



The Role of Sustainability Practices in The Success of World-Famous Chefs

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Abstract

The critical roles of chefs in restaurants and their growing global influence place them in an increasingly important position regarding sustainability. Chefs are taking responsibility for sustainability issue and providing significant support for this purpose through their culinary practices. Thus, a significant relationship is established between chefs and sustainability from the chefs' perspective. This study aims to clarify the position of sustainability practices in the success of chefs by looking at the relationship between chefs and sustainability from the sustainability perspective as other side. For this purpose, the autobiographical documentary series *Chef's Table Legends*, broadcasted on Netflix platform, is analyzed using descriptive analysis. This study indicates that the interaction between professional success and sustainable practices can be mutual. It demonstrates that sustainability practices can have a significant standing in chefs' professional success, and the amount of successes can increase and deepen the commitment to sustainable practices. Analysis of the success processes achieved by chefs can be a guide for more functional use of sustainable practices in commercial kitchens.

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INTRODUCTION

Food systems are one of the main drivers of global environmental change (Pereira et al., 2019), and restaurants are at the center of food systems, at the point where producers and consumers meet (Lamy et al., 2025). There are numerous calls from international organizations for restaurants to support sustainability goals (Jones et al., 2025). Chefs, at the center of restaurants, play critical roles in creating sustainable food systems through their culinary practices and menus (Lamy et al., 2025). Thus, a strong relationship emerges between chefs and sustainability.

McBride and Flore (2019) highlight the changing roles of chefs in the 21st century, emphasizing that chefs are no longer simply cooks. Chefs are now defined as those who express their opinions and take a stand on social, economic, cultural, and political issues, as trusted figures of change and innovation, and as representatives of sustainability (McBride and Flore, 2019). Chefs are often described as experts and opinion leaders who strive to incorporate sustainability-related practices into their kitchens, but in reality, sustainable practices complicate chefs' daily practices (Hilton, 2023; Leggett et al., 2021). Against this backdrop of volatility and challenges, the question of whether chefs incorporate sustainability-related practices into their careers is becoming a significant research topic.

The relationship between chefs and sustainability is explored from a wide variety of perspectives, particularly regarding the role of chefs in sustainability. However, the role of sustainability in chefs' professional success is a significant gap in the literature. The role of sustainability practices in chefs' success and their contribution to professional achievement should be investigated. This would reveal whether the relationship between chefs and sustainability is mutual. Therefore, this study focuses on the role of sustainability concepts and practices in the professional success of chefs, investigating the position of sustainability in the achievements of internationally successful and globally recognized award-winning chefs. For this purpose, *Chef's Table Legends*, an autobiographical documentary series on Netflix platform, was analyzed using descriptive analysis.

Conceptual Framework

Sustainability, Sustainable Development Goals, and Sustainability Elements

Sustainability was defined in 1987 by the United Nations Brundtland Commission as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, n.d.). In 2015, world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aiming to address global challenges holistically.

The 2030 Agenda serves as a roadmap for protecting the planet, combating inequalities, and ending poverty. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are the cornerstones of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, n.d.). The SDGs emphasize that any action taken in one area will impact not only that area but also others (Wang and Ko, 2024). While these goals aim to leave no one behind, they also offer practical solutions to eliminate the causes of conflict, human rights violations, and environmental and climate degradation (United Nations, n.d.).

The United Nations specifically emphasizes the three fundamental elements of sustainable development: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection. These elements are interconnected and critical to the well-being of both individuals and societies (United Nations, n.d.). Defining the relationships between these three elements has led to the emergence of three interconnected conceptual areas of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental (Gedik, 2020).

Environmental sustainability takes shape within the triangle of air, land, and sea, encompassing issues such as biodiversity, soil and water quality, atmospheric structure and components, climate conditions, ocean life, and ecosystems, which are crucial for the survival of all living things (Cömertler and Cömertler, 2021). This dimension also emphasizes the need to minimize the impacts of human activities on natural resources.

Social sustainability encompasses vital issues such as freedom, equality, justice, participation, cultural identity, public health, human rights, the fair distribution of power and resources, education, the provision of basic infrastructure and services for all in an equitable structure, and access to and empowerment of effective decision-making mechanisms (Vallance et al., 2011). ElBelehy and Crispim (2025) state that social sustainability focuses on both present and future human well-being.

