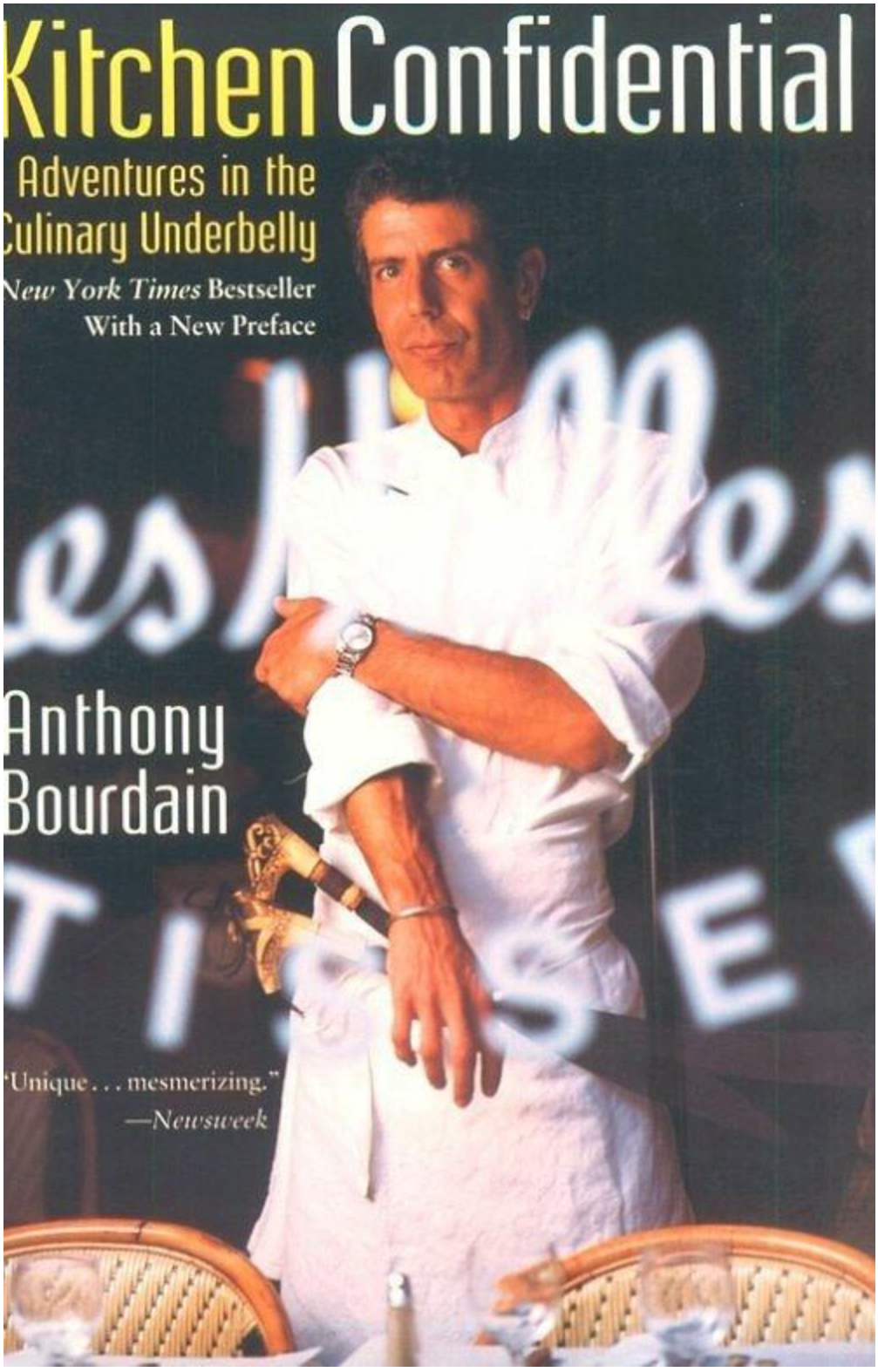

KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL

Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly

Anthony Bourdain

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Portions of this book have appeared previously elsewhere: much of the

'From Our Kitchen To Your Table' and a few other stray bits of business appeared in *The New Yorker*, under the title, 'Don't Eat Before Reading This'. The 'Mission to Tokyo' section appeared first in *Food Arts*, and readers of my short story for Canongate Press's *Rover's Return* collection will see that the fictional protagonist in my contribution, 'Chef's Night Out'

had a humiliating experience on a busy broiler station much like my own.

