may be considered a potentially vulnerable group, as the research explored sexuality, gender, workplace culture, and experiences of discrimination and exclusion. The confidentiality of the participants' data was explained clearly both in the participant information sheet they received prior to interviews and at the beginning of the interviews themselves. The transcripts were anonymised using pseudonyms, and identifiable information, including workplaces, was removed. Any file linking real names to pseudonyms was stored separately and securely. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored in a password-protected folder and backed up only to a secure university OneDrive account.

There was also a risk of psychological discomfort, as the research involved the discussion of emotionally sensitive topics such as abusive behaviours in kitchens, as well as experiences of homophobia and transphobia. In order to minimise this risk, interviews were conducted sensitively, and care was taken to ensure that participants felt in control of what they chose to share. Participants were reminded throughout that they could stop at any time or skip questions. Following the interviews, participants were sent an email with contact details of support organisations, such as MindOut and the Burnt Chef Project, and reminded again of their right to withdraw their data.

Limitations

The limitations of this research are also important to acknowledge. The sample of eight participants, for example, while appropriate for a qualitative project of this scope, limits the range of experiences represented. Alongside this, snowball sampling, while well-suited to accessing a hard-to-reach group, means that the sample was shaped by existing networks and potentially risks over-representing those who are 'out' and connected to wider queer networks. The sensitive nature of the research also means that those who had experienced severe discrimination may have been less willing to participate, as disclosure may have been uncomfortable. Another limitation of this

research is generalisability, as the size of the sample is relatively small, comprising eight participants. However, it should be noted that the primary aim of this research is not to seek complete representativeness, but instead to provide contextual meaning, depth and nuanced insight into the experiences of queer chefs.

Findings and Discussion

Kitchens as Heteronormative Masculinised Spaces

The professional kitchen, as outlined in the literature, has been understood as a masculinised space, shaped not only by a historically male-dominated workforce but by an occupational culture based around norms of toughness, authority and emotional restraint (Fine, 2008; Palmer, 2010; Cano, 2019; Burrow et al., 2022). Participants' accounts strongly reflected this framing. When asked to describe the 'ideal chef', one participant, Jamie, stated:

"There's definitely this image of the chef as tough, confident, maybe slightly intimidating" (Jamie, non-binary and queer)

This description offers an insight into the foundations of kitchen culture in the UK. Belonging in these spaces is not defined simply through technical ability and skill, but is instead shaped by an imagined occupational ideal of toughness, restraint, and aggression. Fine's (2008) account of the kitchen as a distinct social world is useful here. Kitchens appear as highly disciplined, hierarchical spaces, governed by implicit norms that shape ideas of legitimacy within them. This is a world that is defined by an organisational hegemonic masculinity, often immediately visible (Cano, 2019). Leo, a gay man who had worked across several kitchen environments, noted that kitchens "still feel more traditionally masculine", while Alfie, who identified as queer, described an atmosphere of "laddish behaviour... locker room kind of vibes". As Sam put it:

"You just get the vibe quickly, most kitchens you walk in, and you know it's going to be a certain kind of environment. The vibe is just very... straight, very macho." (Sam, gay man)

Sam's account makes clear that this occupational culture is understood not only as masculine but also as specifically heteronormative. In this space, heterosexual masculinity can be seen as the unmarked, assumed norm against which difference is measured. This is an important grounding for understanding queer experience in the kitchen. The kitchen is imagined through a set of embodied norms: toughness, banter, emotional restraint, 'laddishness', heterosexuality, and masculinity. Belonging is,

therefore, not simply a question of technical competence or effort but of cultural fit, of how closely a worker maps onto an occupational ideal that is both masculine and heteronormative.

Hierarchy, Endurance and Occupational Legitimacy

Hierarchy as a Lived Experience

“There’s a really strong hierarchy ... you can usually tell straight away who the head chef is, who the sous chef is, and who the junior chefs are.” (Leo, gay man)

The immediate legibility of rank is one of the defining features of kitchen culture that participants consistently returned to. This hierarchy is not simply an organisational tool but a disciplinary structure through which ideas of legitimacy, difference and belonging are produced. Fine (2008) frames kitchens as strongly hierarchical workplaces, in which rank, authority and endurance shape both how labour is organised and the ways in which workers become accepted and ‘legitimate’ members of the kitchen. Participants’ accounts confirm this but also develop it further, demonstrating that hierarchy is experienced not only as structure but as an atmosphere, shaping how individuals move, speak, and understand their position in the kitchen.

