



Essay by Michael Anton

WORK THE LINE

IN THE ESOTERIC, INSIDER TERMINOLOGY of the restaurant world, “the line” refers *en masse* to the people, the physical space, the equipment (except knives and hand tools, which are personal to each cook), the arrangement of things, the order, the rules, the menu, the methods of the “back of the house”—which is to say, the entire institution that cranks out plate after plate of identical food in a professional kitchen. One can search high and low for the origin of the term and not do much better than assuming it refers to the long, straight row of stations, sequenced in the order in which the courses are served: *garde-manger* for salads and cold appetizers, *entremetier* (eggs), *poissonier* (fish), *saucier* (meat, poultry, stocks and sauces), *pâtissier* (desserts) and in some restaurants separate stations for hot apps, soups, pasta, and the grill. Space selling at a premium in most cities, and with building layouts tending toward the irregular, setting up a straight line is impractical. Stations go where they will fit. But “the line” endures.

That there is a military connotation may be no accident. In the Navy, “line officers” are those who sail the ships and fire the guns, as opposed to supply officers, chaplains, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and everybody else. The phrase, which originated in the way old wooden men-of-war would line up to maximize the impact of their broadsides, was subsequently picked up by armies and air forces.

Auguste Escoffier—“king of chefs and chef of kings”—was already a successful cook when, on the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, he joined the French army. His experience cooking for and observing soldiers convinced him that the average professional kitchen was a chaotic mess. There had to be a better way and military discipline with strictly defined roles and rigid hierarchy was the answer. After the war, he partnered with César Ritz and moved to London to open the kitchens at the brand-new Savoy Hotel where, with *carte blanche* from the hotel’s backers, he hired a slew of French cooks and organized them into the first formal *brigade de cuisine*.

Escoffier’s regime, right down to the names of the ranks, lives on to this day and is more influential than even his canonical recipes. To “work the line” is to cook: from lowly *commis* all the way up to *chefs de cuisine*, who are like watch officers, the senior-most cooks who are physically present in the kitchen, line cooks are the infantry, the armor, the pilots, the helmsmen, and the gunners of the restaurant. Dishwashers, waiters, runners, hostesses, bartenders, managers, owners, accountants, even executive chefs—the restaurant’s admirals and generals—well, they are necessary, one understands, in the same way you can’t wage a campaign without supply officers. But they are, all of them, as a phrase one hears in the national security bureaucracy of the U.S. government has it, “staff, not line.”

Despite the fact that he is paid less (sometimes absurdly so) than almost everyone else in the restaurant, the line cook accords himself, and is accorded by others, a certain elevated status. This is not just because what he does is the beating heart of the operation—one may say in Aristotelian terms that the line cook is the restaurant’s efficient cause while his product is both its formal and final causes—but also because it is hard and requires training and skill. Not to suggest that waiting tables is easy. Anyone who has endured bad or uneven service at an expensive place that should know better can appreciate that seamless service is harder to pull off than it looks. But it is far easier, quicker and more certain of success to take a line cook and make a good waiter out of him than the reverse. Everybody knows it, even—especially—the waiters who can collect in one dinner service more from tips alone than a cook in back earns in an entire 16-hour double shift.

The pay is low in part because the supply of labor is high. This has always been true but it is much truer now that the restaurant scene—or, more precisely, the kitchen—has become glamorous. Middle- and upper middle-class boys and girls from all over America (and, increasingly, England) are saying no, thanks, to the Ivies and Oxbridge, to the whole college scene, even, and either packing off to culinary school or else just starting at the bottom rung on the brigade ladder and working their way up. Kevin Gillespie,



Books Mentioned in this essay:

Julie and Julia: My Year of Cooking Dangerously, by Julie Powell. Little, Brown and Company, 400 pages, \$7

Mastering the Art of French Cooking: 40th Anniversary Edition, by Simone Beck, Louisette Bertholle, and Julia Child. Knopf, 684 pages, \$40

Escoffier: Le Guide Culinaire, Revised, by Georges Auguste Escoffier. Wiley, 646 pages, \$70

L'Art de la cuisine française au dix-neuvième siècle. Traité élémentaire et pratique, by Marie-Antoine Carême and Armand Plumerey. Out-of-print.

The Making of a Chef: Mastering Heat at the Culinary Institute of America, by Michael Ruhlman. Holt Paperbacks, 336 pages, \$18.99

The Soul of a Chef: The Journey Toward Perfection, by Michael Ruhlman. Penguin, 384 pages, \$16

The Reach of a Chef: Professional Cooks in the Age of Celebrity, by Michael Ruhlman. Penguin, 352 pages, \$17

Kitchen Confidential, by Anthony Bourdain. Bloomsbury, 320 pages, \$25.99

Beaten, Seared and Sauced: On Becoming a Chef at the Culinary Institute of America, by Jonathan Dixon. Clarkson Potter, out-of-print

Blood, Bones & Butter, The Inadvertent Education of a Reluctant Chef, by Gabrielle Hamilton. Random House, 304 pages, \$26

Ratio: The Simple Codes Behind the Craft of Everyday Cooking, by Michael Ruhlman. Scribner, 272 pages, \$27

Ruhlman's Twenty: The Ideas and Techniques That Will Make You a Better Cook, by Michael Ruhlman. Chronicle Books, 368 pages, \$40

The French Laundry Cookbook, by Thomas Keller. Artisan, 336 pages, \$50

Bouchon, by Thomas Keller. Artisan, 360 pages, \$50

Ad Hoc at Home, by Thomas Keller. Artisan, 368 pages, \$50

The Saucier's Apprentice, by Raymond Sokolov. Knopf, 256 pages, \$28.95

Heat: An Amateur's Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta-Maker, and Apprentice to a Dante-Quoting Butcher in Tuscany, by Bill Buford. Vintage, 336 pages, \$16

The Sorcerer's Apprentices: A Season in the Kitchen at Ferran Adrià's elBulli, by Lisa Abend. Atria Books, 304 pages, \$16

Life, on the Line: A Chef's Story of Chasing Greatness, Facing Death, and Redefining the Way We Eat, by Grant Achatz and Nick Kokonas. Gotham Trade Paperback, 432 pages, \$18

a successful Atlanta cook and contestant on the hit TV show *Top Chef*, turned down a scholarship to MIT to become a chef. His mother approved. Mine would have fainted.

