

The Artist as Leader: Vivian Howard



**Interview conducted by Rob Kramer and Corey Madden
Edited by Betsi Robinson**

Vivian Howard is a celebrated chef, the star of the popular cooking show, “[A Chef’s Life](#),” a James Beard Foundation award winner and now a New York Times [best-selling author](#). Her fascinating story and passion for culinary arts, storytelling and community engagement make her uniquely qualified to explore the topic of The Artist as Leader.

Vivian left Eastern North Carolina after finishing college and developed her cooking skills in New York City. There she met her husband, Ben, a professional in the food industry and a painter. Vivian’s parents offered to

help them open their own restaurant, with the caveat that it be in North Carolina. In 2005, Vivian and Ben moved back to her hometown of Kinston and opened [Chef & the Farmer](#). Since then, the rural town of Kinston (population just under 22,000) has seen a revitalization of its downtown, as shops, cafes, B&Bs and other businesses have opened around the restaurant, bringing work, tourists and money back into the sagging local economy.

Vivian believes that food tells a story. She works to connect the heritage and history of the South and Eastern North Carolina to the work she does as a chef, a television personality, a cookbook author and a leader in economic revitalization.

CM: Vivian, how do you think your upbringing and your background could have informed your leadership style?

VH: I think that my leadership style mimics my father's. My dad is a farmer, historically a tobacco farmer. He took his father's business and continued to grow tobacco, and now is really involved in John Deere. He's charismatic and passionate about his work, and people believe in what he does because of that. I would describe my dad as a community leader, in a small community. I see a lot of myself in him.

CM: So he takes not just his farm, but the well-being of a community, in mind when he thinks about things. And how does that reflect on what you chose to do?

VH: I've always thought of our work here as more of a community project than a restaurant, and a way to improve our economy. And in my more recent projects, like the show and my book, a way to improve the morale and increase the self-worth of our population through shining a light on our food traditions. I feel a kinship with my dad in that way. As for my upbringing — I spent a lot of time alone. I'm not an only child, but the sister closest to my age is nine years older than I am. I played a lot alone, and I did a lot of imaginary play, and the way that I would get attention was through writing stories. When I would get in trouble, or when I didn't get my way, I would go

to my room and write a little story, then I'd come into the kitchen and throw it on the table and walk off.

RK: Is that your earliest memories of artistic expression?

VH: I think so. I also grew up taking dance. And now that I look at videos, I wasn't nearly as talented as I thought I was. But I thought I was going to be a professional dancer, and I loved it, and I was really driven. Then, when I realized I wasn't going to be a dancer, I thought maybe I could be a choreographer. I still, when I hear songs, choreograph little dances in my head.

RK: So for you, I imagine, creative expression is at the core of being a culinary artist. And yet, I'm imagining a lot of the work you're doing as your brand and identity grows is more complex than "just" being an artist.

VH: Absolutely. I used to go to the restaurant early in the morning and toil away on new dishes, and those were really singular experiences. I'm not doing that at this point in my journey.

RK: How would you say your artistic impulses, your creative process, play into the way you lead and guide others?

VH: I like to teach, so whenever I'm creating something or designing a dish or trying to get a point across, I do a lot of storytelling. I like to tell the history behind things, why we're doing this, and connecting the dots between the history and my thought process. I've always said that my greatest strength as a leader has been creativity and storytelling. And my greatest weaknesses have been leadership.

RK: What is leadership to you?

VH: Like my dad, for some reason I've been able to be an inspiring leader, but I shy away from a lot of the things that are necessary to make a business work. Those hard conversations when I'm not meshing with someone, those people just tend to go away, rather than us working it out. I think I've improved on this with a smaller staff. But when I had a problem with someone, or someone was not performing up to their skill level, or not doing

the things that I needed them to do, I didn't confront those issues right away. I always let them build up until the problem is too big for us to resolve it in an appropriate way. When you're in a restaurant setting, and you have 15 cooks that you're responsible for, and the front-of-house staff, that's really hard to manage if it's not something you're already great at. But now I manage three people, and I'm much better at it!

My other major weakness as a leader is my own self-doubt. So when someone who I admire, their opinion differs from mine on the taste profile of a dish — I think it needs this, this person doesn't think it needs that — I automatically assume that I'm wrong. I don't always tell them that or back down, but in my own mind, in my heart, I really struggle with self-doubt.

CM: Do you have a trusted mentor?