“It shapes everything! From how you carry yourself, to how much space you take up to whether you feel like you’re allowed to have an opinion. You know your place pretty quickly” (Leah, lesbian)

Hierarchy is both a structural feature of the kitchen and a symbolic one, shaping who feels able to share their thoughts, who is expected to submit to authority, and who is marked as belonging. As Leah illustrates, it shapes expected behaviour and conduct, regulating how people are expected to carry themselves according to their role. Another participant, Annika, who had recently joined the kitchen after previously working front of house, highlighted how this is expressed in everyday interactions within the kitchen:

“Junior chefs usually keep their heads down and focus on their station, whereas senior chefs tend to control the pace and tone of the room.” (Annika, bisexual woman)

The expectation that junior chefs “keep their heads down” implies restraint as a condition of participation, and in turn a limited capacity to challenge what is happening around them. By contrast, senior chefs are understood to be shaping not just the overall pace of service but also the overall atmosphere in which others work. Hierarchy thus becomes part of the emotional organisation of the kitchen, shaping who can direct, interrupt, or discipline, and who must remain contained.

This becomes especially important for queer chefs. Exclusion or hostility towards them operates within a space in which junior staff may already feel unable to speak openly or voice concerns, particularly about more senior members of staff. As Leo described:

"If something happened that made you uncomfortable, there wasn't really a route to say anything. One time, the Head Chef saw that I'd plated something wrong. He just went off at me, shouting, calling me names, everything! He knew that I was gay, and some of the insults were related to my sexuality. That's kind of just how it was, you'd just have to kind of ignore it. Especially if it was coming from above you, you just think, that's just how it is here." (Leo, gay man)

In this sense, silence helps sustain hierarchy by creating barriers to reporting discriminatory and abusive behaviour, particularly when it comes from those in positions of power. The kitchen is not a neutral space in which workers occupy different positions; it is a space in which those positions carry different expectations around who can speak, who is heard, and who is expected to remain quiet. Power differentials here shape the ways in which junior queer workers can respond to mistreatment.

For some participants, the strict hierarchy of the kitchen became associated with fear and volatility. Authority could be used to intimidate more junior members of staff, both implicitly and explicitly. As Sam described:

"One of my managers would throw stuff around. He would be in a horrible mood constantly and always show it." (Sam, gay man)

This account highlights how hierarchy can operate affectively, shaping the atmosphere of the kitchen through fear, volatility and threat. The isolation of the kitchen

environment further serves to normalise aggressive conduct, since behaviour that would be less acceptable in customer-facing spaces can become routine when hidden from view. (Burrow, 2022). The kitchen, however, while physically hidden from customers, is not socially or symbolically free from them. Instead, customer demand enters the kitchen indirectly through interruptions from front of house, pressure to meet service times and the relentless demand to move faster. One participant described the use of a timer within the kitchen:

“You have like 10, 12ish minutes to get food out... if we are not hitting that target, they [senior chefs] can be quite angry about it.” (Alfie, queer)

Hierarchy and pressure are in this way closely linked. The demand to meet service times can compound authority as urgency provides a justification for criticism and aggression, making intense control appear necessary to meet tight deadlines. For queer individuals within the kitchen, this makes hierarchy particularly significant because discriminatory behaviour can become absorbed into the fabric of kitchen culture and difficult to call out. One participant described an increase in discriminatory language and abuse during moments of intense pressure:

“Abusive behaviour kind of gets folded into everything else and normalised... When people are under stress, the insults can become a bit personal and are often excused...It's hard to separate out what's directed at you specifically and what's just the general chaos of it all” (Leo, gay man)

As Leo highlights, hostility and aggression are tolerated and excused within a workplace culture organised around ideals of hardness, endurance, and rank. Discriminatory and aggressive behaviour can be framed as necessary to keep service moving, marking resistance towards this behaviour as an inability to cope with pressure, rather than as an objection to mistreatment.

Endurance and the ‘Ideal Chef’

Within this hierarchical structure, the ideal chef emerges as someone who is not only technically competent and fast under pressure but also able to conform to this authority above all else. Legitimacy is not granted automatically, but tied to the ability to

endure pressure, fatigue, and criticism without complaint, hesitation, or visible vulnerability (Burrow, Scott, and Courpasson, 2022). The need to “prove yourself” and your place within this hierarchy constitutes an important aspect of kitchen life:

“You had to prove yourself quickly, or people wouldn’t take you seriously.”