I'd also like to thank Joel Rose, to whom I owe everything . . . Karen Rinaldi and Panio Gianopoulous at Bloomsbury USA. Jamie Byng, David Remnick, the evil Stone Brothers (Rob and Web), Tracy Westmoreland, José de Meireilles and Philippe Lajaunie, Steven Tempel, Michael Batterberry, Kim Witherspoon, Sylvie Rabineau, David Fiore, Scott Bryan, and my ass-kicking crew at Les Halles: Franck, Eddy, Isidoro, Carlos, Omar, Angel, Bautista and Janine.

Cooks Rule.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I have changed the names of some of the individuals and some of the restaurants that are a part of my story.

To Nancy

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APPETIZER

A NOTE FROM THE CHEF

DON'T GET ME WRONG: I *love* the restaurant business. Hell, I'm still *in* the restaurant business-a lifetime, classically trained chef who, an hour from now, will probably be roasting bones for demi-glace and butchering beef tenderloins in a cellar prep kitchen on lower Park Avenue.

I'm not spilling my guts about everything I've seen, learned and done in my long and checkered career as dishwasher, prep drone, fry cook, grillardin, saucier, sous-chef and chef because I'm angry at the business, or because I want to horrify the dining public. I'd still *like* to be a chef, too, when this thing comes out, as this life is the only life I really know. If I need a favor at four o'clock in the morning, whether it's a quick loan, a shoulder to cry on, a

sleeping pill, bail money, or just someone to pick me up in a car in a bad neighborhood in the driving rain, I'm definitely *not* calling up a fellow writer. I'm calling my sous-chef, or a former sous-chef, or my saucier, someone I work with or have worked with over the last twenty-plus years.

No, I want to tell you about the dark recesses of the restaurant underbelly-a subculture whose centuries-old militaristic hierarchy and ethos of 'rum,

buggery and the lash' make for a mix of unwavering order and nerve-shattering chaos-because I find it all quite comfortable, like a nice warm bath. I can move around easily in this life. I speak the language. In the small, incestuous community of chefs and cooks in New York City, I know the people, and in my kitchen, I know how to behave (as opposed to in real life, where I'm on shakier ground). I want the professionals who read this to enjoy it for what it is: a straight look at a life many of us have lived and breathed for most of our days and nights to the exclusion of 'normal' social interaction. Never having had a Friday or Saturday night off, always working holidays, being busiest when the rest of the world is just getting out of work, makes for a sometimes peculiar world-view, which I hope my fellow chefs and cooks will recognize. The restaurant lifers who read this may or may not like what I'm doing. But they'll know I'm not lying.

I want the readers to get a glimpse of the true joys of making really good food at a professional level. I'd like them to understand what it feels like to attain the child's dream of running one's own pirate crew-what it feels like, looks like and smells like in the clatter and hiss of a big city restaurant kitchen. And I'd like to convey, as best I can, the strange delights of the language, patois and death's-head sense of humor found on the front lines.

I'd like civilians who read this to get a sense, at least, that this life, in spite of everything, can be *fun.*

As for me, I have always liked to think of myself as the Chuck Wepner of cooking. Chuck was a journeyman 'contender', referred to as the 'Bayonne Bleeder' back in the Ali-Frazier era. He could always be counted on to last a few solid rounds without going down, giving as good as he got. I admired his resilience, his steadiness, his ability to get it together, to take a beating like a man.

So, it's not Superchef talking to you here. Sure, I graduated CIA, knocked around Europe, worked some famous two-star joints in the city-damn good ones, too. I'm not some embittered hash-slinger out to slag off my more successful peers (though I will when the opportunity presents itself). I'm usually the guy they call in to some high-profile operation when the first chef turns out to be a psychopath, or a mean, megalomaniacal drunk. This book is about street-level cooking and its practitioners. Line cooks are the heroes. I've been hustling a nicely paid living out of this life for a long time-

most of it in the heart of Manhattan, the 'bigs'-so I know a few things. I've still got a few moves left in me.