VH: I don't. I think that's one reason that I have so much self-doubt. I kind of came up through cooking in a different way. I worked in restaurants in New York, but I was never at a high level. I was a line cook, I was a chef de partie, I was never a manager of people. And I never had a mentor who took me under his or her wing and made me believe in myself. So when we moved here and we opened this restaurant, we just winged it. I've learned most of what I know through books and through practice. We were lucky because no one was watching in the beginning. So I had time to build up my skill level. And actually I think it really behooved me to come to this in a bubble, and not have a mentor, because I've developed my own style.

RK: Your style is not influenced by anyone?

VH: It's not influenced by anyone else, and it has its own voice.

RK: I heard you say that you can doubt yourself. And one of the things we see artists regularly deal with is rejection and negative feedback. You put yourself out there and people say, 'I don't like this,' and you have to continue to trudge on.

VH: It's awful!

RK: Isn't it? What inspires you to keep going through those times of tough feedback or self-doubt?

VH: I think that's what keeps me going. Like my father, I've always operated with a major chip on my shoulder. I think because of where I came from, because of the way I grew up, I've always felt like I had to work a little bit harder to get the things that other people got, and to get the recognition that some part of me felt like I deserved.

RK: Does Ben (Knight), your husband and business partner, have that same sort of inner drive?

VH: I think so. I think he's got less self-doubt than I do, at least he plays it off as if he does. Even when I talk about dishes, when I meet with Ben and my chef de cuisine, and it's just the three of us sharing our opinions on something, I'm the first one to doubt my perception of things. Which is completely ridiculous, and I realize that. But I think it may have something to do with being female.

CM: I was going to ask you that question. I definitely felt that my creative life matured late because there were no models for me, and I was following men's paths. And there was a point in the path where it didn't make any sense for me, so I had to make the path myself. That meant I didn't have anybody else to tell me whether the path I was going down would lead to a dead-end! And I did have the 'aha!' moment when I recognized institutionalized sexism, and it made me feel so much better. I was like, 'I'm not personally responsible for the doubt,' actually the doubt is a result of being a part of the first generation, and that that's actually my accomplishment, to soldier on through the doubt. I felt like I was free after that. I still may doubt myself, but I'm not taking it personally.

VH: Right, and don't you think that the self-doubt is a good thing?

CM: Yes. I had a male mentor, David Gordon, who is an avant-garde, post-modern choreographer. He said he thought it was the fate of artists to be wracked with self-doubt, but that was what drove them on, and that you had to fall in love with that, you had to know that that downward spiral of doubt and despair was actually the thing you could love the most, that it meant you were still creative.

RK: Artists who don't have the self-doubt are the ones you want to beware of because they think they've mastered it, and they lose the drive or their ego gets in the way of their ability to question their process and to keep trying to push the boundary.

VH: Right, and everything I do is not great!

RK: And you have to fail!

VH: And it's interesting because I've always had lots of ideas. When I've got an idea, my husband's like, 'Oh God!' It used to be that most of my ideas were met with that kind of reaction. But now that I'm kind of like this public figure, more people listen to my ideas.

RK: You've got power because of your stature.

VH: I had this crazy idea eight months ago, instead of going on a traditional book tour, to drive around in a food truck and do it that way. And when we went to pick up that food truck, I was like, 'Shit, people need to stop listening to all my ideas!' Because they're not all grounded in realism or safety particularly. ... I'm not the only one on the train. It affects everybody who believes in me, and believes in our mission, and all the projects. When you're making decisions based on your personal desires and what you think would be cool, it is not necessarily the most responsible decision. ... Generally the projects that I push really hard on, like the show or the food truck, I'm the one who really ends up suffering the most.

CM: So you've created a show, and it's obviously been successful. How do you grow from it, benefit from it, now that you've accomplished something? Does it change what you do next or how you feel about yourself?

VH: I don't really think it's changed anything about the way I feel about myself. I'm hoping my book will do that! The show, it's been multi-step, little achievements along the way that have been shared by multiple people. We made the show, but we didn't fund the show, so we just carried the burden of that personally. Then over the past three seasons we've been able to slowly gain enough credibility to be able to fund the show, so that's a

relatively new accomplishment, as of this season. That feels like a strong accomplishment, because for two years nobody working on the show got paid.

CM: What do you think the book will help you accomplish?

