

# Many top chefs started their careers later in life and after a chance event, research says

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Many top chefs started their careers later in life and often as a result of a chance event, new research says.

An analysis of the life stories of 30 chefs in world-renowned restaurants found that few had an early calling to their career, the British Academy of Management's annual conference in Birmingham heard today.

Professor Yehuda Baruch, of the Southampton Business School, UK, and Professor Tamim Elbasha, of Audencia Business School, France, analyzed in detail the social media activity and TV interviews of the 30 chefs.

Professor Baruch said they found that some wanted to be chefs from an early age, but that "more surprisingly, the majority of the other top chefs didn't initially see themselves in this industry.

"Unlike our expectations, only nine of 30 chefs had a career based on initial or early 'calling.'"

"By initial calling we mean that they got into the restoration business, as a cook, waiter or otherwise, early in their life with an intention to have a career in this field."

Some found out they were good at cooking by accident. Alexa Atala, the Brazilian chef who runs D.O.M. in São Paulo, rated the fourth best in the world by Restaurant magazine, signed up to cooking school in order to extend his visa when living in Europe.

Nancy Silverton, the American chef who won an Outstanding Chef award in 2014, and Enrique Olvera, the Mexican owner of Pujol, ranked 13th in the world by Restaurant magazine, began cooking well to impress their partners.

The researchers also found that the rise to the top for some was a result of a chance event. Massimo Bottura, the chef patron of Osteria Francescana, a three Michelin-Star restaurant in Modena, Italy, recalled

that his work became recognized after a visit from a food critic who had to stop to avoid heavy traffic.

"One night in April 2001, the most important food critic in Italy was driving from Milan to Florence, and there was an accident in Bologna, so there was a very long line. He decided to stop in Modena. He detoured and he had dinner in Osteria. Two days later, most important magazine, Espresso, came out with this [very favourable] article."

Dan Barber, the award-winning chef at the Blue Hill restaurant in Manhattan, bought an excessive quantity of asparagus by mistake, so decided to do a whole menu based on it, including asparagus ice cream.

"Two hours later, Jonathan Gold, the most important, respected restaurant reviewer in the country, walks in the door. I had no goddamn clue what the man thought of the meal until the article hit. He loved it. He defined us before we really knew who we were. He named us the new epitome of farm-to-table, a restaurant that was not shy about advertising a product that was at the height of its flavor."

Jordi Roca, the pastry chef of the [restaurant](#) El Celler de Can Roca in Girona, Spain, who won the inaugural World's Best Pastry Chef award from Restaurant magazine, was forced to take charge after the main chef broke his leg.

"The data demonstrate the important role of chance events in succeeding or increasing the success of these top chefs," said Professor Baruch.

The research also found that that the chefs all had in common a mastery of French haute-cuisine, but their world-class status was achieved by moving on to specialize in cooking dishes inspired by their own roots.

Professors Elbasha said the chefs had achieved prominence in a fiercely

competitive world. "Chance event can play a significant role in it, but can sometime be led by the individual, namely serendipity can be managed to a certain extent.

"Success is not limited to those who considered the aim of becoming a global celebrity as a calling, though this was the case for a significant minority of the participants."

Provided by British Academy of Management

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