(Annika, bisexual woman)

“If you can’t keep up, maybe kitchens aren’t for you.” (Sam, gay man)

“Pushing through tiredness is normal... long shifts, late nights, coming back the next day.” (Jamie, non-binary and queer)

Considered together, these accounts describe the construction of a specific occupational ideal in which endurance is the primary measure of belonging. Pressure, fatigue and stoicism were treated as tests of occupational suitability and the ability to withstand was seen as a marker for success in the kitchen. Endurance is not just necessary to get through service; it also becomes one of the main criteria through which belonging is judged. As Palmer (2010) argues, belonging in culinary workplaces is shaped as much by cultural fit as by formal competence. Workers are accepted not just because they can perform the technical demands of the role, but because they embody the specific occupational identity expected of them. In this sense, hierarchy and endurance work together.

For queer chefs, belonging in the kitchen is therefore tied not only to technical skill but also to the ability to survive a workplace culture that is often structured by norms of toughness and stoicism (Fine, 2008; Palmer, 2010; Cano, 2019; Burrow, Scott, and Courpasson, 2022). The need to prove oneself can become compounded for queer chefs. Two participants directly described this dynamic:

“I remember feeling like I had to work extra hard to show I could keep up physically and mentally.” (Leah, lesbian)

“It sometimes feels like I have to prove myself twice over, not just that I can do the job and that I’m a great chef, but also that I belong in the kitchen. I’m kind of used to being the only non-binary person in the kitchen, and so it feels like I’m

proving that I can do the job, to all these cis straight men.” (Jamie, non-binary and queer)

As Leah and Jamie illustrate, queer chefs are not only working to demonstrate competence in their technical ability but have to do so in an environment which is culturally coded through heterosexual masculinity. For Jamie and Leah, when they differ from this norm, they feel they must work twice as hard. This need to over-prove competence to be taken seriously within the kitchen echoes findings on the experiences of women within professional culinary labour. Female chefs are often required to demonstrate their ability in the kitchen in ways not asked of their male colleagues, because their belonging is not simply assumed in the same way; they must instead be exceptional (Harris and Giuffre, 2010). A similar dynamic occurs for queer chefs, they must not only demonstrate that they can meet the physical and emotional demands of the service but also navigate the additional labour of existing in an environment in which their identity is, in some cases, seen to be out of place.

This norm of endurance results in the idea that any objections to the conditions can be read as an inability to cope with the demands of kitchen work. To object to an offensive joke, or to call out abusive language, can be read as the inability to ‘handle the pressure’, or as being unfit for kitchen life more generally. Such dynamics complicate the romanticisation of endurance or ‘valorisation of suffering’ (Burrow, Scott and Courpasson, 2022). The normalisation of pressure can become harmful to those within it. For two participants, this expectation contributed to their decisions to leave the industry, with one stating:

“At a certain point I just thought, I’m not going to change this place, and it’s costing me too much to keep trying. So, I left.” (Sam, gay man)

Queer chefs are not only expected to cope with the physical and emotional fatigue that comes from kitchen labour but to do so while navigating discrimination that the kitchen’s own culture can render unchallengeable.

Banter, Humour and Everyday Discrimination

Humour as a Boundary-Making Practice

This highly hierarchical culture and notion of endurance do not only manifest through overt aggression but are also reproduced in everyday experiences of humour within the kitchen. ‘Banter’ can operate as an extension of the same logic, sustaining solidarity among those who conform to cisnormativity within the kitchen while marking out those who do not.

Humour appeared repeatedly across the data as a key component of kitchen life. Participants described its role in structuring everyday interaction within professional kitchen environments as a routine and embedded aspect of kitchen labour itself. In several interviews, humour was described by participants as central to managing the demands of kitchen work and the intensity of service:

“Humour is a huge coping mechanism in kitchens... especially when it’s really busy, people joke constantly” (Leah, lesbian)

“There’s always something being said, like someone’s taking the piss out of someone else... it’s just constant, especially when it’s busy, it kind of keeps things going” (Alfie, queer)

These accounts highlight that humour was seen by participants as a cultural expectation within kitchens, something that workers participated in to endure the stress of service. In high-pressure kitchens, where work is often fast paced with an emphasis on timing, coordination, and execution, humour becomes a way of managing pressure and sustaining the momentum of service. In this sense it can work to create solidarity within the kitchen, maintaining morale, and operating as a form of release and collective bonding amongst the stress. This aligns with literature outlining humour as a form of release and bonding in high-pressure workplaces (Ball and Johnson, 2003).