VH: Well I got into cooking because I wanted to be a writer. I know it sounds crazy, but I was a server in a restaurant and I really became fascinated with all the stories the chef told around the food that we were serving. And it just so happened — it's like one of those little twists of fate — the concept of the restaurant was Southern food via Africa. This was in 2000, 2001 — way ahead of its time in New York. African-American owner. African-American chef. Highly unusual. I moved to New York because I wanted to be a journalist, so I'm like, 'What if I start working in the kitchen here, and I'll turn that experience into maybe a career as a food writer.'

It was really the dawn of the food writer as we know it, and I was seeing a lot of that in the media. I lived for the Wednesday food section of The New York Times. I wrote to Zagat, saying that I wanted to be a food writer. It was so silly, I really thought you got jobs like that. That's how I came to cooking. The book is really the first thing that I've ever done by myself. I took this long path through the back door of being able to do that. The restaurant was a joint venture, Ben and I collaborated, and when we read the reviews, they were of both of us. And the show has been a collaboration, and when we read the reviews or we suffer setbacks or letdowns, it's really a shared experience. The book is just me.

CM: It is your artistic voice.

VH: Yeah, and it's a way that I combined my love of cooking and my particular culinary voice, and my actual voice.

RK: Along with finding one's voice, what are some additional qualities that make someone a good artistic or creative leader?

VH: I think creative folks tend to be very sensitive, either to their own indulgences or their own feelings, or sometimes to others. I feel like I'm very sensitive to other people and the way that what I'm doing might make them

feel, or the way that the workplace makes them feel. If you have that inside of you, it can really tune you in with the particular climate of your workplace, and with the way that things are going, and make you a more sensitive leader.

RK: The culture you create is based on that?

VH: Yeah. And obviously passion, and an ability to articulate that passion and share it with others and inspire them to also believe in that thing that you're passionate about.

RK: We're hearing a lot in our interviews for the series about that sensitivity. Corey and I both agree with this strongly, that a lot of artists have this heightened sense of astuteness as to the way they interact with people or interact with the environment around them. I think that's something that is unique to people, whether they're trained in the arts or that's something they gravitate toward. They make themselves available, which is an easy way to get wounded because you're so sensitive in your process. Yet it's a common strength among artists.

VH: I tend to get really involved with the people I work with. I think that's one of the reasons I have lots of buy-in, because people know that I care about them, they care about me, and it's more than just a project or work. I think that comes from the sensitivity to your environment.

CM: It sounds to me also that you're willing to work by instinct. You have strong aesthetic ideas, but you're also willing to follow your gut. That bravery has been important to you, and people rely on your gut.

VH: I don't even think of it as my gut, but I think my gut and my head are the same thing. My husband would say I don't often use my head. I'm just all emotion.

RK: As you've gone from the pure artistic expression — being a chef and doing the creative work — to growing a larger business, can you describe what you've discovered going through that process?

VH: I feel a tremendous amount of guilt because I've left the one world that I've had for eight years — the restaurant and toiling away in the kitchen with my entire being. I enlisted all these folks who believed in what I was doing,

and really wanted to work with me and near me. Then I left. And I'm happy about it.

RK: You left the kitchen?

VH: Pretty much. So I feel guilty being happy about the new projects and the new opportunities, and having my staff really want me to continue to be their leader. But I really like what I'm doing. And what I find with writing cookbooks or developing recipes for publications is that I still get to do the part of the restaurant that I loved, and I don't have to do any of the stuff that I didn't like. I still work with people, but it's fewer people, it's people with more buy-in and it's more rewarding.

RK: Sounds like a different type of reward.

VH: Yeah, I've said this a lot on the show and I expect I'll really start to get criticized for it, but restaurant work is really hard. It's just not fit for anybody. And I think if people tell you that they love it, there's a part of them that loves it because they love the creativity that is only afforded to just a few people in a restaurant, only the people at the very top are being creative at all. Everybody else is just getting their ass kicked every night. Making the same thing day in and day out, getting tickets yelled at you, and burning yourself, and working every day that everybody else is off. There's just nothing redeeming about that.

CM: As somebody who left the acting profession and moved up into leadership and artistic directorship, I had some of the same feelings, more guilt toward myself, like I didn't make it being just a pure performer. And one of the things I realized is that people who are at the stage of really wanting to be pure performers are interested in taking the heat. They like being in that situation, and they have to mature through it, and the maturity you've experienced is just natural. You know — been there, done that.