I understand Gillespie's impulse, though. Twenty years ago, B.A. in hand and languishing in graduate school up to my eye sockets in Plato and Aristotle, I got the itch to chuck it all and cook. I snagged a job cutting veg, the lowest commis on the greasy pole, at the Treaty of Paris in Annapolis, Maryland, because I needed the money and I thought it would be fun. Long before *Julie and Julia* (2005), I had worked through most every recipe in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (1961) and going pro seemed like the logical next step. That, and the best culinary school in the country, the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), requires prospective students to log at least six months' experience in a professional kitchen before the admissions officers will even read your application.

In the end, I didn't make it to six months. Attempts to cajole my parents into paying for yet another degree, this one bearing no connection to all that I had studied before, went nowhere. Loans were available but somehow I intuitively understood, decades before the Occupy Wall Street scruffballs made student debt a *cause cé-*

lèbre, that going into five-figure hock to land a job that I'd be lucky if it paid above minimum wage was not a great idea. Instead, I did what every young conservative does who fancies himself an intellectual and lives within 50 miles of D.C.: I got a job at a think tank.

Looking back I can see that had I gone through with it, I would have been among the first to surf what is now an enormous wave, not catching it at the curl, maybe—the modern celebrity chef scene arguably began in the mid-1980s—but dropping onto the face before it became littered with other boards, early enough to feel like a pioneer, like a dot-commer around 1997. This is not to suggest that I would have had some glorious culinary career—who knows?—only that on some elemental level whatever it was that turned cheffing from prole to prestigious clearly had affected my own psyche lo those many years ago.

Messiah and Redeemer

IN FRANCE, OF COURSE, THINGS WERE DIFFERENT, though not *very* different. Escoffier single-handedly elevated the status of his profession above the servile dregs. His restaurant at the Savoy proved a huge success and

tempted London's upper classes out of private homes for meals for the first time in the history of English society. He never worked in France again but that didn't matter since every restaurant in England above a pub or country inn was French and English society in those days was society for all intents and purposes, setting standards of taste and elegance for the entire world. He wrote *Le Guide Culinaire* (1903; expanded edition, 1921), the New Testament of *haute cuisine* (the Old being Marie-Antoine Carême's *L'Art de la Cuisine Française*, 1833–1847). All his innovations were implemented across the channel, which still trained the majority of the working chefs who spread out across the Continent and manned the kitchens in all of England's posh restaurants and smart homes (think of Aunt Dahlia's Anatole). Despite a mania for French food, the English just couldn't manage to crank out any homegrown talent until the rise, three generations later, of Marco Pierre White, Gordon Ramsay, and Heston Blumenthal. In France, on the other hand, cooking became for lower and working class boys a path into the bourgeoisie and also a shot at travel and adventure. The second-highest paid member of the *Titanic's* crew, after Captain E.J. Smith, was Pierre Rousseau, the head chef. Escoffier was



awarded France's *Legion d'Honneur* and Kaiser Wilhelm II once told him, after eating a particularly elaborate meal, "I am the emperor of Germany but you are the emperor of chefs."

But of course that was not exactly an invitation to join the emperor at the table. Such would have been unthinkable. Except for the small fact that there are no more emperors, it is not merely thinkable now, it is common.

There is no shortage of chronicles (and chroniclers) of how this happened but the best is Michael Ruhlman. A nice, well brought up Midwestern boy, Ruhlman got interested in education and wrote a book about his private high school, the all-boys University School, the greenhouse, the hydroponic nursery for what's left of Cleveland's elite. For his next project Ruhlman sweet-talked the CIA, whose administration at first thought he was just trying to finagle a free education, into letting him take classes like a regular student and write a book about it (why hadn't I thought of that?).

But before there was Ruhlman there was Bourdain. Chronologically, that's not quite accurate: Ruhlman's book on the CIA, *The Making of a Chef* (1997), came out before *Kitchen Confidential* (2000), Bourdain's notorious tell-all—or is it more properly termed an "invent-all"? Certainly it's an "invent-some." Anyway, Anthony Bourdain exploded first in the public consciousness of cheffing. In 1999, he was slaving away as the chef de cuisine at Les Halles, a stupendously successful though not terribly good bistro in the nether-nabe between Murray Hill and Gramercy Park. The décor is exactly what it should be, pure Lost Generation Parisian dank, but the food may as well have been sitting on Gertrude Stein's table for the past 90 years. When I used to live in the area there was another casual frog spot directly across Park Avenue, called the Park Bistro, in fact, and it was more expensive but so much better that I never went to Les Halles after I discovered the rival. And yet because of Bourdain, Les Halles barrels on, banging out 600 covers a night (a "cover" is one diner's meal, start to finish, however many courses he orders), while the poor Park Bistro's building was torn down and it had to crawl two blocks south where it died a quiet death.

So Bourdain is there at Les Halles, well into his third decade on the line, career peaking at a dispiritingly low altitude, a fact nobody understands better than himself, but he's managed not only to scratch out two novels but actually get them published. They sank without a bubble, as most novels do, but they serve as a useful totemic reminder to editors and others that "This man is multifaceted" and, importantly, "He can write." Every morning for a couple of weeks, before his brutally long double shift on the line,

he works on an article about the seamier side of the professional kitchen, for instance, don't order fish on Mondays because chances are that fetid flounder was delivered at the crack of dawn Friday and then slowly rotted in the *poissonier's* reach-in as the door was opened over and over and the temp inside crawled up into the danger zone (a cooks' term for the range between 40° and 140° F, at which food spoils) to drop again only after the door was closed for the last time after a multi-hour service, repeat six times (lunch plus dinner over three days). Also, did you know that bus boys, when they take uneaten bread off a table, often give it back to the waiters who then shuttle it right back into the dining room and plop it down in front of an incoming guest? Welcome, *madame et monsieur*, and would you prefer bottled water or Chateau Giuliani? These and other nauseating tidbits were packaged into "Don't Eat Before Reading This," in the April 19, 1999 *New Yorker*.