Economic sustainability draws attention to the finite nature of resources (Yavuz, 2010) and refers to production systems that prevent current consumption from negatively impacting the needs of future generations (Mensah, 2019). Furthermore, by regarding the renewability of natural resources with skepticism (Yeni, 2014), it encourages economic decisions to be made in the most equitable and robust manner possible (Mensah, 2019). Thus, economic sustainability must possess characteristics that ensure social and environmental sustainability.

Exploring The Connection Between Sustainability and The Chef

Chefs are described by Pereira et al. (2019) as creators of change. This is just one of the evolving roles of chefs in the 21st century (McBride and Flore, 2019). Chefs no longer just have customers; they also have fans, much like celebrities. They play important roles in a wide range of issues and organizations, serve as opinion leaders on social, economic, and political issues as food activists, highlight global problems, fight for solutions, volunteer for social organizations, and attend book signings for their own books. Chefs, therefore, wield a significant sphere of influence (McBride and Flore, 2019). The scope of this influence is constantly expanding, and the topics covered are diversifying.

The relationship between sustainability and chefs is a notable research topic explored by many researchers from various perspectives. Wellton and Lainpelto (2021) examined the role of knowledge culture and chef leadership in environmental, social, and economic sustainability in restaurants. They found that responsible and sustainable decision-making is situation-based, with business size being a significant factor. They emphasized the importance of the master-apprentice relationship and chefs' desire and ability to serve as role models in environmental sustainability. Mrusek et al. (2022)'s study examining the interaction between sustainability, leadership, and innovation management with respect to Michelin-starred chefs. The study states that leadership is the key component of innovation management, and that environmental sustainability is the least supported among the three elements of sustainability when carrying out innovative activities in high-quality kitchens.

Lamy et al. (2025), in their study on the challenges chefs face when balancing tradition and sustainability in their kitchens, concluded that the biggest challenge relates to their sustainability performance. They particularly emphasized the challenges at the intersection of change and sustainable practices with economic responsibilities. They concluded that although chefs may prefer traditional ingredients and methods, they may be forced to move away from them for economic reasons.

Richardson and Fernqvist (2024) argue that new dynamics are needed for the sustainability of food systems. In this context, they attempted to identify the role of the concept of “food democracy” in chefs’ sustainable approaches, reaching a number of interesting conclusions. Food democracy is described and evaluated with five main principles: collaboration, becoming knowledgeable, sharing ideas, efficacy, and orientation toward public good in the study. They found that chefs use food democracy principles to promote sustainable food practices, and food democracy is a way to motivate people to engage in and participate in these practices and offers chefs alternative perspectives to improve people’s food values and sustainable food behaviors.

Jones et al. (2025) investigated the extent to which chefs consider environmental sustainability in their menu design processes. The research reveals that chefs prefer to design small, dynamic menus with natural, fresh ingredients that contribute to local economies, and menus are designed for reuse, minimizing food waste. However, activities to improve the environmental impact of menus must first be financially sustainable and maintain profits.

Chefs use local products and local supply chains within the framework of sustainability practices and prefer traceable supply chains (Sünnetçioğlu et al., 2023; Güçlü Nergiz and Kapucuoğlu, 2018). In sustainable kitchens, the preparation procedures and production methods of ingredients are important to chefs. Therefore, many chefs worldwide prefer local, organic, and culturally sourced products when choosing ingredients, which stands out for its sustainability, thereby supporting biodiversity (Boz, 2024; Pereira Garcia et al., 2024). Chefs also place great importance on the sustainability of national culinary cultures, which they consider an element of cultural heritage, thus preserving cultural authenticity (Tekeli et al., 2024). Additionally, chef creativity plays a crucial role in reducing food waste in commercial kitchens (Sezerel et al., 2025).

Methodology

The aim of this study is to clarify the position of sustainability practices in the success of internationally successful and globally recognized award-winning chefs. The primary research question is: “What is the role of sustainability practices in the success of Michelin-starred and world-renowned chefs?”

For this purpose, “*Chef’s Table Legends*,” an autobiographical documentary series broadcast on Netflix, will be analyzed using descriptive analysis. This type of analysis organizes the obtained data and interprets it based on identified themes (Çilingir, 2025). According to Yıldırım and Şimşek (2008), descriptive analysis consists of four stages: creating a framework, processing data according to this framework, identifying the findings, and then interpreting these findings.

The series, consisting of four 50-minute episodes, was watched by the researcher on the Netflix platform using a personal account and computer between July 10 and 28, 2025. The series, which totals 3 hours and 20 minutes, was rewatched four times, with repeated viewings as necessary.