However, the same humour that creates solidarity and bonding can also operate as a mechanism of exclusion. Rather than functioning in the kitchen as a neutral, inclusive form of stress relief, participants’ accounts suggest that humour in the kitchen often contained discriminatory dimensions, working to normalise exclusion and

reproduce heteronormative expectations of who belongs within professional culinary labour.

Jokes were frequently described as drawing on sexist, homophobic, and racist assumptions, often at the expense of marginalised individuals. These jokes served to shape who is positioned as belonging within the kitchen and who is marked as different, or inferior, and therefore need to work twice as hard to show that they belong. Humour and banter emerge, therefore, not only as tools of stress relief or collective coping, but also as boundary-making practices.

Within this culture, queerness was rendered as discussable and available for ridicule in a way that the implicit norm of heterosexuality was not. Participants described instances where discriminatory language was used towards them, often framed as harmless ‘banter’:

“Someone assumed I fancied every woman in the kitchen because they found out I was gay... it was meant as a joke, and everyone laughed, but it did make me uncomfortable because suddenly it became a talking point” (Leah, lesbian)

“Just like laddish behaviour... very locker room kind of vibes... when I did come out, the jokes were quite distasteful and very sexual” (Alfie, queer)

The assumption that Leah “*must fancy every woman*” relies on a stereotypical and sexualised exaggeration of lesbian desire, positioning her sexuality as something unusual and predatory. Moreover, the idea that “*everyone laughed*” points to how humour, in this context, creates a sense of group cohesion precisely while simultaneously acting as a marker of exclusion and fixing Leah as its object. While heterosexuality remains unmarked and taken for granted, queerness becomes publicly discussable and available for ridicule. This mirrors Rubin’s (1984) concept of the “*charmed circle*” in which certain sexualities are positioned as natural, healthy and unremarkable while others are pushed to the perimeter, rendered strange, excessive, or highly sexualised. Within the kitchen cisgender heterosexual identities occupy the centre of that circle, they are unmarked and rarely commented upon, while queer identities are at the edges, publicly discussable, reducible to sexualised stereotypes,

and, as Leah's account illustrates, an object of ridicule. Humour, in this context operates as one of the primary ways this boundary is drawn and maintained.

The description of *“locker room kind of vibes”* situates these interactions within a broader workplace culture of masculinity, where sexualised, discriminatory language is normalised as part of everyday interaction. This speaks to the kitchen as a workplace, being highly masculinised and structured by ideals of toughness and aggression (Cano, 2019). Those able to participate in, tolerate, or deflect this form of banter were more easily recognised as fitting in, while those targeted by it were made to feel exposed and out of place. Read through a culture of heteronormativity, this dynamic illustrates how everyday banter helps secure heterosexual masculinity as the cultural standard in the kitchen against which others are judged.

Emotional Labour and Hierarchy

The burden of navigating this culture did not fall equally across the kitchen. For queer workers, the management of responses to this humour constituted a significant form of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Sharp et al. 2022). Participants frequently described managing their responses to such behaviour to maintain a sense of ease within the workplace and avoid conflict. One participant explained that they *“laughed it off at the time because [they were] junior and didn’t want to make it awkward”* (Jamie, non-binary and queer). Queer individuals within the kitchen are therefore not only navigating the physical and mental demands of kitchen work but also the emotional implications of being positioned within these interactions that they cannot easily challenge.

For junior staff in particular, the capacity to challenge inappropriate comments appeared constrained by the strict hierarchy of the kitchen, with jokes described as coming from the *“top-down”*. Challenging behaviour from senior staff carried professional risk that left most participants feeling unable to call out such behaviour. The work of navigating responses to and jokes around sexuality and gender identity becomes part of surviving the environment.

The interviews also make it clear that queer individuals within kitchens were navigating humour not just at the expense of their own identity, but also within a wider discriminatory culture. One participant explained that kitchen humour often included “*stereotypes or slightly edgy jokes*”, another likewise described there being “*definitely a lot of fatphobia*”, “*homophobia*”, and “*a bit of misogyny*” in the kitchen they worked in and recalled staff referring to a weekly curry night using a racist slur. These kinds of jokes shed light on how not only queerness but also difference more broadly are treated within the kitchen, as a source of ridicule. Humour therefore emerges as a practice through which inequalities within the kitchen are heightened, and discriminatory jokes and practices are normalised.