Now, it's bad enough for all the struggling writers out there working some prole job either for the money or for the "authenticity" that can't be earned from a desk that this...cook...not only gets himself published, but in *The New Yorker*. *The New Yorker!* The bastard starts right at the apex. By 1999, the middlebrow stench described by Norman Podhoretz in *Ex Friends* (1999) that clung to *The New Yorker*—"The most successful suburban women's magazine in the country" Tom Wolfe wrote in 1965—the odor that made all the serious intellectuals despise its high circulation and those kelp beds of tony ads over on the margins, well, by 1999 that smell had dissipated into the wide open air and no trace was left. Nobody looks down on *The New Yorker* any more. On the contrary, to be published in its pages is to be ordained as...A Writer...to become a made man *ad unotratto*.

Then Bourdain does all the poor envious slob one better. He gets a book contract based on that one article. And, of course, the book becomes a life-transforming mega-bestseller. It happens exactly the way every hunchbacked finger-tapping sucker with delusions of literary grandeur, skin warmed only by the cathode rays of his 15-year-old analog Acer monitor, dreams it will happen. Bourdain's life on the line ends and he becomes a star, with his own TV show and a one man stage act that fills theaters and community centers all over the heartland. One shot and the SOB lands on the moon.

Kitchen Confidential is a hugely entertaining book. Truly, the man can write—probably better than he can cook. How true it all is, well, that's another question. The book is essentially a non-stop orgy of lurid tales of sex, drugs, rock & roll, crime (gun running out of the bathroom?) more sex (in the walk-in, on the counters, in the alley, with waitresses, hostesses, patrons, other

cooks, rut rut rut, does anyone *cook* around here?). Of course there must be something to it and even if it's half made up—hell, even 90%—it still blows the lid off the typical chef memoir, which Russ Parsons, the top food writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, has aptly described as a staid Horatio Alger story with a French accent.

Now, the world Bourdain describes is anything but glamorous. His kitchens are dirty, his restaurants mediocre at best, his bosses shady, his co-workers barely above the level of street thugs. (In the *New Yorker* piece, Bourdain recalls coming across a study reporting that the most-cited occupation by inmates entering prison is "cook.") But, in the same way that a good movie villain always grabs the audience more firmly by the throat than the nice guy hero—everybody quotes Gordon Gekko; nobody quotes Bud Fox—Bourdain's book spawned a host of imitators and wannabes. Jonathan Dixon, author of the c-school memoir *Beaten, Seared and Sauced* (2011), tells the disquieting story of one young CIA student who got himself inked with a design—"skull, capped with chef's toque, a long knife clenched between the teeth"—that Bourdain only went so far as to emboss on the front cover of his cookbook. "Anthony Bourdain is my favorite all-time cook," another student declares and then adds, "Actually, he's about my favorite person on the planet." Worse: the CIA makes its students do externships, full-on jobs in a real restaurant kitchen, before returning to finish up their coursework and graduate. The smart thing to do is shoot as high as you can, go for the restaurant with the most prestige (and highest difficulty level) even if it means slavery and penury (the chef's trajectory, after all, is supposed be like that of the artist: suffer, starve and then...success!). Dixon reports meeting two students who apply to Les Halles in order to cook with Bourdain:

"You know," I say, "he isn't going to be there, right?"

This news was greeted with, first, a blank stare; next, dismay; and finally, anger.

"Yes," one of them insisted. "He will be."

No, kid, he won't be. Just as no Wharton grad is going to find Gordon Gekko kicking up his heels on the 55th floor of 60 Wall.

Dixon concludes, sorrowfully, that if "Thomas Keller is a God in the world of the CIA, I guess that would make Escoffier the holy spirit. But without question, the messiah and redeemer is Anthony Bourdain, and *Kitchen Confidential* is his Apocrypha."

This is not to blame Bourdain overmuch. The point of writing is to write something good and he did that; it's not his fault, not entirely, that a whole generation of proto-chefs wants to re-live



his dissolute life. As to his (many) literary imitators, the less said about them the better. Parsons read all those books so that we don't have to and we owe him a drink. But would that he could have spared us Gabrielle Hamilton! Hamilton is like a female Bourdain, only much more successful as a chef, if not as a writer, not yet, but given the rhapsodic reviews of her memoir *Blood, Bones & Butter* (2011), that could change. Really, there is not much new here except that the sex, drugs, fighting, stealing, etc., are being embraced with gusto by a female this time, and who on earth can really be shocked by that in the age of *Girls Gone Wild*? The writing quality is there, for the most part, one must admit, but she comes off as such a thoroughly unlikable person that it doesn't matter.

Dinner with Ruhlman

BUT AS I WAS SAYING, IT WASN'T GLAMOUR that Bourdain imparted to cheffing, it was something arguably more impactful: coolness. Michael Ruhlman is anything but cool—he's much too earnest for that—and his writings provide a necessary corrective to the Bourdain bravado. Cooking school is not glamorous, not even at the CIA, the Harvard of its field, but Ruhlman found plenty of glamour elsewhere, or it found him. The CIA book was supposed to be about education, not so much about food, but while there Ruhlman caught the bug and before his book was even published he knew he had to write more about the line.

Apologies in advance to the envy brigade—this is going to hurt!—in Cleveland there is a lady he knows, very slightly, who is well connected to the big time chef world. He goes to her for advice on how to proceed with a follow-up book. She says, Yeah, maybe I have some ideas, but you know, I am doing the recipe testing for Thomas Keller's cookbook for his restaurant, The French Laundry—have you heard of it?—and Thomas doesn't want a cookbook writer, he wants a "real writer" who can tell a story, are you interested?

Um, yeah, he thinks he can scare up a little interest.