- The first viewing was conducted to gain a general impression of the series, with all four episodes watched consecutively without interruption.
- The second viewing focused on identifying the main points of each episode. An outline of the four episodes was then compiled into a computer-based table.
- The third viewing focused on the details of each chef’s story, with notes and quotes taken in handwritten form. Numerous pauses were made during this stage for note-taking, and brief replays were used as needed.

Detailed notes were taken on every change in the chefs' career trajectories from their inception to the filming year of 2025, including significant moments, turning points, actions, feelings, thoughts, and the opinions of guest commentators. The focus was on both successes and failures, with a priority on cause-and-effect relationships. Upon completing each episode, the handwritten notes were transferred to a computer and transcribed, yielding detailed findings about the chefs' success stories.

- The fourth viewing focused on a holistic analysis of all four episodes within the framework of the identified themes. The episodes were watched consecutively, with brief repetitions as needed to address questions related to each theme.

Each episode was viewed for an average of ten hours, resulting in a total viewing time of around 40 hours.

This Netflix series was chosen because Netflix has a large and widespread audience, broadcasting in approximately 53 countries, and this makes Netflix one of the most followed platforms in the world (Neira, Clares Gavilán, and Sánchez-Navarro, 2023). Another reason this series was specifically chosen is that offers the opportunity to witness the lives, career stories, successes, mistakes, and shifts in professional philosophies of world-renowned, award-winning four chefs, told through their own narratives. Each chef featured in the series serves as a role model and a valuable professional figure. They mentor many chefs in their kitchens and contribute to new approaches in their field. The series provides a sample group that would be difficult to gather for a traditional scientific study. All these characteristics make the series a suitable sample group for the study's purpose.

Potential themes for the study were identified during the literature review phase by considering recurring themes in academic studies on the relationship between chefs and sustainability. Then, the potential themes were compared with notes obtained by the researcher in the second review phase, which outlined the main points of the series. Finally, the comparison results and potential themes were shared with academics in the field to evaluate their suitability for the research objective. Thus, it was decided that the study would be analyzed through five main themes. The study's themes are listed below:

- Theme 1: How and when did chefs' interest in cuisine and food begin?
- Theme 2: Do chefs have practices related to sustainability in their careers, and if so, what are the primary motivations behind their adoption?
- Theme 3: What sustainability-related practices do chefs implement in their restaurants or kitchens?
- Theme 4: How do sustainability practices contribute to the success of a chef's restaurant or brand?
- Theme 5: How effective is a chef's adoption of sustainability in achieving or maintaining "world-renowned chef" status?

The results section of the study will examine each chef's success story in detail, while the conclusion section will present a common assessment of the identified themes.

The study is subject to certain limitations. Data was collected from a single platform and is limited only for the relevant chefs in episodes. While expert opinions were obtained, analyses were performed solely by the researcher. These factors may limit the generalizability of the results. The fact that the series examined underwent editorial processes for narrative building purposes restricts the study's ability to draw causal inferences. Furthermore, within these boundaries, the thematic focus was primarily directed toward social and environmental sustainability, as data

regarding economic sustainability remained limited in the examined narrative.

Results

This documentary series focuses on a single chef in each episode, detailing their career journeys, goals, and the key factors that led to their success. The challenges they faced and how they overcame them are presented in chronological order. Each chef’s career trajectory is detailed with the help of food critics, food writers, successful chefs they have mentored, visual and print media records, prominent figures from the chefs’ home countries, and footage from the chefs’ own kitchens. Basic information about the series is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. The Series Information

Serie	Year of Production	Chef and Country	Time (min.)	Number and Location of Restaurants
<i>Chef’s Table Legends</i>	2025	Jamie Oliver-England	50	46 restaurants – UK
		José Andrés-Spain	50	40 restaurants – USA
		Thomas Keller-USA	50	2 restaurants – USA
		Alice Waters-USA	50	1 restaurant – USA

Although the series does not specifically emphasize sustainability, it does explore sustainable practices when they are integral to a chef’s career development and success.

Jamie Oliver

“This is an investment in the next generation, not a cost. Communities and countries are defined by how they treat their most vulnerable. It’s your legacy.”

Jamie Oliver

For Jamie Oliver, who has dyslexia, school life was extremely challenging and filled with failures. After his condition was discovered, he received special education, a process he describes as “torture.” He felt that period of his life was far from intelligent or productive. The only thing that brought him joy was working weekends at his parents’ pub. He believes this was precisely why he remained resilient and able to hold on to life. He started by clearing tables, helping his family, then moved on to washing dishes and eventually cooking. The praise he received from his father after preparing his first roast was a turning point for him; for perhaps the first time, he felt strong and free.

