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INTRODUCTION

I just finished watching the second season of the U.S. television series, *The Bear*. I wept through every episode. Everything about the show resonated with me—from its evocative cinematography to its stirring soundtrack. Watching *The Bear* opened the floodgates of memories from my past life as a chef; and now, I face the bittersweet reality that I am on the other side of that chapter. I never fully realized how deeply the culinary identity informed who I am. Having chosen a new career path in academia, I now grapple with a painful severance—"an amputation of the culinary self" (Bucher & Lee, 2023, p. 2)—a mourning of my chef identity.

One episode stood out. Titled: "Forks" (Season 2, Episode 7) (Russell et al., 2023), this installment centers on Richie, a character who has grappled with finding purpose and significance in his job at the restaurant throughout the series. Lost and searching for inspiration, Richie is directed to *stage* (pronounced "stahzh," this is essentially an unpaid internship or apprenticeship where one works for an establishment or chef in exchange for the chance to learn). He is sent to one of Chicago's most prestigious and elite fine-dining establishments in the hope that he will discover his *raison d'être*. Among the restaurant's elite service crew, Richie endures a series of hazing rituals, beginning with a week-long assignment of meticulously polishing forks before being allowed to undertake any other work. At first, he struggles to find meaning and purpose in these seemingly menial tasks. As the episode progresses, we see him gradually changing and evolving. He wakes up a little earlier each day, feeling a little more prepared and determined. His attire changes from stained, sloppy T-shirts and jeans to suavely pressed suits and Windsor-knotted neckties. Ritchie drives off into his newfound purpose to Taylor Swift's *Love Story* as the credits roll at the end of the episode.

Richie's realization resonates with me as an individual who *used to have* a purpose as a chef. Having lived a twenty-five-year career in the culinary industry, I strangely find myself today on the opposite side of Richie's realization. Richie has a newfound purpose; I, on the other hand, have recently let go of mine. I cannot help but wonder how many other chef practitioners-turned-scholars have felt and undergone the same identity fracture? How many chefs, food and beverage professionals, managers, and practitioners of the culinary craft feel the same sense of longing and "amputation" after turning to academia?

As I pondered on these questions, I came across the *pracademic*. The term "pracademic" constitutes the joining of the terms "practitioner" and "academic" into one word that can be used as both a noun and adjective (Hollweck et al., 2021). The phenomenon of a "pracademic" encompasses a unique blend of academic rigor and practical experience positioned at the intersection of theory and practice (Marcus, 2023). This dual role enables pracademics to bridge the often-distinct worlds of academia and professional practice, facilitating a dynamic exchange of knowledge, insights, and practical applications. These individuals exist in the liminal space between theory and practice, which as Friesen (2022) describes, is a space to be occupied, not simply bridged over. In this article, I explore a group of pracademics pivotal to the hospitality academy: chefs.

The transition from being a culinary professional to becoming an academic can be a bewildering experience. Many chefs find themselves compelled to set aside their culinary expertise to navigate an environment dominated by academic credentialism and rigid formalities (Abidin & Basar, 2024; Bucher & Lee, 2023; Lynch, 2024; Pittman, 2024; Woodhouse, 2024). In this article, I explore the ways chef pracademics navigate the neoliberal academic system—a system characterized by the "publish or perish" mantra, that values corporate metrics over genuine educational impact, and self-interest over community interests (Benjamin et al., 2024; Lee & Benjamin, 2023).

RESEARCH METHODS

As an attempt to make sense of my experience coming to academia, I embraced what Lee (2025) describes as "living qualitatively"—a process of getting lost, to be found, only to be lost again—and sought into the lives of three established chef pracademics. I approach this research from an interpretivist position, adopting an autoethnographic methodology (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography seeks to produce meaning that does not come from maintaining a rigid dichotomy between art and science, or subjective and objective interpretation. Rather, it is a form of inquiry situated along a continuum of practices, which overlaps art and science by analyzing the self (auto) along with the culture (ethno) (Ellis, 2004). The strengths of this methodology lie in the ability it gives the researcher to analyze personal experiences and tie them to cultural and social phenomena.

My sample of participants were chosen purposefully, as each participant had made the transition into academia after a full industry career where they had all worked for over a decade. Each chef pracademic had also obtained tenure at R1 institutions in the U.S. and currently ranks as either a full or associate professor (see Table 1). I engaged in three interviews with each participant. Each interview took place on the video conferencing software Zoom, and lasted on average 60 minutes, with some conversations spanning into several hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, with each participant answering a series of semi-structured questions. These interviews took place over the course of three months.

Name (Pseudonyms)	Position (Current)	Industry Experience (Number of years)	Academic Experience (Number of years)
Carol	Full Professor	20	15
Kyle	Full Professor	23	29
Charles	Associate Professor	29	16

Table 1. Participant profiles.