This is 1997, before Ruth Reichel's *New York Times* article that made a reservation at The French Laundry forever after harder to get than an audience with the pope. But still everyone in the food world knows who Keller is, the same way that anyone vaguely associated with music could name all four Beatles in January 1964. This is also before Keller changed his menu to nine-course tastings only, priced like a Toyota Prius. Having had the good fortune to eat there before the revolution remains for me a perverse point of pride, like one of those mooks from the old neighborhood who knew Jimmy before he became a star.

Anyway, the next thing Ruhlman knows he is sitting there at The French Laundry in Yountville, California, with his prospective co-author plus Keller's literary agent and her husband, who are in from New York. They are offered menus but the waiter says that Keller wants to cook special for them and soon the courses just start flying out, one after the other...anchovy marinated in lemon and olive oil with baked cluster tomatoes...pickled salutation oysters (what the hell are those?) with a cappellini of marinated cucumbers and sevruga...truffle custard with ragout of summer truffles and a chive chip...plus clever little plates that would come to be known as Keller's specialty, his way of messing with your expectations and stirring your memories. For instance, he sends out a littleneck clam shell on a bed of rock salt, peppercorns, cloves, allspice, and star anise, with a clump of cappellini inside and a single clam on top and the waiter calls it "linguini with clam sauce." That barnacle encrusted spaghetti shack war horse! Marvelous! Similarly, "Peas and Carrots" at The French Laundry is in fact a chive-infused crepe filled with lobster meat, shallot *ciseler* as fine as grains of sand, one pass with the knife only, please, no going back and rock-chopping all those big pieces that shouldn't have been in there in the first place, thank you very much, plus mascarpone and lobster *glacé* (a highly refined sauce made from simmering lobster bodies and aromatic vegetables in liquid, straining it, then keeping it on the heat until it reduces to a syrup), served on a ginger-carrot emulsion and topped with pea shoots dressed in lemon oil. The Jolly Green Giant frozen food aisle moniker is Keller's idea of a gag.

All this is intoxicating enough but what's more, many of the plates are coming out in twos and twos, meaning, all four diners are not necessarily being served the same dish for every course, none of which are on the regular menu in the first place, a feat which makes working the restaurant's already brutally difficult line that much harder.

Overwhelmed, Ruhlman turns to the slick New York agent and asks "Do you eat like this all the time?" She shoots him the blank stare. Hick move, Michael! But we understand.

Of course she doesn't eat like that all the time. No one does. Even the people who could afford to don't because while money may be infinite, talent, time and space are not. There aren't enough great chefs, restaurants, tables, or hours in the day to make the food.

Ruhlman went on to write not only Keller's first cookbook but all three of his subsequent ones, plus three others for three different famous chefs. Those, one may say, were his side projects because all along he was writing his own stuff, including two technique-heavy cook-

books. *Ratio* (2009) is like the Periodic Table for cooking, it breaks every fundamental recipe down to its elements, while *Ruhlman's Twenty* (2011) does the same for technique. They are, in essence, a CIA education reduced to a *glacé* and lovingly spooned between four covers. What a good culinary school teaches you is that if you know the correct ratios for combining basic ingredients and you know the techniques to make them sing, you don't need recipes. You can cook anything.

But Ruhlman's heavily researched and reported books about the restaurant world are the heart of his oeuvre. *The Making of a Chef*, *The Soul of a Chef* (2001), and *The Reach of a Chef* (2006) together constitute a sort of non-fiction *Lord of the Rings* trilogy on cheffing. These epics take you inside, right up to the cutting boards, counters, and range tops, verily dropping you, dear reader, on the line not just at the French Laundry but at Keller's equally exquisite Per Se in New York, plus Cleveland's Lola (home base of Michael Symon, who later became one of the Food Network's nine Iron Chefs), Grant Achatz's Chicago temple Alinea, and many more, all dedicated to quality with the intensity that Butterfly felt for Pinkerton. For good measure and to maintain both his cooking chops and his New Journalistic street cred, Ruhlman sometimes hops on the line himself, occasionally getting in the weeds (chefspeak for falling behind) but earning the respect of some real pros in the process. If you read these books and still don't "get" the appeal of the line then, to borrow from Louis Armstrong, man, you'll never know.

Dining In

APRIL, 2008, JET BLUE, JFK TO SFO. EVERY seat has a little TV. It's all networks and basic cable and you have to endure the commercials but it's free. Surfing through the channels I see some cheap white cotton double breasted jackets and the glint of steel. Chefs!

I have been cooking steadily since college and the fumes of that experience at the Treaty of Paris hang in my nostrils. I have worked through both *The French Laundry Cookbook* (2009) and also *Bouchon* (2004), the book for Keller's Bouchon (my favorite place to eat in the United States), a bistro that serves rote paleo-frog food with no hint of updating but flawlessly prepared every time. My little bible is *The Saucier's Apprentice* (1976) by Raymond Sokolov, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter of all things, who has explained how to make the five mother sauces (*béchamel*, *espagnole*, *tomato*, *hollandaise*, and *velouté*, arranged into the handy mnemonic "Beth V") and all of their various and beguiling derivatives. I am rather smug about my sauces. I am, for instance, the only person I know who still



makes a true *demi-glace*, which takes three days (day one: veal stock, 12 hour simmer; day two: *espagnole*; day three: combine veal stock with *espagnole*, ratio 1:1, and reduce, reduce, reduce all the while skimming, skimming, skimming, until the liquid is *nappe*, that is, it coats the back of a spoon lightly). I was once telephoned, through the White House Situation Room by the National Security Advisor, in the middle of this process and told to drop everything and come to the office. Down the drain it all had to go, the wages of divided loyalty. My duck dishes are said by others to be restaurant quality. This is inaccurate but nonetheless gratifying, as flattery often is.

Jet Blue plays the same six episodes of *Top Chef* (season 3, if you must know) over and over and I watch, spellbound. I realize that what I am seeing on that little screen I could not replicate if my life depended on it. I must learn to do that. Is such even possible?

Once again, fifteen years later, the old impulse washes over me...chuck it all...and cook. But certain freely undertaken obligations make that even less practical now than it was then. Flip Johnny Cash around 180°: because you're mine, can't work the line. But maybe there is another way.