Of course, there's every possibility this book *could* finish me in the business. There will be horror stories. Heavy drinking, drugs, screwing in the dry-goods area, unappetizing revelations about bad food-handling and unsavory industry-wide practices. Talking about why you probably shouldn't order fish on a Monday, why those who favor well-done get the scrapings from the bottom of the barrel, and why seafood frittata is *not a* wise brunch selection won't make me any more popular with potential future employers. My naked contempt for vegetarians, sauce-on-siders, the

'lactose-intolerant' and the cooking of the Ewok-like Emeril Lagasse is not going to get me my own show on the Food Network. I don't think I'll be going on ski weekends with Andre Soltner anytime soon or getting a back rub from that hunky Bobby Flay. Eric Ripert won't be calling me for ideas on tomorrow's fish special. But I'm simply *not* going to deceive anybody about the life as I've seen it.

It's all here: the good, the bad and the ugly. The interested reader might, on the one hand, find out how to make professional-looking and tasting plates with a few handy tools-and on the other hand, decide *never* to order the moules marinières again. *Tant pis*, man.

For me, the cooking life has been a long love affair, with moments both sublime and ridiculous. But like a love affair, looking back you remember the happy times best-the things that drew you in, attracted you in the first place, the things that kept you coming back for more. I hope I can give the reader a taste of those things and those times. I've never regretted the

unexpected left turn that dropped me in the restaurant business. And I've long believed that good food, good eating is all about risk. Whether we're talking about unpasteurized Stilton, raw oysters or working for organized crime 'associates', food, for me, has always been an adventure.

FIRST COURSE

FOOD IS GOOD

MY FIRST INDICATION THAT food was something other than a substance one stuffed in one's face when hungry-like filling up at a gas station-came after fourth-grade elementary school. It was on a family vacation to Europe, on the *Queen Mary*, in the cabin-class dining room.

There's a picture somewhere: my mother in her Jackie O sunglasses, my younger brother and I in our painfully cute cruisewear, boarding the big Cunard ocean liner, all of us excited about our first transatlantic voyage, our first trip to my father's ancestral homeland, France.

It was the soup.

It was *cold.*

This was something of a discovery for a curious fourth-grader whose entire experience of soup to this point had consisted of Campbell's cream of tomato and chicken noodle. I'd eaten in restaurants before, sure, but this was the first food I really noticed. It was the first food I enjoyed and, more important, remembered enjoying. I asked our patient British waiter what this delightfully cool, tasty liquid was.

'Vichyssoise,' came the reply, a word that to this day-even though it's now a tired old warhorse of a menu selection and one I've prepared thousands of times-still has a magical ring to it. I remember everything about the experience: the way our waiter ladled it from a silver tureen into my bowl, the crunch of tiny chopped chives he spooned on as garnish, the rich, creamy taste of leek and potato, the pleasurable shock, the surprise that it was cold.

I don't remember much else about the passage across the Atlantic. I saw *Boeing Boeing* with Jerry Lewis and Tony Curtis in the *Queen*'s movie theater, and a Bardot flick. The old liner shuddered and groaned and vibrated terribly the whole way-barnacles on the hull was the official explanation-and from New York to Cherbourg, it was like riding atop a giant lawn-mower. My brother and I quickly became bored, and spent much of our time in the 'Teen Lounge', listening to 'House of the Rising Sun' on the jukebox, or watching the water slosh around like a contained tidal wave in the below-deck salt-water pool.

But that cold soup stayed with me. It resonated, waking me up, making me aware of my tongue, and in some way, preparing me for future events.

My second pre-epiphany in my long climb to chefdom also came during that first trip to France. After docking, my mother, brother and I stayed with cousins in the small seaside town of Cherbourg, a bleak, chilly resort area in Normandy, on the English Channel. The sky was almost always cloudy; the water was inhospitably cold. All the neighborhood kids thought I knew Steve McQueen and John Wayne personally-as an American, it was assumed we were all pals, that we hung out together on the range, riding horses and gunning down miscreants-so I enjoyed a certain celebrity right away. The beaches, while no good for swimming, were studded with old Nazi blockhouses and gun emplacements, many still bearing visible bullet scars and the scorch of flamethrowers, and there were tunnels under the dunes-all very cool for a little kid to explore. My little French friends were, I was astonished to find, allowed to have a cigarette on Sunday, were given watered *vin ordinaire* at the dinner table, and best of all, they owned Velo Solex motorbikes. *This* was the way to raise kids, I recall thinking, unhappy that my mother did not agree.

So for my first few weeks in France, I explored underground passageways, looking for dead Nazis, played miniature golf, sneaked cigarettes, read a lot of Tintin and Asterix comics, scooted around on my friends' motorbikes and absorbed little life-lessons from observations that, for instance, the family friend Monsieur Dupont brought his mistress to some meals and his wife to others, his extended brood of children apparently indifferent to the switch.

