

Women Butchers

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Wherever you look, cheap supermarket meat has made life hard for butchers. At the same time, a few younger people are taking much more of an interest in butchery. I shouldn't have been surprised that many of them are women, three of whom — Martina Bartolozzi, Sophie Minchilli and Olivia Potts — agreed to tell me how they become interested in butchery and what it meant to them.

Martina Bartolozzi: It was a family business. My stepfather is Dario Cecchini, who is a very well-known butcher — *He's a rock star* — Yes, yes. And he is an eighth generation butcher in the village of Panzano in Chianti in Tuscany. And I started working with him when I was still in high school at one of his restaurants, just like flipping burgers one summer.

Jeremy: From that start, eventually Martina took over Dario Cecchini's social media and communications, helping to burnish that rock star image. But she wanted more.

Martina: After about six years of this, I realised, you know, I talk meat all day long. I explain the ins and outs of meat to people who come and visit this tiny butcher shop from all over the world. But I've never gotten my hands dirty myself. Like, I talk theory, but I don't have any personal practice. And so I asked Dario if I could start learning how to carve meat.

Jeremy: Dario said. Yeah, okay, provided she did her other work too.

Martina: And so I would go in two hours early, put on my flower print Crocs, put on my chainmail apron and chainmail glove and a bunch of scarves and beanies and fleeces because it's cold in the butchering room, very cold. And I could learn how to carve meat for two hours and then, come my time, I would take those things off, put on my nice shirt, put on my nice shoes, and go back into the office.

Jeremy: Butcher woman number two is Sophie Minchilli, another half Italian, half American who also has a food business in the family. Her path to butchery was a little bit different.

Sophie Minchilli: I was having this life crisis which revolved around the consumption of meat. I was never into butchery. It was more it happened just by chance. So I was on holiday with my friends at the beach in Puglia. Beautiful beach, beautiful summer, and we met some boys and one of these boys happened to be a butcher. We became really good friends. So I thought, okay, I'm eating meat, but am I supposed to be eating meat? Would I ever kill an animal myself? Would I ever butcher an animal? I was having this whole crisis, met this boy who's a butcher, so I decided to just go ahead and ask him. Can I come work for you? Like as an intern for a summer? And in the beginning, he was a little hesitant. But then he said, why not?

Jeremy: And number three is Olivia Potts, whose article got me into the topic in the first place. She'd been a successful criminal barrister in London and loved it, but then decided to give that up in order to cook for other people and write about food.

Olivia Potts: So I wanted to just give myself a confidence boost, so that when I was talking about and writing about meat, I knew exactly what I was doing. I was very lucky. I lived in East London. I lived near Walthamstow, where there is a further education college which has its own butchery department, and they offered this course and I signed up for it maybe three times, and just before it was due to start, each time I get a text message saying, oh, it's been cancelled due to lack of interest.

And eventually one day I was in Walthamstow and thought, I'll just pop in and speak to them and find out if there's any point in me signing up to this again. And they basically said, no, no one's going for it, it's just you every time. It's just you trying to sign up for this course and that's not really viable. And then just before I was about to leave, they said, we'll just go get the butcher. We'll just bring him up to speak to you. And actually they did. I went down to him. I went down into the butchery stores and 25 minutes later had left, having signed up for a level two NVQ in butchery, which is, you know, a full training in full carcass butchery. And that was how I ended up there, through accident really more than design.

Jeremy: So three women, each of whom wanted to learn more about meat and butchery, which they did in very different ways. Sophie Minchilli's butcher friend kind of just dumped her in it.

Sophie: He decided one of my first jobs would be the chickens. So I had to go feed his chickens because he butchers his own chickens. So I would go feed these little chickens every morning. And I loved them. They loved me. And then finally one day he came up to me and he was like, okay, the time has come. Bruno or whoever ordered two chickens. So can you please go get them and bring them here?

And I looked at him with a very puzzled look, like, what do you mean, go get them and bring them? He was like, go kill them, clean them and bring them back to the butcher shop. And I wanted to be cool. So I was like, yeah, sure, I'll go do that right now.

So I went to the field where my my chickens were waiting for me. They thought I was going to feed them, and I tried to grab one. I couldn't do it. And I started crying. And this old man walked by the field, saw me, this weird girl, blonde girl from Rome, crying in the middle of this chicken field. And he asked me if I needed help and I said I desperately need help. So actually, this random old man taught me how to butcher a chicken. And that first time it was horrific. But the way he patiently taught me and told me like, this is how he had been doing it all his life, how his father had taught him, sort of changed my perspective on the whole experience.

Jeremy: This is actually a key point. Butchery is something that's passed on from person to person. It isn't something you can learn from books. Someone has to show you. For Martina Bartolozzi and Olivia Potts that teaching was a bit more formal.

Martina: I learned how to carve meat from the same person that actually taught Dario, our Maestro Orlando, who is now ... He is turning 84 in one month, and he still works at the butcher shop because it's his life's calling. And so he taught Dario. He taught me, and he taught all of the other people that worked with Dario. And it was a learn by practice, learn by doing, very much.