The weekend warrior is a despised figure in literature, pop culture, and among people who do anything—whatever it may be—for real. Nonetheless, this appears to be my only option. Bourdain says that there are only three cooking schools in the United States worth a damn, the CIA (his alma mater); Johnson & Wales in Providence, Rhode Island; and the French Culinary Institute (FCI) in lower Manhattan. The CIA is so preeminent that Paul Bocuse himself, the very father of *nouvelle cuisine*, sent them his only begotten son to educate in the culinary traditions of the motherland, *La Belle France*. As it happens, the CIA is within driving distance from my home but it's an all or nothing proposition. Either enroll in the full two year program or take one of the "boot camps," maximum length five days. The former is impossible and the latter is not good enough.

The FCI, even closer, is more philistine-friendly. They offer courses for amateurs, on the weekends. You can start slow but the offerings blossom out into pretty massive affairs, where if you stay with it you can do almost the entire professional program. I start with "Knife Skills, De-boning and Fileting," which gobbles up only three Saturdays. It turns out I have picked up a lot of bad habits since the days of being ordered around by the Filipinos at the Treaty of Paris. Since the Spanish American War, Navy galleys and wardrooms have been dominated by Filipinos—the White House Mess, the in-house restaurant run by the Navy, is staffed entirely by

Filipinos—and to this day the kitchens in any Navy town from San Diego to Norfolk to Annapolis are heavily Filipino.

Chef Janet, a very nice lady, explains how to do everything properly. The instruction is welcome but the class is large and nobody is very good and she is not really mean enough to insist on quality from us. Still, I do learn to properly break down fish, something I have never done, which in turn leads me to start cooking and eating fish after a lifetime of avoiding it despite a childhood spent up to my chest in the Monterey Bay.

It's clear that this little dip into the waters of cheffing is not going to be enough. They offer an eight-week course but also the big one, Culinary Techniques, called simply "La Tech" at the school. This one takes half a year but it teaches everything, or at least all the basics, the foundational skills.... I call and ask, if I take the eight-week "Essentials" class and find that this is not out of my system, how much of that is repeated in La Tech? In other words, if I am likely to move on should I just dive in to the big one or do both? And they say, just dive in.

So I do. The instructor is French and intense and almost the first thing out of his mouth is, "The school assigned me this class. I have never taught an amateur class before. They said I have to go easy on you. I'll try but that won't be easy for me." There was no twinkle in his eye or wink or other sly indication that, hey, don't worry, just joshin' ya on a Saturday morning, you'll be all right. No, he meant every word.

Well...all right! That's more like it! High standards, yelling, throw-that-out-and-start-over, you call that a *brunoise*?... This is going to be the real deal....

Chef X (this is not an attempt to disguise his identity, that's really what he goes by) is a legend at the school. He used to run the kitchen at La Côte Basque, for a couple of decades one of the two or three most prestigious restaurants in Manhattan and immortalized in an eponymous chapter of Truman Capote's unfinished novel *Answered Prayers*. In fact, it was that very chapter, set at those hallowed tables, that killed the whole project for him. In 1975, Capote vainly published the chapter as an excerpt in *Esquire* and after the Upper East Side dowagers who were his main sources of material read it, none of them ever spoke to him again.

Chef X is widely considered the most difficult instructor at the FCI. He definitely does have a hard time going easy on us. It gets so bad that two of the women, one old and one young, just stop showing up. They walk away from seven grand. I soldier on and, truth be told, I am not doing so badly.

Chef X is especially brutal on our knife skills, which inspires me to buy veg during the week

and just cut, cut, cut to get up to speed. The task which makes everyone groan—amateur and professional student alike—is *tournage*. You take a root vegetable and, with a paring knife (a bird's beak works best), trim it into a football shape with seven even sides. This is indeed a massive pain in the neck until you get the hang of it and even after. Also, since virtually no restaurant in the world still does it, we are all complaining like kids who whine, "When am I ever going to need algebra in real life?" *Tournage* is like a Chopin étude that is no longer played in concert. You still have to know how to do it or you don't know how to cook. After slaughtering several dozen pounds of potatoes, carrots and turnips, I come to love *tournage*. It looks nice, the uniform size ensures that everything will cook evenly (this is the foundational reason undergirding much of French knife technique), and the round shape means that you can roll the vegetables around in the pan to brown them evenly, if you're going for color. But, on a deeper level, knowing how to *tourner* is to be admitted into a secret society, to join Escoffier himself on the great ladder, at the lowest rung to be sure, the eternal *commis*, but to be a part of...the tradition.

Even La Tech, six months of this, every Saturday, all day, was not enough. There is a follow-up course, Advanced Culinary Techniques or La Tech 2, which is slightly misnamed. While we do learn a few advanced techniques (for instance, making ice cream in various bizarre flavors like basil and lemon-thyme, and also fabricating the glorious *foiegras au torchon*), the emphasis is more on applying all the techniques we learned in the last class. Every week we make a new four course meal, hot app, fish, meat, dessert. This goes on for a while and it is fun but eventually it ends and there is no La Tech 3 and still I want...more....

I start making more and more elaborate dinners every Saturday, at a minimum a fish and a meat course, plus often a soup or salad, and maybe a hot app. Sundays are simpler, one course only, Keller's book, *Ad Hoc at Home* (2009), is perfect for this. *Ad Hoc* is a restaurant in Yountville where the general public can eat what is for all intents and purposes the same food that is served to the staff at Bouchon and The French Laundry. Every restaurant above a diner feeds the staff, at what is typically called "family meal." Family meal in the Keller empire is so good that he gets the idea to base a restaurant on it, no menu, just a take-it-or-leave-it lineup of French-inflected American classics like Caesar salads, pot roast, fried chicken, and trout. The place is meant to be temporary but of course it is a huge success and still there, going strong...

Saturdays grow in ambition. Five courses are soon obligatory. Salad or soup, hot or cold app,



fish, meat, dessert...guests once a month or so, but guests or no, up at dawn, troll the local markets, start prepping around eight or nine, first course served at six, dinner over by eight or so, clean, rest...and still...there must be...more... And off in the dim distance beckons...the line....