I was largely unimpressed by the food.

The butter tasted strangely 'cheesy' to my undeveloped palate. The milk-a staple, no, a mandatory ritual in '60s American kiddie life-was undrinkable here. Lunch seemed always to consist of sandwich au jambon or croque-monsieur. Centuries of French cuisine had yet to make an impression. What I noticed about food, French style, was what they *didn't* have.

After a few weeks of this, we took a night train to Paris, where we met up with my father, and a spanking new Rover Sedan Mark III, our touring car.

In Paris, we stayed at the Hotel Lutétia, then a large, slightly shabby old pile on Boulevard Haussmann. The menu selections for my brother and me expanded somewhat, to include steak-frites and steak haché (hamburger).

We did all the predictable touristy things: climbed the Tour Eiffel, picnicked in the Bois de Boulogne, marched past the Great Works at the Louvre,

pushed toy sailboats around the fountain in the Jardin de Luxembourg-none of it much fun for a nine-year-old with an already developing criminal bent.

My principal interest at this time was adding to my collection of English translations of Tintin adventures. Hergé's crisply drafted tales of drug-smuggling, ancient temples, and strange and faraway places and cultures were *real* exotica for me. I prevailed on my poor parents to buy hundreds of dollars-worth of these stories at W. H. Smith, the English bookstore, just to keep me from whining about the deprivations of France. With my little short-shorts a permanent affront, I was quickly becoming a sullen, moody, difficult little bastard. I fought constantly with my brother, carped about everything, and was in every possible way a drag on my mother's Glorious Expedition.

My parents did their best. They took us everywhere, from restaurant to restaurant, cringing, no doubt, every time we insisted on steak haché (with ketchup, no less) and a 'Coca.' They endured silently my gripes about cheesy butter, the seemingly endless amusement I took in advertisements for a popular soft drink of the time, Pschitt. 'I want shit! I want shit!' They managed to ignore the eye-rolling and fidgeting when they spoke French, tried to encourage me to find something, anything, to enjoy.

And there came a time when, finally, they *didn't* take the kids along.

I remember it well, because it was such a slap in the face. It was a wake-up call that food could be important, a challenge to my natural belligerence. By being denied, a door opened.

The town's name was Vienne. We'd driven miles and miles of road to get there. My brother and I were fresh out of Tintins and cranky as hell. The French countryside, with its graceful, tree-lined roads, hedgerows, tilled fields and picture-book villages provided little distraction. My folks had by now endured weeks of relentless complaining through many tense and increasingly unpleasant meals. They'd dutifully ordered our steak haché, crudités variées, sandwich au jambon and the like long enough. They'd put up with our grousing that the beds were too hard, the pillows too soft, the neck-rolls and toilets and plumbing too weird. They'd even allowed us a little watered wine, as it was clearly the French thing to do-but also, I think,

to shut us up. They'd taken my brother and me, the two Ugliest Little Americans, everywhere.

Vienne was different.

They pulled the gleaming new Rover into the parking lot of a restaurant called, rather promisingly, La Pyramide, handed us what was apparently a hoarded stash of Tintins . . . *and then left us in the car!*

It was a hard blow. Little brother and I were left in that car for over three hours, an eternity for two miserable kids already bored out of their minds. I had plenty of time to wonder: *What could be so great inside those walls?*

They were eating in there. I knew that. And it was certainly a Big Deal; even at a witless age nine, I could recognize the nervous anticipation, the excitement, the near-reverence with which my beleaguered parents had approached this hour. And I had the Vichyssoise Incident still fresh in my mind. Food, it appeared, could be *important*. It could be an event. It had secrets.

I know now, of course, that La Pyramide, even in 1966, was the center of the culinary universe. Bocuse, Troisgros, *everybody* had done their time there, making their bones under the legendarily fearsome proprietor, Ferdinand Point. Point was the Grand Master of cuisine at the time, and La Pyramide was Mecca for foodies. This was a pilgrimage for my earnestly francophile parents. In some small way, I got that through my tiny, empty skull in the back of the sweltering parked car, even then.

Things changed. *I* changed after that.

First of all, I was furious. Spite, always a great motivating force in my life, caused me to become suddenly adventurous where food was concerned. I decided then and there to outdo my foodie parents. At the same time, I could gross out my still uninitiated little brother. I'd show *them* who the gourmet was!

Brains? Stinky, runny cheeses that smelled like dead man's feet?