At the age of 24, Jamie Oliver became instantly famous after a television shoot at the restaurant where he worked. He launched his own TV show, a simple and entertaining cooking program that was unlike anything before it. He simplified recipes and ingredients to convince everyone to cook at home, often inviting his friends over to show them that cooking was fun. This quickly made him a chef everyone followed. Sheila Dillon, host of BBC Radio 4’s The Food Programme, explains: “There’s hardly a person in Britain who doesn’t have an opinion about Jamie Oliver. He’s entered into all of our lives.” Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair adds: “No one had ever thought cooking could be like that. He was a guy in his early twenties. He didn’t look like a chef, talk like a chef. He personified a societal change.”

Two and a half years later, having encountered the darker side of fame, Oliver began to face harsh criticism. However, he started to ponder: “I just started thinking how do I use my voice or fame. Can it be more than just culinary enthusiasm on a plate? Can it go deeper than that?”

Jamie Oliver saw this as an opportunity to open a restaurant, and so he opened Fifteen. “I want my first restaurant to be powered by young people that have been let down or forgotten,” he thought. He later described his memories of Fifteen as follows: “To give kids that had no self-worth, the ability to learn things every day, to make them feel proud of themselves, that’s what drove me. That’s what made Fifteen. It is the best thing I’ve ever done.”

The restaurant became a huge success. This convinced Jamie Oliver that he could create positive change in the food industry, and so he began his school meals project. At the time, school meals were both expensive and unhealthy. As Oliver noted, “school diners mean different things to the kids that are very vulnerable.” After overcoming numerous challenges, he succeeded in this project approximately two years later, even securing financial and moral support from the government.

Jamie Oliver then opened the restaurant chain Jamie’s Italian, which he describes as “incredible ingredients, really affordable prices, democratizing great food.” All was well, and he soon owned 46 restaurants with an annual turnover of £100 million. He continued his projects, even winning an Emmy Award for his program on healthy eating in the U.S.

With 4,500 employees and daily staff costs of approximately £75,000, he eventually realized he could no longer cover his expenses. Oliver says of those days: “I tried everything. It was awful. We ended up losing all the restaurants. Everything that I’d built over the past twenty-something years. It was like losing my heart.”

Despite losing all his restaurants, Jamie Oliver, who wanted to disappear, got back up and found success again. He realized, “I was so focused on creating these moments, these thunderclaps. Documentaries, campaigns... But I’d never realized that it was all about the ripples. Even a small thing can create beautiful results.”

José Andrés

“Life starts at the edge of your comfort zone.”

José Andrés

Born in Asturias, Spain, José Andrés was the son of nurse parents. Their working-class family was not poor, but they did not have much money either. Andrés describes those days this way: “The fridge in my house at the end of the month was not very full. But that emptiness was not something to be sad about. Because croquettes were coming.” He notes that almost all mothers in Spain knew how to make croquettes, and his mother would “use everything to the limit: leftover eggs, ham, leftover fried chicken. So, my mother showed me that we could do magical things with nothing, if we gave it the love it deserves.” Croquettes still play a prominent role in his menus today.

In Asturias, cooking is highly valued. He explains: “Where I come from, saying ‘I know how to cook’ was like you are a powerful person, you know how to cook.” Driven by this motivation, José Andrés began culinary school at the age of 15. During his training, he wanted to eat, smell, and try everything—moments of discovery he has never forgotten.

Early in his career, he had the opportunity to work with Ferran Adrià at the restaurant El Bulli. According to José Andrés, Adrià was reinterpreting Catalan cuisine and also creating dishes that had nothing to do with traditional cuisine. This experience was crucial for José Andrés’s culinary approach, and he describes El Bulli as a “Big Bang.” From Ferran Adrià, he learned to look at everything differently and to get “out of everyone’s comfort zone.” He says

he found his true calling there: to bring authentic Spanish cuisine to America.

Continuing his culinary career in the United States, José Andrés longed for his cultural roots. His solution was to make blue cheese, a dish from his homeland. This re-established a vibrant connection with his culture from thousands of miles away. At his first restaurant, Jaleo, Andrés began preparing dishes that represented Spanish cuisine, becoming the first restaurant to introduce these flavors to a wide American audience.

While Jaleo reflected his traditional side, José Andrés also wanted to showcase the innovative approach he developed at El Bulli. His second restaurant, MiniBar, did just that. He started interpreting American classics. “I began was deconstructing American classics and rebuilding it. This was the creative outlet of my dreams.”