Olivia: In the old days in the UK we used to do butchery that would sort of give you multiple muscles in one joint. We, as a country, were very good at roasting and we used a lot of tied roasting joints and they would give you various different muscles. What we do now is

seam butchery, which means that you go along the line of the muscle as you're cutting it.

Martina: And it's kind of like, I don't know, like a puzzle, but reverse. It's all one. And through experience and practice that you start seeing all of the different parts, you start seeing all of the different muscle groups, and you learn how to separate them. And this is one of the reasons why it's not a job of strength necessarily, because when you have a sharp knife that works just right and you know where to place it, the meat just comes apart on its own, all of the different muscles. I mean, I don't know how graphic I can get — *as graphic as you like* — Okay, so you have say two pieces of muscle and inside, in between is the seam, you can cut on the top of the seam, and if you cut just right in two pieces of muscles, you can just pull it apart with your hands. And it goes like this, this little crackling noise. And it just opens, in a sense. And then from there, you know, you have these major muscles and then it's each different butcher's journey to decide how to cut it into smaller pieces, depending on the regional differences in the cuisine usually.

Olivia: And that is, I think, probably easier to cook. But more importantly, you end up with very, very little waste from the animal.

Sophie: I always wonder, like, don't people ask themselves like, okay, here's the steak or chicken breasts, where's all the rest? It used to be a whole animal. Where did it go?

Olivia: The waste that you get from the animal when you're doing it commercially, you know, with machines in preparing it for a supermarket consumer, there's a huge amount of wastage. It is not possible to industrialise seam butchery. That's not something that can be done by a machine. And it's not even something that can be done by someone in a factory using their hands on a conveyor belt. You know, it's not fast. It's not slow when you're a trained butcher, but it's not super fast work. But in terms of using the animal, both cost efficiency and having respect for the animal, it is a far, far better way to use it. And you end up with real nose to tail butchery.

Jeremy: So modern seam butchery takes a lot of skill and is much less wasteful. But that's not to say it's easy.

Olivia: It's a really, really physically intense job to be a butcher. You are dealing with blades all day long and saws and mincers, and there

are ... I mean, less so now because we have really good health and safety. But historically there have been loads and loads of injuries to butchers. It's a genuinely dangerous profession because it uses knives, and it's also very physically difficult in terms of hoiking around carcasses. You know they're heavy, they're big, they're cumbersome, they're unwieldy.

Martina: We learn how to hold the meat so that even a person my size can — or plenty smaller — can lift the meat off of the hook and then put it on the table. And so we would butcher our meat, our beef, horizontally on a table. But you can also learn how to butcher it just hanging off the hook so you don't have to move it at all.

Jeremy: Maybe English butchers have something to learn from Italians. But anyway, these women managed to learn the skills they needed to butcher animals. So what was their biggest problem?

Martina: Dealing with men. That's it. Dealing with men and with just anyone's preconceived notions about what a butcher should look like. Butchers come in all shapes and sizes and on all ends of the gender spectrum, and it's just about paying attention and learning a skill. It doesn't require any strength. It requires technique and smarts.

Olivia: Speaking generally, there is a belief that butchery is not a job for a woman because they are both not strong enough and they are not, um, I'm going to say, emotionally robust enough to deal with the blood and guts of the profession, which is obviously complete nonsense. We deal with some of the the hardest, both physically gruelling and also just gross bits of, of human and animal life. I think the nurse is a really good example, because it's this idea that women aren't physically strong enough. We're quite happy for women to be nurses and to work in care homes where they have to flip huge, huge people. You know, human men need to be turned over in the bed. But goodness me, if you ask them to handle half a lamb or something like that, you couldn't possibly manage that.

Sophie: I tried, I didn't like it and it was physically very challenging. I mean, horses and cows, they're big, very big, very heavy.

Jeremy: And that point that Martina Bartolozzi made about the preconceived notions of what a butcher should look like. Sophie Minchilli experienced some of that down in Puglia ... and it wasn't all bad.

Sophie: First of all, people, customers, would come in and then they would be sort of surprised to see this girl from Rome, this young girl working in the butcher in town. They thought it was kind of weird. Then after a while, all the men in town would line up and come bearing gifts for me. So I would actually go back home at the end of the day with some meats and also like crates of figs. They would make me cakes and they would just bring me so many different kinds of gifts. And it was ... yeah, maybe because I was a young, beautiful girl working in this butcher, but it was also their culture. It was just they were welcoming me into their world, their town.

Jeremy: And even though she found carcasses hard to deal with, the butcher did give Sophie Minchilli plenty of work.

Sophie: Smaller things like bombette, chickens. Yeah, they thought it would be more adapt for a woman.

Bombette, which is from this part of Puglia, and it's the pork's neck, so capocollo, filled with a variety of things. So the classic is like ham and cheese. And you roll them up into little packets, little bombs, — bombette — and grill them. So I would have a lot of fun actually making all these different kinds of bombette. And I found it very relaxing and therapeutic. And I feel like it was definitely more of a women's job that you need patience and care. And yes, nimble hands. Is that the word nimble?