In the sections to come, I portray one key theme that emerged from a preliminary round of qualitative analysis: "Kitchen people" coming through the "back door," a discussion about how each participant arrived at their original posts in hospitality education.

"Kitchen people" coming through the "back door"

> I definitely came into academia through the back door … After working for many years in country clubs and private clubs, I was getting really burned out … I had a family, I was in my thirties, and I found that I had a different patience for education that I didn't have when I was eighteen. I was much better at it, much more involved in it, much more interested in it. (Charles)

I begin with Charles' story: a tenured chef pracademic whose journey into academia began with little to no structured plan but through an opportunity born out of frustration and necessity. Charles was initially hired at the university in 1998. He had neither a PhD nor master's degree to his name, yet he held a joint role as a clinical professor, teaching culinary courses in the school of hospitality, and as a special events chef who catered

specifically for the president of the university. Charles had a unique entry into the university walls; he called this entryway "the back door."

The "back door" represents an unconventional path into academia, one that circumvents the traditional credential-based hiring model in favor of fulfilling a specialized need within a hiring department. In Charles' case, he solved an operational issue for the hospitality department, as culinary instructors—like quality cooks—are hard to come by. The presence of a "back door" also implies that there is a preferred, more conventional and formal "front door" which, in academia, admits a candidate earning a master's or doctoral degree prior to securing a faculty role at the university. For those without the "credential keys" to the front entryway, the back door becomes their next best option.

For Charles, the front door not only barred him from attaining a formal faculty role, but admission into a master's degree program. When Charles wanted to pursue a master's degree in hospitality, his culinary arts credentials came under heavy scrutiny. Graduate programs simply did not know how to evaluate or transfer his culinary credits for matriculation. As Charles recalls,

> I tried to apply as a non-traditional student, and what I found very quickly was they would love to have me, but they didn't know what to do with my culinary school credits. How do you transfer credits for ice carving or *garde manger* to a traditional university? Then, suddenly, I'm [working] in a university where they were willing to make exceptions to the rules for transferring credits.

While there is one front door to enter through, various forms of back door entry are common amongst fellow pracademics involved in my inquiry. Even with the necessary formal credentials of a doctorate, severe biases against culinarians and their legitimacy in academic roles persist. The front door remains shut to these individuals, even when they possess the necessary "doctoral key."

Take Kyle, for example. Kyle realized he wanted to step out of operations and into teaching while running a university foodservice operation and began pursuing a master's degree. Upon completion, he found a job at a neighboring university teaching full-time, whilst simultaneously beginning his PhD program. After completing his course work, Kyle was able to join the faculty of a large hospitality program in a non-tenure track position—even before completing his degree. Once the PhD was completed and the doctoral key obtained, he was able to step through the front door to access a tenure track position, against the advice of his department head:

> He told me, "You should just stay on the non-tenure track line and not go tenure track because you kitchen people don't make the transition well." So, I told him, look, I didn't get my PhD from the number one ranked PhD program in the country, and the toughest person in hospitality [his academic advisor] just to stay on a non-tenure track. So, he said, ok, *but it's your funeral.*

Kyle is not alone in this experience. Carol entered academia later in life after leaving an illustrious twenty-year career in the industry. She describes her back door entry as a "break in." She had nearly the same experience as Kyle when applying for the tenure track position:

> I came to the interview, and he said, "I know you're here to get the tenure track line but I'm going to offer you the instructor line instead." And I said to him, I did not fly all the way over here for that, and if that's what you're going to offer me, I just won't be here. So, he said, alright I'll give you the tenure line […] They didn't think I was going to make it. I was outwardly told *not to get too comfortable* because people didn't believe that I was going to make it past my three-year tenure evaluation.

The phrases, "you kitchen people don't make the transition well" and to "not … get too comfortable" are clear gestures of the prevailing neoliberal structures that shape our hospitality field, ones that reinforce exclusivity through credentialism and "preferred" career trajectories. The derogatory phrases assign culinarians a monolithic identity—one that is hands-on, vocational, and incompatible with the intellectual and research demands of tenure-

track positions. The phrases reflect a wider and less overt prejudice that discourages culinary professionals from attempting to move into tenure-track positions. It implies that a rigid academic hierarchy exists, where chefs are seen as secondary outsiders expected to remain in teaching-focused or adjunct roles, rather than engaging in intellectual exchange and research.

With the front door shut, the back door for these chef pracademics was the only way into tenure-track research roles. For Charles, the back door opened serendipitously, and for Kyle and Carol, it came with additional discriminatory consequences. Either way, the common denominator remains: they resolved to use the back door because the front was not an option for them. Fortunately for Charles, his culinary skills and professional demeanor prevailed, earning him the social capital to obtain his advanced degrees and eventually a tenure-track role. Yet for Kyle and Carol, their culinarian identities continued to expose them to prejudices against mere "kitchen people." Even after they had a PhD in hand, the biases against their vocational expertise were obvious to scrutiny. They still had to fight for their own legitimacy within the institutional walls. The back door, while granting access, served also as a constant reminder that they were never welcomed in the first place. A fracturing of the self emerged as they wrestled with their identities—no longer part of the kitchen yet never fully accepted as scholars—leaving them in a liminal space where their worth was persistently questioned.