Believing that staying in one place would be the biggest obstacle to progress, Andrés began opening restaurants in various U.S. cities. When he had 40 restaurants, he decided to stop and share his success, believing that “It’s not success if it is not share around.” He began volunteering at DC Central Kitchen. He says: “There, I saw that a cook like me could feed a few people, but you could be a part of feeding the many.”

With these thoughts, Andrés began to undertake social responsibility projects. When a devastating earthquake struck Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 2010, he went there to help. Cooking alongside volunteers, he prepared thousands of meals a day for the victims. It was there that he realized, in his own words, “when people are given a spark, that spark turns into a blazing fire of hope.”

Matt Goulding, co-author of *Vegetables Unleashed*, describes José Andrés’s approach: “When people are starving, he thought, ‘Why don’t we call in professional chefs who know how to feed people?’ So, he went to disaster areas and started feeding the world.” Michele Norris, a Peabody Award-winning journalist, says: “Jose is a symbol of goodness and curiosity. He inspires people.”

José Andrés quickly founded the World Central Kitchen organization. With this organization, he has helped people with millions of meals in many countries. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. Andrés has become a professionally influential role model, a great humanitarian, a volunteer ambassador for Spain, and one of the greatest advocates for the vulnerable and hungry. He says: “I feel a responsibility; this is the moment you can push for the right policy to end hunger. Now is the moment.”

Thomas Keller

“Did I have the spirit of a leader? That was the question.”

Thomas Keller

Thomas Keller, the fifth child of a divorced family, recalls consuming mostly prepared foods during his childhood. He began his career washing dishes at a restaurant to help his mother support the family. Initially, he did not think cooking would become his career. However, when the chef at his mother’s restaurant quit, Keller began cooking in the kitchen.

With his mother’s strong support, Thomas Keller began working in various restaurants. A pivotal moment came when he learned that chefs cook to feed people. He chose being a chef as a career shortly before his mother passed away suddenly. Deeply affected, he resolved to become the best chef he could be to make her proud. He describes that period as follows: “The only thing I thought about was how to become a better chef.” With this in mind, he

moved to France in 1983.

At the time, Paul Bocuse was challenging classical French cooking methods, leading a culinary revolution known as *La Nouvelle Cuisine* (New Cuisine). This movement introduced lighter sauces, smaller portions, healthier cooking methods, and modern presentations. Thomas Keller was deeply impressed by these developments.

Upon his return, he began working at *La Reserve*, one of the most renowned French restaurants in the United States. Keller was the first American chef to work there and was a resounding success. However, for a chef full of new ideas, *La Reserve* proved to be too conservative. Keller wanted to work his way through different restaurants. He and his friend opened a fine dining restaurant called *Rakel*, serving *avant-garde* dishes with modern interpretations of classic French cuisine. *Rakel* received rave reviews, and Thomas Keller believed he had found his calling. However, the stock market crashed, and fine dining became unacceptable. The chef was forced to choose between continuing his passion for fine dining and transitioning to casual dining.

Thomas Keller, who favored fine dining, left *Rakel* and took a head chef position at another upscale restaurant. While preparing for an event, he visited an ice cream parlor and had an idea: he would serve his dishes in small, playful cones. He developed a recipe, and the cone was a hit. Keller achieved great success, describing it as a relief that “represented a fresh start. It felt like I had broken all the chains that bound me to fine dining. The true purpose of cooking was now clear: to make people happy.”

Although the cone was very successful, Keller could not get along with the general manager, and his job was terminated. He recalls: “I was in my mid-thirties. I had no job. I had no income.” Shortly thereafter, he heard that *The French Laundry* had been sold and went to see the restaurant. He realized this small, authentic space was the perfect place for his dreams. “That was like destiny,” he says.

Keller personally attended to every small detail, ensuring guests felt comfortable from the moment they arrived. The restaurant quickly became a huge success, reaching number one on the world’s 50 best restaurants list. When it was time to open a second restaurant, he opened *Per Se* in New York. Despite various setbacks, *Per Se* achieved great success, becoming the first three-Michelin-starred restaurant in America. The following year, Keller also received three Michelin stars at *The French Laundry*.

“I had two restaurants, and it made me realize that I needed to become a different kind of leader. And I elevated the chef at *The French Laundry*. So, my position, I basically eliminated.” The following year, the resources for both restaurants increased, with each employing 100 people.