Olivia: When I was researching the piece, I came up against a narrative that drove me up the wall, which was, women have something to bring to butcher shops because they are feminine and they are more able to talk to the consumers about cookery than men are. They are more approachable than men are, which is a pretty toxic narrative in and of itself, and hugely patronising to both the butcher and the consumer, I think.

A huge problem that you find with consumers going into butcher shops — or more accurately, not going into butcher shops — is that they are afraid that they don't know what they're asking for, and they're going to look like an idiot.

Martina: We try to inform people to help them understand then, how to handle this precious item that used to be a life.

Olivia: You need a butcher who is not going to make you feel like an idiot.

Martina: And so educating people about how to use meat, as well as many other things, is fundamental, so that the respect that we have for the meat and the respect that the person that wants to cook it has ... so it can stay alive, let's say. And so that we can give thanks in the best way to this animal that lost its life for our nourishment.

Olivia: I think you're going to find that across a huge number of butcher shops, from a wide variety of different types of butchers, I don't think that that is individual to women, but I do think that that opening the world up makes butchers generally think about how they are dealing with people.

Jeremy: So while butchers are the experts and may be getting better at helping people cook their meat properly, the fact remains that small local butcher shops are in decline.

Olivia: Where I live, there's no butcher near me. If I want meat, I have to either go quite far afield or to a supermarket where I'm unlikely to be buying it on the bone. It is likely to be packaged and chopped up for me.

There is a certain de-skilling of the general public, I think, simply because they don't have regular access to those types of meat. And if you don't have regular access and you don't have the skills, of course you don't want to buy that. You go and buy two packaged chicken breasts because you know exactly what to do with them.

Sophie: I feel like my generation is going back to ... maybe I shouldn't be buying chicken in a plastic box in a supermarket, but I should be looking for the small butcher in my neighbourhood or in my town, talking with him, finding out where the animals come from and just having a chat about meat and the way we eat meat. Basically going back to the way it used to be. I mean, meat wasn't this readily available always. It was something you had on special occasions. It was expensive.

Martina: Meat sold in supermarkets tends to be more convenient. But I wonder ... And, you know, at the same time, there is also a movement to eat more greens, to not eat as much meat. And I understand that. I am okay with eating less meat as long as we're

eating better quality meat. So at a supermarket, I would just avoid buying meat and try to support my local butcher and so maybe eat a little less because yes, it can be more expensive, but better quality. Better quality for the animal and better quality also for ourselves.

Jeremy: The women I spoke to who set out to learn about butchery aren't using their hard-won skills every day. But the experience has changed the way they think about meat, and they even miss butchery a bit.

Olivia: I do. I do still feel a little bit sad that I'm not standing in a butchery shop somewhere making use of it in that way. I personally could not have hacked it in a butcher shop and I know that, but I am sad not to be using those skills on a daily basis, because it is one of those jobs that you only get really, really good at it if you are using those muscles and those knives every single day.

Martina: I miss it very much. I miss doing, working with my hands. Create ... Transforming matter. That is very satisfying for me. I miss this first hand connection with food. And also, I miss my community in a sense. I miss arriving early at the butcher shop and donning our outfits and chit chatting with my 84 year old maestro and asking him for life advice and laughing together, that was also very much part of it. I miss it very much.

Olivia: I cater weddings and I tend to cater huge bits of meat slow roasted, really slowly, in fields, in makeshift kitchens that we set up for a couple of days at a time. So it's enabled me to feel confident around those kind of cuts of meat. But it also means that I can write about meat in a way that is reassuring to the amateur but enthusiastic cook. And I think that, I hope that that's a really valuable thing to be able to do, to say, look, this is how you do it. Don't be afraid. Just go for it.

Sophie: It definitely changed the way I eat and consume meat. I'm not a vegetarian, but I'll eat very little meat and only if I know exactly where it's coming from. I just ... I learned the importance of where your meat comes from and that, yeah, we are eating too much meat. In today's world, we don't need that much meat. And it's just a respect to the animal and the people who raise it and how they raise it. So it definitely changed my view of how I consume meat.

Jeremy: Of course, you don't have to learn to be a butcher to change your attitude to meat, but clearly it helps. Olivia Potts looked

at women butchers in quite some detail for the piece she wrote, and she sees definite signs of change.

Olivia: Okay, we have seen a real uptick in women, which is unsurprising, right? Because you can only be what you can see. And once we do start to see female leaders within the industry, women on the international butchery teams, women butchering meat in restaurants, all that kind of thing, you do start to see a sea change, I suppose.

Jeremy: Yeah, but a big question remains. Can an influx of women save local independent butcher shops?

Olivia: If we find that it is women who are interested in it, then yeah, they're going to be the future, but they're going to be the future because they are manpower. — *I can't help laughing about your unreconstructed use of manpower* — Well, we definitely need more staffing. The thing that ... I think that if we look at it that way, bringing women into the profession suddenly doubles the number of — or possibly more than doubles — the number of people you can look for, for beefing up (if you excuse that) the number of people we have working skilled jobs in butchers and it is that passing on of skill that will save the profession. And if that is being passed on to women, then yeah, it will be women who save the profession. But not because they're women.

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