Alternative Queer Kitchen Cultures

While much of the data highlights experiences of exclusion and discrimination within a hierarchical heteronormative kitchen culture, not all participants described the workplace in these terms. Two participants highlighted workplaces that were markedly different: often calmer, more respectful and more open to the presence of queerness. This contrast is important, suggesting that the kitchen culture identified elsewhere in the data is neither inevitable nor universal and that a more inclusive future for the kitchen is possible. Kitchen culture and in turn, the experiences of queer chefs, is contingent, shaped by staffing, leadership and the everyday norms through which belonging is produced.

Pressure and Aggression

A significant perspective comes from Rhianna, a lesbian head chef, who had experienced a range of different types of kitchens. At the time of interview Rhianna was working in a kitchen that she described as having a different, more queer-friendly environment compared to kitchens she had experienced earlier in her career. When asked about the atmosphere of her current kitchen she described it as:

“Busy, but it’s warm [...] there’s still that pressure, but it doesn’t tip into aggression in the same ways I experienced when I was coming up.” (Rhianna, lesbian)

The kitchen Rhianna describes still has a sense of demand and pressure, the intensity and pace remain, but these conditions do not automatically translate into an environment of aggression. This provides an important contrast to other accounts in which pressure was often accompanied by, or used to excuse, shouting, intimidation and an atmosphere of hostility.

Nic, a junior chef working in a “predominantly alternative queer” venue, reinforced this distinction:

“It’s pretty, pretty, pretty busy, so, like, it can get stressful at times, but it’s only ever during, like, during service, it’s just it’s fast-paced, it happens, but there’s no, like, there’s nothing in terms of, like, no toxicity or stress outside of that.” (Nic, non-binary and pansexual)

What is different from other kitchens described is not the existence of stress but how it manifests itself. Nic’s workplace still involves the same emphasis on speed, which causes pressure during a demanding period of service. The difference is not the existence of stress, but the way it is socially organised. Pressure is in this kitchen situational, tied to service itself, rather than becoming the justification for a wider culture of aggression, hostility, or intimidation. This complicates an understanding of aggression as the natural extension of fast-paced culinary labour, suggesting that toxicity is not produced by pressure itself, but by the ways in which it is managed, interpreted and enacted within the kitchen. While pressure may be difficult to remove from kitchen life, due to the demands of service, toxicity is not an inevitable consequence of it.

Queerness as Ordinary

Another key difference between these kitchens and those highlighted by other participants is the position of queerness within the workplace culture. In other accounts queerness was often marked, scrutinised, or made into a point of ridicule, as

part of the perimeter of the 'charmed circle' within the kitchen (Rubin, 1984). An important aspect of the more inclusive kitchen that Nic describes is the ways in which everyday interactions informed an immediate feeling of belonging. In contrast to the experience of Alfie, for whom coming out led to "sexual and distasteful" jokes, Nic described a workplace in which queerness and questions around queer identity were treated as everyday practices:

"The owner asked in the interview how I identified, and that's like, because the other staff are queer, it's something that just kind of comes up, it kind of just comes up in conversations. Oh, like, hi, nice to meet you, what are your pronouns, etcetera, etcetera." (Nic, non-binary and pansexual)

Queerness is here positioned as ordinary as opposed to marginal; heterosexuality no longer constitutes the unmarked norm, and queerness is not pushed to the periphery as a source of ridicule (Rubin, 1984). Nic described how non-queer colleagues reacted with genuine curiosity and openness when they mentioned being pansexual, a response that stands in sharp contrast to the ridicule described by Alfie and Leah. The significance of this is not only an increased representation of queerness in the kitchen, but also the removal of cisgender heterosexuality as the unspoken condition of belonging.

Leadership and Hierarchy

Another key dimension of the more inclusive kitchen relates to hierarchy and leadership. For many other participants, hierarchy was closely tied to fear, intimidation and containment. Senior staff shaped the overall atmosphere of the room, often in ways that left junior queer workers feeling excluded and unable to challenge discriminatory behaviour. These alternative accounts suggest, however, that hierarchy in the kitchen can be inhabited differently.