Thomas Keller is the first and only American chef to own two three-Michelin-starred restaurants. He also trained three chefs who have gone on to receive three Michelin stars themselves. Dr. Tim Ryan, president of the Culinary Institute of America, says: “Sustaining this success over the years is something no one else has been able to do. There are hundreds, even thousands, of people who choose Thomas as their mentor. He is the most important American chef of all time.” Thomas Keller explains his philosophy: “I have this responsibility to continue to influence and impact the future generations.”

Alice Waters

“I feel that good food should be a right and not a privilege. It needs to be without pesticides and herbicides. Everybody deserves this food.”

Alice Waters

Alice Waters was born into a family that grew their own vegetables and fruits due to financial hardship. She experienced financial difficulty throughout her childhood. One of her fondest memories is of her mother taking her outside every spring and fall to gather flowers. “I’m grateful to my mother because she loved flowers,” she says. This experience established her strong connection with nature and taught her the seasons in which flowers, vegetables, and fruits naturally grow.

In 1964, at the height of the free speech movement, Alice Waters began her university studies at Berkeley. She frequently gathered with friends at her home, cooking for them almost daily. It was then that she realized how powerful and impactful it was to be together.

In 1965, she had the opportunity to study in Paris, France, an experience that completely changed her life. For the first time, she saw markets selling fresh fruits and vegetables, waited in line for fresh bread, and ate delicious meals. Everyone there consumed locally produced goods because there were no grocery stores. This was all completely new to Alice Waters. At the time, people in America were beginning to move away from home cooking because of the introduction of fast food and ready-made meals. Her year in France opened her eyes to the importance of food.

Upon returning to the United States, Alice Waters decided to live and eat like the French. She opened a French restaurant, Chez Panisse, with the ideal of offering a fixed-price, daily-changing menu made with whatever fresh ingredients were available at that time of year. For over 50 years, she has been serving guests daily menus with the freshest ingredients.

Alice Waters wanted her food to taste like what she ate in France, but she could not find natural ingredients. To solve this problem, she contacted all the farmers within an hour of her restaurant and asked them to provide natural produce. Only one farm owner agreed—a regenerative organic farm that, as Alice Waters put it, “let nature take its course.” She began to find the flavor she was looking for. Over the years, she gradually expanded her network of farmers, fishermen, and bakeries, developing and implementing the Farm to Table idea.” Today, very few restaurants lack a Farm to Table menu, and that achievement belongs to Alice Waters.

Alice Waters realized her ideal of offering low-priced daily menus, but she was happy despite her mounting debt. Seeking a solution, she hired another chef for her restaurant, and they worked together successfully for a year before realizing they could no longer collaborate and splitting up. When she became a mother, another change was needed. She came up with a “crazy idea”: to employ two chefs for each kitchen department and pay them full wages. Many people thought this would make the restaurant unviable. However, the idea was incredibly successful because the chefs came to work happy, boosting their productivity and performance. Alice Waters says of this idea, “It was the most important decision I made for Chez Panisse.”

She insists that everyone has the right to a natural diet and never gives up on this belief, emphasizing this right on all platforms. She was the first chef to list the names of the farms where her products came from on her menus,

believing farmers should be respected and local supply chains used. Samin Nosrat, author of *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat*, says: “In a world that focused so much on the chef’s artistry, the chef’s brilliance, removing yourself from the equation and saying, ‘This didn’t need me to be better,’ is quite radical and revolutionary.”

Alice Waters then wanted to teach cooking and gardening to children to give them a new understanding of food. This led to the launch of the Edible School Garden project. The project quickly became a huge success and was implemented in 6,500 schools across the United States. Michelle Obama also supported the project, and a vegetable garden was established at the White House with students from various Washington schools.

Alice Waters, who says she has a message to share with the world, wants to change the world’s values and see a generation that cares about where their food comes from. She has succeeded. As she says, “It gives hope, and that’s what this is all about. It’s about hope for our future.”

Conclusion

This study aimed to clarify the position of sustainability practices in the professional success of world-renowned chefs. For this purpose, the autobiographical documentary series *Chef’s Table Legends*, broadcast on Netflix, was analyzed using a descriptive analysis method. The results of the analysis are presented in detail under five distinct themes.

Theme 1: How and when do chefs begin their interest in the kitchen and food?