Horsemeat? Sweetbreads? Bring it on!! Whatever had the most shock value became my meal of choice. For the rest of that summer, and in the summers that followed, I ate *everything*. I scooped gooey Vacherin, learned to love the cheesy, rich Normandy butter, especially slathered on baguettes and dipped in bitter hot chocolate. I sneaked red wine whenever possible, tried

fritures-tiny whole fish, fried and eaten with persillade-loving that I was eating heads, eyes, bones and all. I ate ray in beurre noisette, saucisson à l'ail, tripes, rognons de veau (kidneys), boudin noir that squirted blood down my chin.

And I had my first oyster.

Now, *this* was a truly significant event. I remember it like I remember losing my virginity-and in many ways, more fondly.

August of that first summer was spent in La Teste sur Mer, a tiny oyster village on the Bassin d'Arcachon in the Gironde (Southwest France). We stayed with my aunt, Tante Jeanne, and my uncle, Oncle Gustav, in the same red tile-roofed, white stuccoed house where my father had summered

as a boy. My Tante Jeanne was a frumpy, bespectacled, slightly smelly old woman, my Oncle Gustav, a geezer in coveralls and beret who smoked hand-rolled cigarettes until they disappeared onto the tip of his tongue.

Little had changed about La Teste in the years since my father had vacationed there. The neighbors were still all oyster fishermen. Their families still raised rabbits and grew tomatoes in their backyards. Houses had two kitchens, an inside one and an outdoor 'fish kitchen'. There was a hand pump for drinking water from a well, and an outhouse by the rear of the garden. Lizards and snails were everywhere. The main tourist attractions were the nearby Dune of Pyla (Europe's Largest Sand Dune!) and the nearby resort town of Arcachon, where the French flocked in unison for *Les Grandes Vacances*. Television was a Big Event. At seven o'clock, when the two national stations would come on the air, my Oncle Gustav would solemnly emerge from his room with a key chained to his hip and ceremoniously unlock the cabinet doors that covered the screen.

My brother and I were happier here. There was more to do. The beaches were warm, and closer in climate to what we knew back home, with the added attraction of the ubiquitous Nazi blockhouses. There were lizards to hunt down and exterminate with readily available *pétards*, firecrackers which one could buy legally (!) over-the-counter. There was a forest within walking distance where an actual hermit lived, and my brother and I spent hours there, spying on him from the underbrush. By now I could read and enjoy comic books in French and of course I was eating- *really* eating.

Murky brown soupe de poisson, tomato salad, moules marinières, poulet

basquaise (we were only a few miles from the Basque country). We made day trips to Cap Ferret, a wild, deserted and breathtakingly magnificent Atlantic beach with big rolling waves, taking along baguettes and saucissons and wheels of cheese, wine and Evian (bottled water was at that time unheard of back home). A few miles west was Lac Cazeaux, a fresh-water lake where my brother and I could rent *pédalo* watercraft and pedal our way around the deep. We ate gaufres, delicious hot waffles, covered in whipped cream and powdered sugar. The two hot songs of that summer on the Cazeaux jukebox were 'Whiter Shade of Pale' by Procol Harum, and

'These Boots Were Made for Walkin' by Nancy Sinatra. The French played those two songs over and over again, the music punctuated by the sonic booms from French air force jets which would swoop over the lake on their way to a nearby bombing range. With all the rock and roll, good stuff to eat and high-explosives at hand, I was reasonably happy.

So, when our neighbor, Monsieur Saint-Jour, the oyster fisherman, invited my family out on his *penas* (oyster boat), I was enthusiastic.

At six in the morning, we boarded Monsieur Saint-Jour's small wooden vessel with our picnic baskets and our sensible footwear. He was a crusty old bastard, dressed like my uncle in ancient denim coveralls, espadrilles and beret. He had a leathery, tanned and windblown face, hollow cheeks, and the tiny broken blood vessels on nose and cheeks that everyone seemed to have from drinking so much of the local Bordeaux. He hadn't fully briefed his guests on what was involved in these daily travails. We put-putted out to a buoy marking his underwater oyster *parc*, a fenced-off section of bay bottom, and we sat . . . and sat . . . and sat, in the roaring August sun, waiting for the tide to go out. The idea was to float the boat over the stockaded fence walls, then sit there until the boat slowly sank with the water level, until it rested on the *bassin* floor. At this point, Monsieur Saint-Jour, and his guests presumably, would rake the oysters, collect a few good specimens for sale in port, and remove any parasites that might be endangering his crop.