Chuckling It All

BILL BUFORD REALLY DID CHUCK IT ALL TO COOK. Buford was the fiction editor at *The New Yorker*, a very nice gig for a writer. This brought him into contact with a lot of what are termed in Manhattan bold-faced names. He throws a party for the novelist Jay McInerney and invites Jay's good friend, Mario Batali, one of the country's most celebrated celebrity chefs. Buford thinks of himself as a decent cook but as soon as Batali arrives the chef takes over and cooks the entire dinner, staying until 3 am and almost drinking Buford out of house and home in the process. But Batali is so infectiously fun that this leads to an idea: why not profile him for the magazine?

From such simple, reasonable notions does ruin arise! The way to learn what Batali's life is really like, Buford reasonably deduces, is to spend a little time at his flagship restaurant, Babbo (this is before Del Posto opened). Be careful, Bill!

It will hardly spoil the suspense if I just cut to the chase and reveal that of course he becomes obsessed, quits his job in fact, and spends six months on the line at Babbo and that not being enough he moves to Italy where he learns to make pasta the correct way and also apprentices to arguably the world's most famous butcher, then returns to the U.S. to work more stints at Babbo and for Batali's various road shows—four years of this, all of it unpaid. One is occasionally struck by the same bewilderment that arises from Manhattan-set sitcoms whose main characters are perky girls who work in coffee shops or publishing or at a children's center in the Bronx, and we all have a vague idea of what these jobs pay, yet she invariably lives in the full floor of a federal townhouse in the heart of the West Village and—*how can you afford that?* Buford does not pause to explain this, which stirs the envy to a higher pitch than usual.

Worse, the book that Buford got out of his experiences, *Heat* (2006), is a genuine masterpiece, the best-written of all the cheffing books hands down. Say what you will about *The New Yorker* and its liberalism and pretention but these cats know how to write; the quality is always there. The way he handles the scene in which he cuts himself on the first day is a case in point. This scene is obligatory in cooking memoirs, the same way that all mob movies must show a fat wiseguy cooking a meat ragu.

Vinnie! Don't put too many onions inna sauce! Final Draft, the screenplay software used by *tout* Hollywood, will automatically drop this scene into your script if you try to leave it out. In Buford's hands, ritual self-mutilation becomes the perfect mixture of tragedy and comedy that Socrates describes in the *Symposium*:

I looked across at one of the cooks, Cesar, who seemed to be boning quails, a much more challenging operation. The deliveryman hadn't moved. Was he actually shaking his head?—when, somehow, I dragged the blade of Elisa's knife, smoothly and delicately, across the top of my forefinger—from behind the first knuckle to the nail. There was a moment: did I do what I think I did? Yes. And the top of my finger erupted in a gush of red blood.

"Did you just slice yourself?" Elisa asked, breaking off her lamb-shank count, and in a tone that said, You've been here half an hour, and this is what you've done?

"Yes," I said, "but not to worry." I wrapped my hand in a meaty, soiled cloth. "I do this all the time. You should look at my fingers. A road map of scars and nicks. I think I need to wear glasses. Nearsighted. Or farsighted. Both, actually. Really, it's what I do."

"Do you need to go to the hospital?" It sounded like an accusation.

I shook my head, a little worried by her worry. There was a lot of blood.

"Band-Aids are in the refrigerator," she said. "You'll need to wear a rubber glove. The Band-Aids won't stay dry."

I retreated to the dining room, crunched up the wound with a crisscrossing of Band-Aids, wrestled my finger into a surgeon's glove, and returned. It was nearly nine o'clock, and my cutting board had a modest square of about five inches of work space. The rest of it was stacked with pieces of duck.

And so I resumed. Chop, trim, wrestle, pop, thwack. I cleared my board. And, as I did, the Band-Aids started to work themselves loose, and the clear synthetic glove started to expand and droop, filling up like a water balloon with my blood. The truth is, I am always slicing off little bits of me, but I could see that if I sliced off a little bit of this glove it was going to be a mess.

By the end Buford is skilled and confident enough to run the line himself, throw death-ray stares at other cooks and just boss them around. He is so skilled that Batali offers to set him up in his own restaurant. Buford turns him down. France beckons. I eagerly await that book.

Prep and Plating

FOR SOME, THE ITCH NEVER SUBSIDES. IN the back of my head since that final day of La Tech 2 is this tidbit. The school runs a restaurant, L'Ecole, at which the professional students cook in the last weeks of their curriculum. But some of the services—the early dinner service every day and the brunch services on weekends—are staffed by a skeleton crew of paid pros and supplemented by volunteers. I could be one of those volunteers. The idea hangs there in the frontal lobe until finally I call. Come Saturday, they say.

Like every hopeless noob, I start on *garde-manger*. You may think there is no way to screw up a salad but you'd be wrong. The ways are legion. Overdress, underdress, dress too soon, toss inadequately, over season, under season, too much of this, too little of that. And that's just the plating, an art in and of itself. There is also the prep for all the components, lettuce trimmed and washed to gleaming perfection, other elements sliced and diced.

My first official task was to make croutons, not the square kind, the sliced kind. You take a baguette and slice it evenly. They are not terrible sticklers about evenness for this kind of crouton because it would either end up in the onion soup, saturated beneath the cheese, or alone on top of one of the salads with a spritz of goat cheese or tapenade on top. As a rule in a French restaurant, any element of which the diner will clearly see two or more on his plate had better look absolutely identical. Still, I managed to screw up the croutons. They are to be toasted in the oven until crisp but not brown. No color. The first batch was fine. The second were in the oven not even half as long as the first and when I checked them, they were almost black.

"Ovens fluctuate," says Joe, the line cook I was reporting to, "you have to watch them." I was, dammit, but.... At that moment Chef Nick walks by. He is acting as expeditor for this service, which means he supervises everyone and everything and is also the last line of defense checking plates at the pass to make sure they are perfect before they go out. Chef Nick used to work for Chef X at La Côte Basque and at the FCI is maybe one click behind in terms of hard-ass reputation. "Good croutons," he says without stopping. "Nice color." At least I didn't cut myself that day. No, I had already logged that milestone on my first day of La Tech.