A chef’s interest in food and cooking often begins at an early age. The reasons vary widely, ranging from the kitchen’s cultural importance and cooking as a form of self-expression to the necessity of earning a living due to financial constraints. While the decision to pursue a culinary career can be made early or later in life, a chef’s journey truly begins when they discover the deeper purpose behind their cooking. The age at which this decision is made is often tied to the meaning of food and cuisine within their culture, which in turn defines the connection a chef forms with their craft. Ultimately, a critical driving force for a person to become a successful chef is the realization that cooking can be connected to almost anything.

Cooking can help people achieve their dreams, Alice Waters’s desire to live like a French person, or help them become the person they aspire to be, Thomas Keller’s desire to make his mother proud. Cooking can also give meaning to a person's existence, as it did for Jamie Oliver, who found happiness and a way to express himself while working in the kitchen on weekends. For José Andrés, it was a way to connect with his cultural roots. While the motivations of these chefs are vastly different, the path they chose to achieve their desires was the same: cooking.

Cooking is an important tool that helps a person achieve their goals. Its versatility can make it the key to a successful career. Although an early connection with food is crucial, a chef’s ability to create a multifaceted meaning and relationship with cooking is a particularly valuable and essential aspect of becoming a successful chef.

Theme 2: Do chefs have practices related to sustainability in their careers, and if so, what are the primary motivations behind their adoption?

Sustainability ideas and practices play a significant role in the careers of the chefs featured in this series. The primary motivations are a sense of responsibility for everyone, including future generations and a desire for change. While their desire for change initially begins as a personal one, it later evolves into a desire to create change for

everyone.

The chefs' approaches align with the fundamental philosophy of sustainability, which the United Nations defines as "leaving no one behind." These chefs contribute to the three pillars of sustainability—economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection—through their food and cuisine in unique ways. This sense of responsibility demonstrates their awareness of sustainability, which is one of the most important commonalities among these world-renowned chefs.

Cooking is not only connected to almost everything, but it can also be used to connect with almost anything. Discovering this interconnectedness is a significant turning point in a chef's career. With this realization, chefs not only produce with economic, social, and environmental responsibilities in mind, but they also become voices for change, advocates for ideas, and actors in social and environmental projects.

This aligns with the changing roles of chefs in the 21st century, as outlined by McBride and Flore (2019). The power of cooking allows chefs to develop a different and critical perspective, and more importantly, they can use this power to voice critical thinking. Critical thinking put into action transforms into dynamics that mobilize communities through a chef's character and food. This further explores the critical role of chefs in creating sustainable food systems, as outlined by Lamy et al. (2025), and extends their influence to establishing sustainable social and economic structures. Thus, as Pereira et al. (2019) define them, chefs become creators of change.

Theme 3: What sustainability practices do chefs implement in their restaurants or kitchens?

The Farm to Table movement, now almost synonymous with sustainability in gastronomy, was initiated by Alice Waters. With her emphasis on respecting farmers, agricultural culture, and the right of every person to good food, Waters pioneered a successful movement that encompasses all elements of sustainability. Her use of seasonal local produce and local supply chains highlights the importance of traceability, supporting the results of Sünnetçioğlu et al. (2023) and Güçlü Nergiz and Kapucuoğlu (2018). Furthermore, as Jones et al. (2025) stated, using local produce contributes to the local economy, a contribution Alice Waters actively strives to increase. She also sets a model for the food and beverage industry by implementing a business model that ensures full and equal rights for her employees, contributing to the restaurant's long-term success.

While all chefs emphasized local menus, Thomas Keller and José Andrés also succeeded in presenting these with a modern approach. The chefs, who place particular emphasis on dishes reflecting their unique culinary cultures, include both traditional and modern recipes on their menus. Lamy et al. (2025) concluded that there is a linear relationship between a chef's professional knowledge and skill level and their sustainable and innovative approaches. This is particularly evident in the practices of Keller and Andrés, who use their advanced knowledge, skills, and creativity to modernize local culinary elements, thereby highlighting their cultures and contributing to economic sustainability.

Alice Waters initiated the Edible School Garden project in schools to raise awareness of food sustainability for future generations. This project has been successfully implemented in 6,500 schools across the US. A similar project was implemented by Jamie Oliver in England to make school meals healthier, recognizing their importance for children. These projects are part of social sustainability, as they focus on the well-being of both current and future generations, aligning with ElBelehy and Crispim's (2025) definition.

José Andrés founded and developed the World Central Kitchen organization to help people in disaster areas. This globally operating organization not only supports vulnerable people but also strives to contribute to economic and environmental sustainability, making him a prominent figure in the fight against global hunger. José Andrés uses his sphere of influence, as outlined by McBride and Flore (2019), to achieve social sustainability.