DISCUSSION

The voices of the chef pracademics reveal a shared narrative of fracture, adaptation, and resilience. Their journeys into academia were not linear; but were shaped by necessity, serendipity, and a desire to teach. Their experiences speak to the tensions of belonging, of being both insiders and outsiders in institutions that demand research productivity while depending on practical experience to sustain programs.

Charles, Kyle, and Carol's stories illustrate how traditional academic pathways were not designed with chef pracademics in mind. The "front door" of academia was inaccessible to these chefs, forcing them to seek entry through alternative routes, often in teaching-focused roles that did not initially require a PhD. Yet, even after earning the "doctoral key," these chef pracademics continued to face institutional skepticism. The comment, "you kitchen people don't make the transition well," serves as a stark reminder of how culinary expertise is often undervalued in scholarly spaces.

For many chef pracademics, the reality of being seen as "kitchen people" means they are often assigned to manage laborious culinary lab courses and cater for departmental events, while meeting research expectations. The academic system, while eager to utilize industry experience, remains hesitant to fully accept chef pracademics as scholars. From managing kitchen operations to coordinating events, their workload is both physically and mentally exhausting. Yet, much of this work remains invisible within academic evaluation systems. This balancing act of physical and intellectual labor reflects the broader issue of how academic institutions reward work, with research output prioritized and hands-on culinary instruction seemingly undervalued. These experiences of chef pracademics reinforce the sense of being caught in a liminal space, where they are deeply connected to their culinary identities yet forced to constantly prove their legitimacy in academia. The result is a fracturing of self, a rupture between who they were as chefs and the expectations and requirements of scholars.

Despite the challenges, the experiences shared here are not just about struggle; they are about transformation. While chef pracademics may enter through the back door, their presence challenges the rigid structures of academia, pushing institutions to reconsider the value of applied knowledge. This study is one of the first to document the lived experiences of chef pracademics. Its findings highlight the need for a more inclusive academic culture—one that transcends the rigidity of conventional tenure track systems in the U.S., and values multiple forms of expertise that serves the academic community.

FINAL REMARKS

When tending to our emotions, the award-winning Harvard Medical School psychologist Susan David (2016) underscores the significance of properly labeling our feelings—specifically those of unhappiness. I soon came to realize that my negative emotions associated with watching *The Bear* went beyond mere sadness. The title of "chef" is intertwined with my identity, and the mere thought of letting go of that title felt like abandoning a significant part of myself. The decision to hang up the apron and embark on a PhD journey brought about a complex mix of emotions, including *disappointment*, *displacement*, and *longing*—emotions that resonate with people who, like me, have had to transition away from identities that have long defined their lives (Shepherd, 2003). When I properly identified these emotions, I understood why this loss of identity can be described as an "amputation" (Bucher & Lee, 2023, p. 2). Joining academia after having had an already illustrious career, and having my expertise treated as "lesser than" and "lower tier," conjured a festering pain within me that *The Bear* brought to fruition.

Today, I find myself "showing up" and "stepping out" from these emotions (David, 2016). Having inquired into them, spending months pinpointing, critiquing, and listening to my emotions as data, I have started to realize that there is also a sense of relief to move on from the restaurant industry. I have not left my culinary identity behind, but rather I am evolving it. To overcome these feelings of disappointment, displacement, and longing, I must walk my *why* and move on into a new career. By obtaining a PhD and embracing my aspirations of becoming a chef pracademic in my own right, I might just carve out a new chapter of my life story.

Richie's journey in *The Bear* is one of self-discovery, of finding clarity and purpose as part of his *becoming*. In contrast, the chef pracademics in this study navigate an ongoing rupture, a process of reassembling their identities in a system that often does not fully see or appreciate them. Yet, through their stories, a new narrative emerges, one that does not view their past culinary careers as something to be left behind, but rather as an integral part of who they are as educators and scholars.

As I reflect on my own journey, I realize that this inquiry has also been a process of finding fragments of myself within the stories of others. The rupture of my identity is not unique, and in these shared experiences I find empathy, power, and community. I see now that the way forward is not in severing my culinary identity from the rest of myself but embracing, leveraging, and appreciating it as a part of becoming a chef *and* a scholar, or a chef pracademic.

Shawn Bucher is an entrepreneur and chef-turned-scholar, with over 25 years of industry experience. His research interests include chefs, foodservice operations, business strategy, and entrepreneurship. As a current consultant, researcher, and the father of four kids, his life has very few dull moments.

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