

Bernadette Shanahan-Haas Is Helping Women in the Baking Industry Cook Up Career Success

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Written by
STAFF



When Bernadette Shanahan-Haas stepped into the executive director role at the Retail Bakers of America more than a decade ago, the trade association, she says, was struggling.

"They literally said to me, 'You can either figure out a way to close the doors or to make this a job,'" Shanahan-Haas says. "Now, 10-plus years later, we've got investments, a really strong bank account, strong membership and tons of events."

With a membership that includes doughnut and bagel shops, suppliers, and full-line, wholesale, supermarket and other bakeries, RBA today provides several training, certification, networking and other resources to encourage bakers' professional growth and help baking businesses excel.

Reset the Table recently spoke with Shanahan-Haas about the current state of the bakery sector and the mindset that may help women who work in it thrive.

How did you initially become involved in the industry?

My true first exposure to the industry was probably in college. I worked as a waitress and actually was let go because somebody ordered liver and onions, and I said, "Ew."

I have had a connection to my community bakery for so long; she [the owner] is actually the person who put me in touch with the RBA. I love the idea of helping small businesses. Truly, that's been my passion — taking a small organization and building it up. Having that connection with my bakery, I already had a love for the industry.

One of the previous executive director positions you held was with the Professional Women's Network, a nonprofit organization that helps businesswomen develop their careers. Did that help prepare you in any way for this role?

This industry, as much as I love it, used to be — and in some ways still is — an older white gentlemen's club. That experience with the Women's Network is the most important aspect of a lot of things I do — because it's all about boosting each other up. We are strong leaders and should be seen as such. We shouldn't be overlooked because we're women, we're young or whatever the excuse might be.

A lot of the industry is women-run bakeries; they're breaking glass ceilings all over the place right now. I really feel we're molding it a different way than it used to be.

When I first started at the RBA, I worked with this gentleman who volunteered and made our certification program very stodgy. Not a lot of people passed, and I thought, "That's ridiculous. There's no reason why we shouldn't teach what they need so they can [pass]."

He had a whole binder of information — formulas, how they tested and rubrics — and he literally wouldn't give it to me. I just thought, "Well, fine, I'll do it on my own." Now our certification programs are amazing. We have video libraries of education; judges all over the country; our first three exams in 2024 are already sold out.

I didn't cower in a corner because this gentleman wouldn't give me his notes. I want everybody to pass. We're building a strong industry.

Do you have any advice for women who are hoping to enter the professional association side of the foodservice sector?

Walk into it like you own it. Then there's no sense of "I don't belong at this table."

Don't be afraid to fail. It's gonna happen. Fail fast and move on. You're not going to go out of business because you tried a croissant; you're not going to fail as an association director because you tried an event and it didn't work.

You take the data, learn from it and move on. We're all under this crazy assumption sometimes that if I fail, I'm out. That is not the case.

What's the biggest challenge you've faced working in this industry?

This past year, bakers have had so many challenges. The cost of goods has gone up ridiculously. [A] small business is now paying almost double — sometimes triple, sometimes quadruple — the amount [for] custom goods.

We've had to educate customers [that] they're getting the value of an amazing product in the end.

What has being a woman and the executive director of a professional association in the foodservice industry meant to you?

I'm very proud of it. I am beaming with pride just with what we've done and built.

There are so many successes in that — and not just bank accounts. We have such a strong board of directors because we all work together; a strong certification program; we do so much education because we want the next generation to learn the right things from professionals all across the country. It's way more than just numbers on paper.

There have been some conversations recently around the term "badass" and how its connotations suggest women need to act masculine to succeed. What are your thoughts on that notion?

I 100% agree. I do business like a man. I will make tough decisions if they need to be made; I will do the things that need to get done. I hate that, ever since I started my career, I've had to say that I do business like a man — but it's the truth.

I am not afraid to be a leader. I am not afraid to be a badass. That is a mentality women need.

Do you have any other thoughts to share with female professionals in the industry — or any advice you'd give to young women who are just starting out to position themselves for career success?

Especially in the food industry, you don't always have to know everything. There are so many associations in our industry; there's so much education out there.

My husband always teases me that I can't bake to save my life — that's the [most] ironic part about my job. But I can run a business. I can make sure our members are happy. I wasn't afraid to take a job in an industry I didn't know because I knew I had the capability of learning.

[And] help your fellow ladies out. We always say at the RBA, if you're in Chicago, your competition is not the bakery in Sacramento. So help each other — [discuss] how did you do that? How did that work for you? And, especially in the association space, don't be afraid to voice your opinion or put new ideas out there.



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