

scope

Contemporary Research Topics

art & design 29:
Hospitality & Tourism
July 2025

Opinion Piece

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1029005>

CHALLENGING THE LOGIC OF “SHE’LL BE RIGHT”:
FOSTERING WELL-BEING WITHIN
PROFESSIONAL KITCHENS

Juliane Tautz

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

CC-BY the authors.

© illustrations: the artists or other copyright owners or as indicated.

CHALLENGING THE LOGIC OF “SHE’LL BE RIGHT”: FOSTERING WELL-BEING WITHIN PROFESSIONAL KITCHENS

Juliane Tautz

Picture this: A young chef had just finished her traineeship and stepped into the chaos of a bustling professional kitchen, eager to prove herself. She was the only female in a team of 12, with a head chef who was under immense pressure after just having opened a new restaurant. The clatter of pans, the sizzle of oil, the rapid-fire calls for service: it was a symphony that fuelled her dreams. After an exhausting 70-hour week, with aching feet and a mind that was a fog of exhaustion, she found herself back on the grill. Under immense pressure, working through the stress of hundreds of orders each night, she made her first mistake, and a meal was sent back.

No big deal, it was fixed. She brushed it off, pushed forward, and the night went on. But then came the second mistake. This time, it was met with sharp glares, muttered insults, and the unmistakable disdain of her head chef and the kitchen staff. “What is she even doing here?” The words hung in the air, unspoken but felt. Her hands trembled, her stomach churned, but she clenched her jaw and told herself she couldn’t break. Not here. Not now. She could feel emotions taking over her body but was trying her hardest to stay calm. Then the third dish was returned.

What followed was a public explosion of rage from her head chef, a torrent of expletives and humiliation that echoed through the kitchen, telling her to leave and never to come back. In that moment, as she walked out of the kitchen in tears, she could feel the eyes of every chef burning into her back. Shame consumed her. Her mind screamed that she wasn’t good enough, that she never had been.

She collapsed onto a crate outside, next to the rubbish skip, her body shaking, her dreams unravelling. Why had she ever thought she could do this? Why had she chosen to be a chef? But before she could catch her breath, the kitchen door slammed open. Her head chef, the man whose approval she had been chasing, whose respect she had been starving for, stormed out. His words were sharp, laced with the same disrespect, demanding she come back inside. He expected her to ignore the emotional toll and continue the shift as if nothing had happened.

And so, she wiped her tears away, stood on unsteady legs, and stepped back into the fire, like a good soldier ...

This story really happened, and it happened to me. It showcases the fact that the hospitality industry, an industry that I love, had been slowly breaking me, and countless others like me. It highlights a systemic issue within the hospitality industry, a culture where long hours are glorified, and mental health is ignored (Robinson et al., 2022). My story is not isolated. It reflects practices unfortunately found in numerous professional kitchens around the globe (Barton, 2017; Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou, 2017; Ram, 2018). This is a culture that too often dismisses emotional and mental well-being for the sake of speed, efficiency, and perfection.

The hospitality industry, long celebrated for its resilience and camaraderie, is also notorious for its unsustainable work culture (Williamson & Rasmussen, 2022). The “She’ll be right” mentality, a phrase embedded in Australian and New Zealand cultural lexicons, has often justified long hours, high stress, and a disregard for hauora (personal well-being) in the hospitality industry. However, as the industry grapples with staff shortages, burnout, and declining mental health (Robinson et al., 2023) it is evident that “she,” in fact, is NOT “right.” Change is necessary.

From my own experience as a chef and now as a hospitality educator, I have seen how deeply ingrained these unhealthy work practices are. Many of my students have shared similar stories of overwhelming pressure, mental strain, and burnout. The sad bottom line is, that the suicide rate among female chefs is nearly four times higher than the suicide rate of females in all other occupations (Burnett et al., 2022). Furthermore, the New Zealand Union of Students’ Associations’ report on student mental health in Aotearoa suggests that mental health concerns are prevalent among all of New Zealand’s students (New Zealand Union of Students’ Associations, 2017). These challenges may be exacerbated when they enter the demanding environment of the hospitality industry. I found myself directing learners to hauora and mental health services too often, watching them struggle under the weight of these compounding pressures.

Traditional culinary arts practices and workplace cultures are not sustainable, nor are they healthy (Bloisi & Hoel, 2008). A recent New Zealand and Australian study has shown that 25 percent of hospitality workers are working more than 52 hours per week (Robinson et al., 2023). Another study suggests that about 30 percent of workers are not getting paid for those additional hours (Williamson & Rasmussen, 2022). It is now evident that the hospitality industry cannot continue on this path as the industry struggles to attract staff and retain them. In a review of the employment conditions in New Zealand’s tourism and hospitality sector, 33.7 percent of respondents said that they were thinking of leaving the sector and 45.1 percent did not want, or were unsure about having, a long-term career in tourism or hospitality (Williamson & Rasmussen, 2022). The practices of the industry need to change, and central to this is making the workers’ well-being a priority.