There was, I recall, still about two feet of water left to go before the hull of the boat settled on dry ground and we could walk about the *parc*. We'd already polished off the Brie and baguettes and downed the Evian, but I was still hungry, and characteristically said so.

Monsieur Saint-Jour, on hearing this-as if challenging his American passengers-inquired in his thick Girondais accent, if any of us would care to try an oyster.

My parents hesitated. I doubt they'd realized they might have actually to *eat* one of the raw, slimy things we were currently floating over. My little brother recoiled in horror.

But I, in the proudest moment of my young life, stood up smartly, grinning with defiance, and volunteered to be the first.

And in that unforgettably sweet moment in my personal history, that one moment still more alive for me than so many of the other 'firsts' which followed-first pussy, first joint, first day in high school, first published book, or any other thing-I attained glory. Monsieur Saint-Jour beckoned me over to the gunwale, where he leaned over, reached down until his head nearly disappeared underwater, and emerged holding a single silt-encrusted oyster, huge and irregularly shaped, in his rough, clawlike fist. With a snubby, rust-covered oyster knife, he popped the thing open and handed it to me, everyone watching now, my little brother shrinking away from this glistening, vaguely sexual-looking object, still dripping and nearly alive.

I took it in my hand, tilted the shell back into my mouth as instructed by the by now beaming Monsieur Saint-Jour, and with one bite and a slurp, wolfed it down. It tasted of seawater . . . of brine and flesh . . . and somehow . . . of the future.

Everything was different now. Everything.

I'd not only survived-I'd *enjoyed.*

This, I knew, was the magic I had until now been only dimly and spitefully aware of. I was hooked. My parents' shudders, my little brother's expression of unrestrained revulsion and amazement only reinforced the sense that I had, somehow, become a man. I had had an *adventure*, tasted forbidden fruit, and everything that followed in my life-the food, the long and often stupid and self-destructive chase for *the next thing*, whether it was drugs or sex or some other new sensation-would all stem from this moment.

I'd learned something. Viscerally, instinctively, spiritually-even in some small, precursive way, sexually-and there was no turning back. The genie

was out of the bottle. My life as a cook, and as a chef, had begun.

Food had *power.*

It could inspire, astonish, shock, excite, delight and *impress*. It had the power to please me . . . and others. This was valuable information.

For the rest of that summer, and in later summers, I'd often slip off by myself to the little stands by the port, where one could buy brown paper bags of unwashed, black-covered oysters by the dozen. After a few lessons from my new soul-mate, blood brother and bestest buddy, Monsieur Saint-Jour-who was now sharing his after-work bowls of sugared *vin ordinaire* with me too-I could easily open the oysters by myself, coming in from behind with the knife and popping the hinge like it was Aladdin's cave.

I'd sit in the garden among the tomatoes and the lizards and eat my oysters and drink Kronenbourgs (France was a wonderland for under-age drinkers), happily reading *Modesty Blaise* and the *Katzenjammer Kids* and the lovely hard-bound *bandes dessinées* in French, until the pictures swam in front of my eyes, smoking the occasional pilfered Gitane. And I still associate the taste of oysters with those heady, wonderful days of illicit late-afternoon buzzes. The smell of French cigarettes, the taste of beer, that unforgettable feeling of doing something I shouldn't be doing.

I had, as yet, no plans to cook professionally. But I frequently look back at my life, searching for that fork in the road, trying to figure out where, exactly, I *went bad* and became a thrill-seeking, pleasure-hungry sensualist, always looking to shock, amuse, terrify and manipulate, seeking to fill that empty spot in my soul with something new.

I like to think it was Monsieur Saint-Jour's fault. But of course, it was me all along.

FOOD IS SEX

IN 1973, UNHAPPILY IN love, I graduated high school a year early so I could chase the object of my desire to Vassar College-the less said about that part of my life, the better, believe me. Let it suffice to say that by age eighteen I was a thoroughly undisciplined young man, blithely flunking or

fading out of college (I couldn't be bothered to attend classes). I was angry at myself and at everyone else. Essentially, I treated the world as my

ashtray. I spent most of my waking hours drinking, smoking pot, scheming, and doing my best to amuse, outrage, impress and penetrate anyone silly enough to find me entertaining. I was-to be frank-a spoiled, miserable, narcissistic, self-destructive and thoughtless young lout, badly in need of a good ass-kicking. Rudderless and unhappy, I went in with some friends on a summer share in Provincetown, Cape Cod. It was what my friends were doing and that was enough for me.