VH: There are cooks who really want to push and grow in that field, they wear that torture as a badge. Even our language, the way that we describe our work, is we're always getting crushed, we're getting killed, or we killed it. It's really this battle language.

RK: It sounds visceral.

VH: Yeah, it's visceral, but it's something that makes you a badass! I've personally never identified myself as a badass.

RK: We interviewed James Moeser, the Chancellor Emeritus for UNC-Chapel Hill, and he was a classically trained organist and started his career playing the organ and leading church choirs, then moved into university administration. He talked a lot about the transition, or the grieving process, of letting go of what he called the fun work, the creative process work, and moving into higher levels of administration, which involves a lot of crap. But then finding the joys in that as he let go and got further from his beginning creative process. It sounds a little similar to what you're experiencing.

VH: Yeah, and now what I do for the restaurant, which I really enjoy, is meet with the kitchen management and talk about the season that is approaching and the ingredients that will give us. And we brainstorm around dishes and concepts and things that the kitchen will do, and I offer a lot of that because I know the region better than our staff at this point. Then we bounce ideas back and forth and that's really fun. Then I'm like ... see ya!

CM: Knowing that you feel guilty, you have these meetings. Are you finding other innovative ways to keep the continuity, the spark, with them that don't take away from you?

VH: I try to go into the kitchen and talk to people and look them in the eye, and get to know them and make sure they know that I'm really grateful that they're there and that they care about their work. I think that I'm doing that.

CM: It sounds like you know your boundaries and you are developing leadership around boundaries.

VH: I have so few boundaries at this point, my life is an open book for people. When people see me, they ask me how my kids are, they ask me if my parents are still living, they ask me all these really personal questions. I know why they are asking, and I don't have a problem with it. So the boundaries that I am certain about are really defined. I used to go into the

restaurant at night and visit with tables. But I haven't done that in several weeks because I needed a break from it. And I realize I'm getting ready to embark on a nine-week experience like that, which I'm incredibly grateful for.

RK: It's show time and you're going to be on for nine weeks. So you're storing up your energy, your resilience?

VH: Well, I'm trying. Last weekend we were at the Biltmore for three days doing events, and then Kannapolis. I tell them all the time that I'm incredibly grateful for all the outpouring of support and how much people love the show and how much people love me, I really am. But you can only expose yourself to it for so long. I only have so much inside of me. And I try to give everybody a little piece of me. It's not like I just sign a paper, I write a love note.

CM: I have theatre friends who have become well-known, and I notice that when they are in demand they have to develop a bit of a persona and some very clear boundaries. That persona is real, but it's a bit of a performance. It's like they put on their lipstick or they put on their costume. One of the things that's really changed about Broadway is that you're expected to step out the stage door and sign autographs. I notice that my friends have a set idea in mind of how much time they'll spend. I can feel them still performing, and they call it their third act and they time it. Then they hit their wall. They're like, 'Thanks, I need to go now,' and they walk away, and there's more people waiting for them, but they can't get to everybody.

VH: If they weren't performing they would probably say, 'I'm really freakin' tired.'

RK: A lot of artists are more introverted by nature, yet performance art is extroverted work. But there's this protection of one's energy and resilience, and the need to restore balance. When you go out, you're burning energy as you engage in the world, and you have to find time to retreat and recharge.

VH: Until the show, I was incredibly introverted. I wouldn't go out in the dining room, nobody had taken a picture of me in 10 years. I'm not sure if I was always that way, or if my work made me that way, but I do have to gear up for things.

RK: What words of encouragement might you have for artists who could, or want to, move into leadership responsibilities? Are there things that you've learned from transitioning into more leadership responsibility that you would pass on to younger artists?

VH: One of the things that I've always tried to keep at the core is self-expression. Whether it's cooking or writing or making the show, I really get into this idea of crafting story, and I think a focus on that allows me to be a leader. If you're an artistic leader, people's buy-in is based on your art, it's really not based on your leadership skills. So you need to nurture that art and always make it the focus. Which is something that we're struggling with at the restaurant right now. I think my husband is a natural leader, he's confident and he knows what direction he wants to take. And that's what I always thought a leader was — you know where you're going, you know why you're going there, you tell people they're going with you.

RK: Well, there are two ways: You can tell them to go, or they can follow you by choice.