A great deal of the line cook's job is cutting. A rough rule is that for every hour you spend cooking, you spend another two prepping. Cutting being, perhaps, the most foundational cooking skill, doing so much of it, while numbing to the brain, is good for the hands. With so much repetition, one cannot help but become



reasonably proficient. “Repetition is at the heart of cooking,” Buford writes. Oh, yes. For brutal confirmation of this fact, see Lisa Abend’s *The Sorcerer’s Apprentices* (2011), which recounts the tedious experiences of the *stagiaires* (volunteer prep cooks) at Spain’s famous El Bulli. I thought my technique decent, what with all those classes and practice at home. But it took several weeks to pass muster with Joe.

One task I am assigned week after week is cutting the chives. They are squirrely little bug-gers, certainly easier to cut the fewer of them you hold at one time, but I have no choice but to clump them in big groups or else the task will take forever. Every day, Joe says the same thing: “Smaller.” I am really trying hard, here, and also taking care to toss out any pieces that look too big. But still the same refrain: “Smaller.” Actually, sometimes instead he says “Thinner.” I start to notice that he isn’t even looking when he says that, just grazing by. I am suddenly reminded of the following:

More than a decade before, working as a speechwriter for the mayor of New York City, I am seated at a lunch table next to a man who asks what I do and I tell him and he says, funny thing, he used to do the same thing for Henry Kissinger back in his White House days. I say, wow, that must have been fascinating.

“Fascinating is not the word I would use.”

“Really? What, then?”

“Let me put it this way. One time I drafted a speech for Henry, an important address on the Middle East. The first draft came back with a single word scrawled on the margins: “Tougher.”

In speechwriting this is known as a conceptual edit. That is, not a line edit, change this word, take this out and put this in, but something that requires you to rethink everything on minimal guidance. Speechwriters hate conceptual edits.

“So I write another draft, and this one comes back and it says ‘Softer.’ I do another draft, this time ‘More on Syria.’ And so on, six times, with these cryptic notes that I do my best to respond to but evidently keep failing. Finally I’ve had it and I go over to his office and I say, ‘Henry, I’m trying hard to capture what you want to say but I’m obviously not getting it, I think we need to talk this through.’” And then Henry the K says in that sonorous baritone, “Vell, I guess I had bedduh read it now.”

“Joe, have you even looked at the chives? Any thinner and you’d need an electron microscope to see them. Here.”

His eyes fix downward. “Good.”

Good! Was ever a single syllable so satisfying to a human ear? Occasionally, when he was really impressed (this did not happen often) I’d get a drawled out “Niïiice.”

Garde-manger is mostly prep and plating. There is very little to cook, except this one ca-

vatelli dish, which is soon moved to the hot line. Just plating and prepping, plating and prepping. When there are lulls, you prep what you can for the dinner service. Then a ticket will come in—we receive our orders on an electric machine that spits out a roll of paper, like the receipt printer on a cash register—and you drop everything and “fire” that order. We were never fast enough for Chef Nick. “Guys, it shouldn’t take you more than 30 seconds to plate that salad, come on!” Yes chef! you misera—“You say something?” “No, chef!”

The brunch service could be hectic or not, depending on the weather above all. What would crush us, absolutely drive us insane, were the huge parties of a dozen or more, people coming in after junior’s graduation and what-not. Every plate has to go out at the same time and be the correct temperature, or, for salads, not wilted from sitting in the dressing too long. One party of 32 I thought was going to make Chef Nick go hoarse from all the yelling at us he felt required to unleash.

There are five stations on the line for brunch: *garde-manger*, of course, but also *entremetier*, a station for hot entrees, the grill, and pastry. Over the course of my time at L’Ecole, I will work them all. Many observations come to mind but one stands out. I’ve been to Death Valley, California, lived through five Washington, D.C., summers, and once stood on the flight deck, during flight operations, of the USS *Constellation* near San Clemente Island at noon on a broiling July day. And I can tell you that nothing on the surface of this planet is hotter than a fully fired restaurant grill. One day, the cook I am working for, just to satisfy his curiosity, takes out his insta-read thermometer and holds the tip of it up to where we have to stand. In about two seconds it reads 98°. Of course you also have to move your hands and arms over the blasted thing quite a bit, where it’s a lot hotter. If you don’t move fast enough the grill will literally burn off the hairs and eventually set fire to your skin.

“Have you ever considered wearing gloves?”

“Hell, no.”

“Why not?”

“Everyone would laugh at me.”

Egg station is responsible for omelets which require a level of dedication that is a cut above. A correctly cooked French omelet is rolled like a cartoon cigar, pointed at each end, not folded in half; it is pale yellow, no brown or even tan spots are allowed; and—this is the tricky part—the surface must be perfectly smooth. Every omelet I made on my first day at egg station was deemed unservable. This was dispiriting.

In search of redemption, I headed out the next morning. “Daddy, where are we going?”

“To the market.”

“Why?”

“We need eggs.”

“Mommy just bought eggs!”

“I need more.”

And I got more—ten cartons. At home I put on my whites (a cook’s uniform is always referred to as “whites” even though these days the jackets often aren’t white and the pants never were) and set up an omelet station in tidy professional style. I proceeded to make omelets all day until I could consistently get them right. The next week, my omelets make it out.

Dinner service has only four stations, *garde-manger*, fish, grill, and pastry. It is a much more hectic affair because the dining room is always fully booked, or close. One may be tempted to snigger about a cooking school restaurant but eating at L’Ecole is not like going to get your hair cut at barber college. It’s a serious place. The 2012 Zagat survey gives it a 25 rating for food (one more than the famous Balthazar two blocks north) and the more prestigious *Guide Michelin* designates it (but not Balthazar) as a *Bib Gourmand*.

All in, a full day—two services—runs about 12-and-a-half hours. Arrive at 8 a.m., prep until service at noon, break down after service ends at 3, prep until the next service begins at 5, break down and clean up at 7:30 when the students take over, out at around 8:30. During that time my posterior cheeks will touch an interior wall maybe twice. I won’t sit down until the uptown 6, assuming it’s not packed, rolls into the Spring Street station around 9 p.m.