Provincetown was (and is) essentially a small Portuguese fishing village all the way out on the fish-hooked tip of the Cape. During the summer months, however, it became Times Square/Christopher Street-by-the-Sea. This was the '70s, remember, so factor that in when you conjure up the image of a once quaint New England port town, clogged with tourists, day-trippers, hippies, drifters, lobster poachers, slutty chicks, dopers, refugees from Key West, and thousands upon thousands of energetically cruising gay men. For a rootless young man with sensualist inclinations, it was the perfect getaway.

Unfortunately, I needed money. My on-again-off-again girlfriend spun pizza for a living. My room-mates, who had summered in P-town before, had jobs waiting for them. They cooked, washed dishes, waited tables-usually at night-so we all went to the beaches and ponds each morning, smoked pot, sniffed a little coke, dropped acid and sunbathed nude, as well as indulging in other healthy teenage activities.

Tired of my drain on the household finances, one annoyed and practical room-mate hooked me up with a dishwashing gig at the restaurant where she waited tables. Dishwashers (sudbusters, aka pearl divers) were the most transient breed in the seasonal restaurant business, so when one goofball failed to show up for work for two days, I was in. It was my introduction to the life-and at first, I did not go happily.

Scrubbing pots and pans, scraping plates and peeling mountains of potatoes, tearing the little beards off mussels, picking scallops and cleaning shrimp did not sound or look attractive to me. But it was from these humble beginnings that I began my strange climb to chefdom. Taking that one job,

as dishwasher at the Dreadnaught, essentially pushed me down the path I still walk to this day.

The Dreadnaught was-well, you've eaten there, or someplace like it: a big, old, ramshackle driftwood pile, built out over the water on ancient wooden pylons. In bad weather, the waves would roll under the dining-room floor and thud loudly against the sea wall. Grey wood shingles, bay windows, and inside, the classic Olde New Englande/Rusty Scupper/Aye Matey/Cap'n Whats's decor: hanging fishnets, hurricane lamps, buoys, nautical bric-a-brac, the bars fashioned from halved lifeboats. Call it Early Driftwood.

We served fried clams, fried shrimp, fried flounder, fried scallops, French fries, steamed lobsters, a few grilled and broiled steaks, chops and fish fillets to the mobs of tourists who'd pour into town each week between the 4th of July and Labor Day.

I was surprisingly happy in my work. The Dreadnaught management were an aged, retiring and boozy lot who stayed out of the kitchen most of the time. The waitresses were attractive and cheerful, free with drinks for the kitchen and with their favors as well.

And the cooks?

The cooks *ruled.*

There was Bobby, the chef, a well-toasted, late-thirtyish ex-hippie who, like a lot of people in P-town, had come for vacation years back and stayed. He lived there year-round, cheffing in the summer, doing roofing and carpentry and house-sitting during the off-season. There was Lydia, a half-mad, matronly Portuguese divorcee with a teenage daughter. Lydia made the clam chowder for which we were somewhat famous, and during service dished out the vegetables and side dishes. She drank a lot. There was Tommy, the fry cook, a perpetually moving surfer dude with electric blue eyes, who even when there was nothing to do, rocked back and forth like an elephant to 'keep up the momentum'. There was Mike, an ex-con and part-time methadone dealer, who worked salad station.

In the kitchen, they were like gods. They dressed like pirates: chef's coats with the arms slashed off, blue jeans, ragged and faded headbands, gore-covered aprons, gold hoop earrings, wrist cuffs, turquoise necklaces and

chokers, rings of scrimshaw and ivory, tattoos-all the decorative detritus of the long-past Summer of Love.

They had style and swagger, and they seemed afraid of nothing. They drank everything in sight, stole whatever wasn't nailed down, and screwed their way through floor staff, bar customers and casual visitors like nothing I'd ever seen or imagined. They carried big, bad-ass knives, which they kept honed and sharpened to a razor's edge. They hurled dirty sauté pans and pots across the kitchen and into my pot sink with casual accuracy. They spoke their own peculiar dialect, an unbelievably profane patois of countercultural jargon and local Portugee slang, delivered with ironic inflection, calling each other, for instance, 'Paaahd' for 'Partner' or 'Daahlin'

for 'Darling'. They looted the place for everything it was worth, stocking up well in advance for the lean months of the offseason. A couple of nights a week, the chef would back his Volkswagen van up to the kitchen door and load whole sirloin strips, boxes of frozen shrimp, cases of beer, sides of bacon into the cargo area. The speed racks over each station-containing bottles of cooking wine, oil, etc. for easy access during service-were always loaded with at least two highball glasses per cook; Lydia liked to call them