VH: Right. So now I realize there are two types of leaders. Our business has become much more organized since I'm not as involved in it. We have a manager meeting every week and one of the things that Ben required in a recent manager meeting is that the head managers — the chef de cuisine, the floor manager, the beverage director — all do power points based on their roles in the restaurant. The chef de cuisine was like, 'I'm not doing that, that's a waste of my time. I need to focus on my work, not a power point.' Right there I think is the juxtaposition of those two types of leadership. And I think there's room for both of them.

RK: It's the administrator and the creative artist colliding at the same time.

VH: Right. But I think if you're an artist, and your role is in leadership, then the people who are buying into your work and are on your train are there based on their respect and admiration for your art, so you've got to make sure that's solid.

CM: I think a lot of artists fear they will have to give up being an artist in order to lead. And I think what you're really saying is you have to keep that fire and that clarity at the core of what you do, and that's why people will take your lead. That's a beautiful example of instinctive leadership, or leadership with willing followership, as opposed to command and control.

VH: This could have been an accident or it could have been something I put in place, but I've always had someone — a partner — who's really good at the other type of leadership.

CM: The structure.

VH: Structure, and math!

VH: I think that's largely how Ben and I have always worked. He organizes and he focuses. We definitely complement each other. And as we have matured, now we respect each other more and we get a lot more out of it.

RK: Is it hard being in business with your spouse?

VH: Yeah. That's one reason I enjoy this so much. One of the things about the restaurant is that the kitchen and the dining room are automatically at odds. He was the leader of the dining room, and I was the leader of the kitchen, so we were always set up to butt heads. Maybe if we had been more mature and I had higher self-esteem it would have been easier. It's been better now that we're not at odds just by the nature of our roles at work.

CM: I really relate to the idea that it potentially takes a woman a little longer to find her own voice, her own space, her own boundaries, because so much of what we're trained to do is be there for everybody else. But at the same time that means there's kind of an unfinished story in the middle of that, and you doubt yourself because you haven't yet done your work. Whereas, sometimes the way we grow guys, they grow

with their centers first and they learn to take care of people second. Those are different paths. I think it's natural to pull away and find your own voice. I think there's also a transition about every 10 years no matter what. I'm now 35 years into a creative career, and I just remember being so shocked at the times where I was like, 'I can't do that anymore, I have to do something else.' And moving on.

VH: And isn't it great that we have the opportunity to evolve and change? When I think about myself toiling in the kitchen over there, often I would think, 'This is what I'm going to do for the rest of my life.'

RK: In a good way or a bad way?

VH: In a bad way.

RK: You felt trapped in it?

VH: Yeah. I knew I had the potential to do other things, but we could never hire people so I could evolve into other roles. There was never enough of a buffer between me and the dishwasher to ensure I wasn't going to be washing dishes. Doing the show was a very deliberate action for me to get out of that situation.

RK: How would you define yourself at this point in your career, as an artist leader?

VH: I'm really excited about the possibilities and all the new ideas I have. I feel newly inspired. I have one project that's kind of wrapping up, or ramping up to another part of it, which is the promotion of the book. Then I'm really excited about what that next thing is.

RK: It's generative to be a creative leader.

VH: Yeah. And I get fatigued by things easily. I'm really hungry, I want to be inspired by a new project. I just need to get people to believe in that project.

CM: When I think about the contribution you make, and the optimism it takes to do what you did in this town, to me that's such an act of leadership.

RK: And bravery. And courage. And vision.

VH: And naiveté.

RK: Yeah, but there's nothing wrong with that! If you don't have a little of that, you're screwed!

VH: That's one of the beauties of new projects. If I knew what it was going to take when I got into it, I'm not sure I would have done it.

Epilogue

Vivian Howard takes risks, creating a generative path for herself, rather than a reactive one. If she experiences fear, it doesn't seem to inhibit the pursuit of her vision and passions. Lessons we can take from Vivian include:

- **Make sincere connections with people.** Let them know you care about them and they will respond in kind.
- **Tell the story.** A story translates information in an accessible and memorable way. Storytelling can make a topic come to life, and is a powerful tool to engage, excite and endear others to follow you.
- **Be genuine.** Likability is an influencer. It starts by owning your weaknesses and admitting your faults.
- **Follow your curiosity.** Careers can be ever-evolving if you are willing to explore what intrigues you.
- **Get others excited.** Passion and vision are contagious when people see how they can fit into it.
- **Lead beyond the art.** Social transformation can occur when the artist leader fuses passion and skill with community impact.

— *Rob Kramer*