Jamie Oliver also demonstrated social sustainability by opening a restaurant staffed exclusively by vulnerable young people to help them become professionals. Another of his restaurants offers pizzas made with affordable, high-quality ingredients to emphasize food democracy. In a country where society has become increasingly estranged from home cooking, he developed practical recipes for local cuisine to both protect public health and strengthen ties with food culture. As noted by McBride and Flore (2019), Jamie Oliver has been the face of change in his own country.

Theme 4: How do sustainability practices contribute to the success of chefs' restaurants or brands?

For 50 years, Alice Waters has maintained a unique restaurant model with a daily-changing menu based on seasonal ingredients from local growers. Her unwavering commitment to sustainable food and restaurant management has made Chez Panisse a leading example. It was named America's best restaurant, ranked first on the world's 50 best restaurants list and has maintained its Michelin star status—all achieved through sustainability.

Thomas Keller prioritizes his leadership skills by developing highly successful chefs, investing in future generations, and creating an economically sustainable restaurant model. He is the first and only American chef to own two three-Michelin-starred restaurants, and his restaurant Per Se was the first in the United States to receive three Michelin stars. Furthermore, three chefs who trained in his kitchen have gone on to earn three Michelin stars themselves. Keller is a pioneer of haute cuisine and fine dining in America, and his consistent success at the top of best-of lists exemplifies the critical role of leadership in sustainability, as concluded by Wellton and Lainpelto (2021) and Mrusek et al. (2022).

By diversifying his culinary tradition with both traditional and modern offerings, José Andrés exemplifies a business model that emphasizes the connection between authentic cuisine and economic sustainability. He owns 40 restaurants and strives to share his success through social projects. His brand Minibar earned him two Michelin stars, and he was named Best Chef for his dishes reflecting Spanish cuisine, making him one of the most prominent representatives of haute cuisine.

Jamie Oliver invested in the next generation, owned 46 restaurants in the UK, and turned his name into a brand. However, he lost all his restaurants at what he considered the peak of his career and had to lay off approximately 1,000 staff. Lamy et al. (2025) stated that chefs are often torn between sustainable practices and economic responsibilities, and that financial challenges can be a significant obstacle to implementing sustainability. Oliver struggled to balance these, but he and Alice Waters both persevered through financial difficulties without sacrificing their sustainable practices. Their careers continue to be successful. Jones et al. (2025) emphasize that initiatives to reduce the environmental impact of menus must be financially sustainable. For Waters, environmental sustainability is more important than profit, yet she has managed to maintain her restaurant's success.

Theme 5: How effective is chefs' embrace of sustainability in achieving or maintaining "world-renowned chef" status?

The chefs featured in the series have built their names into globally recognized brands by leveraging their culinary knowledge, skills, and creativity while also supporting mostly environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Alice Waters is a worldwide pioneer of sustainable practices, the Farm-to-Table movement, food democracy, and Slow Food. José Andrés and Jamie Oliver have received Emmy Awards for their social sustainability efforts. Andrés has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and is internationally recognized as one of the most influential humanitarians. Thomas Keller, with his financially successful and responsible restaurant model, is one of the most successful chefs in the gastronomy field and has mentored many other successful chefs.

Within the limitations of this study, the primary conclusion of this study emphasizes the mutual and complementary relationship between professional success and sustainability. While a chef's international recognition stems from talent, creativity, and hard work, a commitment to sustainable practices significantly enhances the depth and impact of that success. Achievements in both professional skills and sustainability contribute to a chef's global visibility, expanding their sphere of influence as role models and pioneers.

Aligning with Richardson and Fernqvist (2024), this research identifies food democracy as a vital tool for sustainability, amplifying a chef's persuasive voice. Although sustainable practices may complicate operations or cause financial difficulties, as noted by Hilton (2023), Lamy et al. (2025), and Jones et al. (2025), this study demonstrates that persistent implementation ultimately fosters global success.

The integration of sustainability into professional achievements offers a new perspective on its applicability in commercial kitchens. Examining this subject through diverse platforms and perspectives can help generalize insights and provide guidance for more effective implementation. Furthermore, the link between sustainability and success serves as a powerful motivational tool for the hospitality sector. Businesses can leverage this by promoting chefs' sustainable practices or encouraging knowledge sharing. Finally, policymakers should utilize chefs' influence and sustainable practices to reach broader audiences and achieve the 2030 agenda. Encouraging chefs to act as ambassadors and advocates allows them to harness the persuasive power of food to drive systemic change.

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