'summertime coolers', usually strong Cape Codders, Sea Breezes or Greyhounds. Joints were smoked in the downstairs walk-in, and cocaine-always available, though in those days *very* expensive and still considered a rich man's drug-was everywhere. On payday everyone in the kitchen handed money back and forth in a Byzantine rondelay of transactions as the cooks settled up the previous week's drug debts, loans and wagers.

I saw a lot of bad behavior that first year in P-town. I was impressed. These guys were master criminals, sexual athletes, compared to my pitiful college hijinks. Highwaymen rogues, buccaneers, cut-throats, they were like young princes to me, still only a lowly dishwasher. The life of the cook was a life of *adventure*, looting, pillaging and rock-and-rolling through life with a

carefree disregard for all conventional morality. It looked pretty damn good to me on the other side of the line.

But if there was one moment where I saw clearly what I wanted, it was at the end of that summer.

I'd moved up a bit by now. Mike had gone missing on a meth jag and I had been promoted to the salad station plating shrimp cocktails, cracking

oysters and cherrystone clams, mixing canned lobster meat with mayonnaise and filling champagne glasses with strawberries and whipped cream.

The Dreadnaught line was a long, narrow affair: a cold station by the exit door to the parking lot, a double-decker lobster steamer where we'd kill off the 1½ and 2-pounders by the dozen, stacking them up like cordwood before slamming shut the heavy metal doors and turning the wheel, giving them the steam. Then came a row of deep-fryers, a range, a big Garland pull-out broiler, a few more burners, and finally a brick hearth for charcoal grilling, all of this bordered by the usual pass-through on the other side- wooden cutting board/counter with sunken steam table, and below that, the low-boy reach-in refrigerators for reserve supplies. By the far-end open hearth, where Bobby, the chef, worked, was a Dutch door, the top half kept open so incoming tourists could get a peek at some lobsters or steaks grilling as they entered and get in the mood.

One weekday, a large wedding party arrived, fresh from the ceremony: bride, groom, ushers, family and friends. Married up-Cape, the happy couple and party had come down to P-town for the celebratory dinner following, presumably, a reception. They were high when they arrived.

From the salad station at the other end of the line, I saw a brief, slurry exchange between Bobby and some of the guests. I noticed particularly the bride, who at one point leaned into the kitchen and inquired if any of us 'had any hash'. When the party moved on into the dining room, I pretty much forgot about them.

We banged out meals for a while, Lydia amusing us with her usual patter, Tommy dunking clams and shrimp into hot grease, the usual ebb and flow of busy kitchen. Then the bride reappeared at the open Dutch door. She was blonde and good-looking in her virginal wedding white, and she spoke closely with the chef for a few seconds; Bobby suddenly grinned from ear to ear, the sunburned crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes growing more pronounced. A few moments later she was gone again, but Bobby, visibly trembling, suddenly said, 'Tony! Watch my station,' and promptly scooted out the back door.

Ordinarily, this alone would have been a momentous event. To be allowed to work the busy broiler station, to take the helm-even for a few minutes-

was a dream come true. But curiosity got the better of all of us remaining in the kitchen. We had to look.

There was a fenced-off garbage stockade right outside the window by the dishwasher, that concealed the stacked trash and cans of edible waste the restaurant sold to a pig farm up-Cape, from the cars in the parking lot.

Soon, all of us-Tommy, Lydia, the new dishwasher and I-were peering through the window, where in full view of his assembled crew, Bobby was noisily rear-ending the bride. She was bent obligingly over a 55-gallon drum, her gown hiked up over her hips. Bobby's apron was up, resting over her back as he pumped away furiously, the young woman's eyes rolled up into her head, mouth whispering, 'Yess, yess . . . good . . . good . . .'

While her new groom and family chawed happily on their flounder fillets and deep-fried scallops just a few yards away in the Dreadnaught dining room, here was the blushing bride, getting an impromptu send-off from a total stranger.

And I knew then, dear reader, for the first time: I wanted to be a chef.

FOOD IS PAIN

I DON'T WANT YOU to think that everything up to this point was about fornication, free booze and ready access to drugs. I should recall for you the