Rhianna's place in the hierarchy of her current kitchen is illuminating here as her perspective comes from that of a head chef. She discussed her own queer identity as explicitly informing the kind of leader she wished to be:

“Being queer has made me so aware of what it means to feel out of place, or to feel watched, or like you have to edit yourself. I think that can be a common feeling for queer people. I feel because of that lived experience, I’m more attentive to how power works in everyday, subtle ways. I want the kitchen to feel demanding, because it is a demanding environment, but it shouldn’t feel humiliating” (Rhianna, lesbian)

Rhianna drew on her experience as a queer woman in the kitchen as the basis for a different approach to leadership. Her identity and past experiences actively inform how she understands and exercises hierarchy within the kitchen. This parallels Harris and Giuffre’s (2010) research on the experiences of female executive chefs which illustrated how women in positions of culinary authority develop alternative leadership styles rooted in care, collaboration and an awareness of how power operates as informed by their identities as women within the kitchen. Rhianna’s account, however, extends this further along another axis, suggesting that queer identity can cultivate a specific attentiveness to dynamics of exclusion and can inform a model of leadership sensitive to these dynamics.

Nic’s account, from the perspective of a more junior member of staff, similarly showcases this alternative possibility for hierarchy within the kitchen. When asked whether the inclusive culture came from leadership, Nic responded:

“All of it comes from the owner. That’s his whole plan, to be as inclusive as possible. He’s very open about it on social media, the website and to customers. It’s important that the sentiment is shared throughout, like management, to kitchen staff, to everyone” (Nic, non-binary and pansexual)

These comments suggest that alternative kitchen cultures are not necessarily defined by the absence of hierarchy but instead by a different way of inhabiting it. There is still a head chef, still a division of labour, and still the pressure of a busy service. What stands out is not the removal of authority but the different way this authority is enacted and experienced. Conflict does not linger beyond the immediate demands of service, and the hierarchy within the kitchen is not enforced through fear but instead through a mutual understanding and respect.

Future Possibilities

Taken together, these two accounts offer an important point of contrast. They suggest that the exclusionary kitchen culture experienced by other participants is neither structurally necessary nor culturally inevitable. Masculinised heteronormative kitchens are produced and upheld through everyday practices: through the ways authority is performed, through jokes and banter. What the accounts of Nic and Rhianna make clear is that this is not an inevitable fact of kitchen culture, and there is a possibility for a future, more inclusive environment. As Rhianna highlighted:

"Kitchens don't have to be cruel to be good. I think that's the biggest thing I'd like the industry to learn. Some of the best services I've worked have been in spaces where people respected each other, communicated well, and wanted everyone there to succeed. That shouldn't be unusual, but unfortunately it still is." (Rhianna, lesbian)

This framing challenges a pervasive idea of kitchen culture, the same logic that is behind the valorisation of suffering: that excellence requires harshness, and that there is only one 'right' way to be a chef (Burrow, Scott and Courpasson, 2022; Palmer, 2010). However, these alternative kitchens do not showcase a simple route to inclusivity. Rhianna's position as head chef and Nic's emphasis on the role of the owner show that more inclusive kitchens depend heavily on who holds power and how that power is exercised. Inclusive kitchens are therefore produced through changes in leadership, everyday norms, and the organisation of pressure, humour and hierarchy.

Conclusion

This research has explored how the experiences of queer chefs in professional kitchens in the UK are shaped by masculinised hierarchies and heteronormative kitchen cultures. In doing so, it has addressed a clear gap in existing scholarship on culinary labour. While previous research has shown the kitchen to be an intensely hierarchical and often gendered workplace, this research extends this understanding through centring the experiences of queer chefs, demonstrating how these structures are lived, negotiated, and at times, resisted in the name of more inclusive kitchens.

What emerges from the accounts of participants is that professional kitchens are structured through forms of power that can position heterosexual masculinity as the unmarked norm against which belonging is measured. Hierarchy within the kitchen operates as a lived and embodied system, shaping how queer chefs navigate an occupational culture that can feel exclusionary. For queer chefs, this can serve to normalise discriminatory behaviour against them, positioning opposition as being ‘unfit’ for kitchen life.

This research also sheds light on the role of humour in reproducing boundaries of belonging. Banter and joking, while serving as coping mechanisms for some in the high-pressure environment of the kitchen, also appeared to function as boundary-making practices. Through this practice, heterosexual masculinity became naturalised while queerness was rendered discussable, sexualised, or open to ridicule. Exclusion operates in the kitchen not only through overt acts of discrimination but also in everyday practices.