For too long, the “She’ll be right” mindset has dominated hospitality, reinforcing an unsustainable and often harmful culture. By redefining leadership, reshaping education, and shifting industry norms, the hospitality sector can move toward a future where chefs and hospitality professionals are not only skilled and efficient but also healthy, supported, and fulfilled. As part of the research for my master’s thesis, *She’ll Be Right—Culture Change Through the Lens of Redeveloping Culinary Management and Leadership*, I created a series of podcasts with New Zealand community and culinary leaders discussing well-being in the industry. The aim of these podcasts is to unpack the problem of disregarding well-being in hospitality and discuss potential positive ways forward.

Episode 1 ‘She’ll be right – Hauora and well-being’

In episode one, I talk with Pete Rees, the Managing Director of Te Ara Mahi. He discusses hauora and well-being in the context of his work with individuals facing mental health challenges and reintegrating them into workplaces across New Zealand.

Episode 2 ‘She’ll be right – Hauora in education’

In episode two, I talk with Shane Yardley, a senior culinary academic from Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology. Shane and I explore the crucial role that formal education plays in fostering awareness and practices related to hauora among future hospitality professionals.

Episode 3 ‘She’ll be right – Hauora in the industry’

Finally, in episode three, I talk with Debbie Crompton, a chef with over 30 years’ experience who has worked in numerous high-profile New Zealand resorts and luxury lodges. Debbie shares her lived experiences in the industry, linking them to bicultural frameworks and discussing the realities of well-being (or lack thereof) within her past and current kitchen environments.

These podcasts provide a deeper understanding of well-being within our communities. They contain valuable insights into positive pathways for the hospitality industry to become healthier, supported, and fulfilling for its professionals.

Juliane Tautz (ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9979-6755>) migrated from Germany to New Zealand in 2007 and worked as a chef until 2017. She then transitioned into education, teaching hospitality in secondary schools nationwide. Since 2022, she has lectured in the Bachelor of Culinary Arts at Otago Polytechnic. Her master's studies have advanced her professional practice in sustainable culinary leadership.

REFERENCES

- Barton, S. A. (2017). At what price passion? *Food and Foodways*, 25(4), 332–343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2017.1391024>
- Bloisi, W., & Hoel, H. (2008). Abusive work practices and bullying among chefs: A review of the literature. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 27(4), 649–656. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2007.09.001>
- Burnett, A. C., Wong, Q., Rheinberger, D., Zeritis, S., & Torok, M. H. (2022). Suicide among hospitality workers in Australia, 2006–2017. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 57, 1039–1047. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-022-02229-7>
- Giousmpasoglou, C., & Marinakou, E. (2017). Occupational identity and culture: The case of Michelin-starred chefs. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-02-2016-0071>
- Julchen786. (2024, 18 September). 'She'll be right' Episode 1 Hauora and well-being [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WQq-Mv70w0>
- Julchen786. (2024, 18 September). 'She'll be right' Episode 2 Hauora in education [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4sp1X0Fh0o>
- Julchen786. (2024, 18 September). 'She'll be right' Episode 3 Hauora in the industry [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GR-ZLe5zH8>
- New Zealand Union of Students' Associations. (2017). *Kei te pai? Report on Student Mental Health in Aotearoa*.
- Ram, Y. (2018). Hostility or hospitality? A review on violence, bullying and sexual harassment in the tourism and hospitality industry. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 21, 760–774. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2015.1064364>
- Robinson, R. N., Brenner, M., Mooney, S., Doan, T., Steffens, N., & Lodge, J. (2023). *The mental health and well-being of chefs in commercial kitchens: An Australasian study*. Auckland University of Technology. <https://doi.org/10.24135/10292/17072>
- Robinson, R. N., Oren, O., & Riordan, T. (2022, September 5). *Serving up a fair go? Surfacing cultural issues in hospitality employment*. University of Queensland. <https://business.uq.edu.au/files/82074/Fair-Go-Surfacing-cultural-issues-hospitality-employment.pdf>
- Williamson, D., & Rasmussen, E. (2022). *Voices from the front line - A research report on tourism and hospitality employment conditions in New Zealand*. New Zealand Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/assets/research-report-tourism-hospitality-conditions-nz.pdf>