At the same time, this research has shown that such conditions are not an inevitable fact of kitchen life. The accounts of more inclusive kitchens demonstrate that pressure and intensity do not have to manifest as hostility or the exclusion of difference. In these environments, hierarchy remained present but took on an alternative form, enacted without reliance on a culture of fear or humiliation, and the demands and pressures of service remained but did not result in a toxic culture. The implications of this suggest that the conditions producing harm in professional kitchens, the silencing

of junior staff, the normalisation of aggressive behaviour, and the rendering of certain identities as objects of ridicule, can change.

There remains, however, some limitations of the study worth acknowledging. Only one participant, for example, occupied a senior position within the kitchen as a head chef, while the remaining participants occupied more junior roles, influencing the perspectives represented. Additionally, much of the sample consisted of individuals based in major urban areas, meaning the findings may not fully represent the experiences of queer chefs working in more rural areas, where the demographics of the kitchen may change. The sample also draws mostly on the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual chefs, with only two non-binary participants, meaning that the distinct experiences of trans and non-binary workers within the kitchen are only partially captured in this research.

These limitations showcase the opportunity for more varied and wide-ranging future research on kitchen cultures with specific attention to how the kitchen is experienced by marginalised communities. Future research could take a comparative approach to hierarchy, showing how the experiences of those at the top differ from those of more junior individuals and how that position shapes both the experience of exclusion and the capacity to challenge it. A sustained focus on trans workers specifically would also be a valuable direction, given the distinct forms of discrimination they may experience. Future research could also interrogate the racialised nature of the 'ideal chef' and how these norms are bound up with Western ideals of culinary prestige. Finally, a closer attention to geography and location would extend this work, exploring how the location of the kitchen may impact the conditions under which queer workers experience it.

In conclusion, this research has shown that the experiences of queer chefs are shaped by intersections of hierarchy, heteronormativity, and hegemonic masculinity through tools such as humour and aggression. Perhaps most importantly, this research has shown that this exclusion and discrimination is not inevitable or static, and that there is a capacity for a more inclusive future for professional kitchens.

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Appendix 1

Transcript of interview

Could you tell me a bit about your background and how you got into professional cooking?

Yeah of course. I didn't really grow up thinking that was what I'd like to do. I always enjoyed cooking when I was younger, mostly baking with my mum and things, but I never thought about it as career. I went to culinary school after doing a completely unrelated degree for a year and hating it, and I think that was the moment I realised I wanted something more practical and creative. After college I started in a fine dining place, which was... honestly a bit of a shock. Very strict, very precise, lots of pressure. Then after that I moved into more casual restaurants and pubs, which felt more relaxed socially but still intense in their own way. I've worked in a few different settings now and I think each one taught me something slightly different about kitchen culture.

Yeah, and could you tell me a bit more about what that first experience was like going into a professional kitchen?

Really overwhelming, to be honest. You go from learning techniques in school to suddenly being responsible for real service and real customers. I remember being surprised by how physical it is. You're moving constantly, carrying things, standing for hours. And the pace there's not much time to think once service starts. You're kind of expected to adapt to this intense environment really quickly. People don't necessarily explain things in detail because everyone's busy, so you sort of learn by watching and copying.

When you think about the kitchens you've worked in, how would you describe the overall culture or atmosphere?

I'd say it can be quite intense. I think as well like as a gay man you just get the vibe quickly, most kitchens you walk in, and you know it's going to be a certain kind of environment. The vibe is just very kind of straight, very macho.

Could you say a bit more about that atmosphere, where's that coming from?

I mean I think a lot of it comes kind of from the top, like kitchens can be such an intense place. I've had quite a lot of experience with head chefs who were really into the kind of 'boys club' thing. It can really feel like that sort of environment sometimes. Offensive jokes, misogynistic elements a lot the time, sexualised treatment of the girls who are working front of house, racism, just not a great environment if you're different in any way.

You said about it coming from the top down, how would you say different roles show up in the kitchen?

Yeah, I mean there's quite a strong hierarchy in the kitchen, in fine dining as well you've got all kinds of positions; sous chef, head chef, chef de partie. It's very clear, even when people pretend it isn't. You just know who's allowed to make decisions and who's expected to just follow instructions. I think as well hierarchy also shows up in who gets listened to. Someone senior can suggest something and everyone agrees, whereas if you're newer you might not feel confident speaking up. Sometimes it is helpful, like a strong division of labour, especially in a busy environment but it can also be not so helpful, especially when the person in power is not so nice.

Are there any specific moments that stand out to you within that experience?

Yeah, let me think...there was one time I suggested changing something small about plating because I thought it would be faster, and the chef sort of shut it down straight away. Not aggressively, just very firmly like "we do it this way." It wasn't a big deal, but it made me realise you definitely know your place. I mean in general in one place I worked in there was these set of guys who were all chefs and they were friends outside of work and stuff, and they were very scary, that wasn't a great experience at all. One of my managers would throw stuff around. He would be in a horrible mood constantly and always show it.

Wow, that does sound intense, you talked a bit earlier about kitchens being intense and busy environments, would you say they can be quite high stress?

Yeah, very very much. I think pressure is almost built into the job. You're racing against time constantly, tickets coming in, people waiting for food, trying not to make mistakes.

How do you think that stress manifests, during service and things?

Quite a lot of the time it means that people can get a bit more angry or short-tempered. When I was in my first restaurant that was a big culture shock, I mean they can be very harsh to you in school obviously, but the place I was working in had very high standards and so there was a lot of pressure there. There was a lot of shouting, I guess, or hitting stuff down. It's all very normalised. I mean obviously that's what chefs are kind of known for at the minute, like everyone's watched the bear [laughing], it's not that far from the truth.

How do people talk about that kind of stress?

It's a lot of humour honestly like laughing it off, that's not always a bad thing but it maybe does normalise it a bit. It's difficult because of the nature of the work I suppose long and unsociable hours. There's a culture where pushing through tiredness is normal. Long shifts, late nights, coming back the next day. People don't complain much because it's just seen as part of being a chef. There's not really much of a serious discussion about the working conditions or things like that.

If someone was struggling how would that be approached?

I guess it depends on the team. I'm sure some people would definitely rally round and help someone. But I think because there's this like ideal of toughness... I mean I can only really speak for myself, but I think looking back when I first started out and I was struggling I did find it hard to know what to do, I felt like maybe I just wasn't cut out for it at times. I'm lucky to have quite a good support system outside of work as well so I spoke to them about it, but I did feel like a bit of an outsider at times I suppose.

In terms of being an outsider, what do you think an 'insider' looks like, is there an image of an ideal chef?

Yeah, I think so. Fast, resilient, doesn't take criticism personally, doesn't show too much emotion. I think there's probably like a masculine connotation there, I think being gay as well doesn't necessarily fit that maybe, not how I am anyway.

If you're comfortable sharing, how do you think that identity has shaped your experiences within the industry?

Yeah... I mean there's been times where I've struggled. It can be hard to navigate; I don't usually mention my personal life straight away if I start in a new job. I wait and see what people are like first. I mean I have some friends at work, who work front of house and things, so I chat a bit to them about the guy I'm seeing, and I go out with them on nights out sometimes. I guess I do kind of watch my tone and things like I am aware sometimes of not appearing too gay, whatever that means.

That's difficult to be dealing with, policing yourself almost. Have you had any negative experiences in the kitchen as a result of being queer?

Yeah, I've had a few small things. Like other chefs making comments at my expense and things. I mean I kind of count myself lucky I've never had people really go off at me or anything, but I've definitely noticed some stares or little comments or things like that. I think though if I get the vibe that it's probably going to be that way then I don't really reveal too much of myself.

Do you think that's kind of changed over time or has it been quite a consistent theme in your career?

I mean there might have been a slight change, but I don't think as much as you would expect. I think I've gotten better at being more selective I guess, in where I'm working, trying to work out the vibes and read the room but it's still quite an underlying problem in the industry, the same with any kind of abusive language. There's a lot of outside talk of this reckoning, but honestly, I can't see that it's changed that much. Maybe it's situational, I'm sure there are kitchens that are more open out there, but it does still feel a bit of a long way off.

What would you say that ‘reckoning’ would look like in an ideal world, what needs to change?

Just a like a nicer, more inclusive environment, more open, less shouting, less macho. I think that will hopefully happen through an increased representation like I know if I was working in an environment where there was a senior chef who was queer, I’d like to think that would make me feel better and more comfortable. It’s not just about that though, I think we need to have serious conversations within the industry about a lot of aspects. There’s been a push recently towards more mental health and addiction awareness, because those are both issues, but we need more. I guess it’s reflective of society a whole in a way, like I shouldn’t have to worry about holding a guy’s hand, but I still do. I hope that as younger people are coming through who hopefully are more open there’ll be a changing of the guard and people will say this is enough.