The first time I did this I was exhausted, naturally, and just assumed I would crash hard when I got home. But, funny thing, arriving just after 10, I didn’t even begin to feel tired until around 1, and even then it took one or two glasses of port to achieve slumber.

Buford quotes various cooks on this point: “This is the buzz”...“This is the fun part”...“This is what you live for” and concludes that the professional kitchen is a “roomful of adrenaline addicts.” I ask a chef friend about this and he says, “True. You can’t sleep for hours afterward. It’s like taking a few lines of coke.” That explains Bourdain, at any rate, and also Batali and the whole chef culture of after-hours wretched excess. I understand the temptation, sort of, but wasn’t succumbing so lustily one of the reasons why Bourdain never really, you know, accomplished anything in the kitchen? For every force of nature like Batali or Hamilton who can power through night after night, week after week, month after month, year after year of insane debauchery and still not only make it to the line every morning but excel at the very top of the profession, there must be dozens more burnt-out wrecks, rotting away with the rest of the past-date product in Life’s fetid walk-in.



The L'Ecole kitchen, though, is nothing like what Bourdain describes. Even Buford's Babbo makes it seem tame. There is only a little yelling, the swearing is all in good humor, sexism is kept to a minimum, and while everyone seems to smoke (outside) I see no other signs of debauchery. Yet the energy, the electric charge, is there. The professional cooks are almost all white or Asian, under 30, many of them switching over from something else (I met a biochemist, two lawyers, an engineer, a management consultant, and a banker), all of them totally dedicated to what they are doing. The older career-switchers could be annoying though. Anyone north of 40 who really chucks it comes to feel as if she has accepted a vocation directly from the Holy Spirit, His righteous flame dancing over her toque. Really, lady, I'm glad you're happy to be out of that deadening corporate law job but if you use the word "courage" unironically one more time I'm going to.... Anyway, the reason for that intense dedication is partly self-selection—cheffing is drawing from a more upscale and culturally stable demographic these days—but also the (prospective) pot of gold at the end of the rainbow has grown exponentially larger.

Mundane to Sublime

ANDRÉ SOLTNER WAS THE CHEF AND CO-owner of Lutèce, a gastro-temple in Turtle Bay that various luminaries, among them Julia Child, repeatedly proclaimed the best restaurant in America. In 34 years, he missed five days on the line. Lutèce closed in 2004 and today Soltner serves as Dean of Classic Studies at the FCI. Shift Soltner's career forward a decade or two, and he would have been able to catch the wave, make a fortune, and possibly become as famous as Thomas Keller. As it was, the nascent set passed right under his board, unnoticed, like a tsunami 100 miles from shore. "There are chefs in New York right now who should know who André Soltner is and they don't, and that's astounding to me," Ruhlman quotes one Manhattan consultant as saying.

Rob, L'Ecole's grill man, knows. "Chef Soltner is in the house" he mutters softly one Monday as the great man glides through the kitchen. I beam with pride when he compliments my *ciseler*. I scan the other faces on the line for signs of recognition; the results are inconclusive.

Grant Achatz is representative of the new breed. Solidly middle class, his youthful indiscretions apparently never progressed much beyond speeding and one is tempted to give him a

pass for that since he built the car himself. No ordinary cruising punk, he. *Life, on the Line* (2011) is the first chef memoir in which booze, tobacco, sex, and drugs play not even a supporting role. Even Keller, Achatz's eventual mentor, enjoyed a wasted youth, which Ruhlman treats with Victorian delicacy (young Thomas "engaged himself in less wholesome pursuits common among teenagers in the 1970s").

Achatz, by contrast, was driven from the get-go. He has never felt the temptation to chuck it all because what there was to chuck is what he wanted all along. He grew up in a restaurant family and his vaulting ambition has always been to cook at the highest level. With a few breaks along the way, but mostly through talent, intuitive genius, and grinding hard work, he got there: his Alinea has been the hottest restaurant in America since it opened in 2005, when Achatz was just 30. A great many young c-school grads and line cooks jump in dreaming that the same can happen for them. But for nearly all of them, it can't.

For one thing, they are not Achatz. This is a man who, when diagnosed with tongue cancer, of all the unbelievably ironic pieces of dismal luck, and told that the whole beastly muscle had to be cut out and even then he still might die, replied, No way, try something else, come what may, I'm going to check out with my tongue still inside my skull. Then he spent his year of radiation and chemo literally writing his cookbook while hooked up to the toxic tubes to make sure that he scratched it all out before his summons for judgment before the great executive chef in the sky. Few are built quite this way or manage to make themselves into anything quite like this.

Second, now that cheffing offers some real fame and lucre to those who scale to the top of the pyramid, the base has widened considerably. There may be more slots at the summit than there used to be, but not nearly enough to accommodate everyone who dreams of getting there. It's like the NBA, only the starting salary isn't \$490,180 or even close.

The ones who understand this, and do it anyway, are attracted to something else. The honesty...the satisfaction of working your brain and hands at the same time...engaging all your senses...the adrenaline rush...the craftsmanship...the endless potential for creativity...the responsibility...the BoBo high of turning a necessity into a lavish luxury, transforming the mundane into the sublime...turning out a physical product rather than spreadsheets and word docs...being well and truly finished

and free at the end of a shift, not tethered to a Blackberry...making people genuinely happy...with the risk that if you blow it they won't be. Cooking without paying customers is like gambling without stakes. Nobody ever sent a dish back at a dinner party.

My stint on the line had to be cut short owing to demographic change in my own household. The impulse—chuck it!—never subsides. I am at a swanky reception at a building designed by J.E.R. Carpenter, the only Upper East Side architect who can hold a candle to Candela, the kind of building where they spell out the address in italicized script on the awning—*Six Forty Park Avenue*. The apartment takes up a full floor and there are so many chambers with plausible claim to the title "living room" that one does not quite know where to stand. I meet a very nice lady, not the hostess but an East Side matron of the sort who lives in a place just like this. I don't remember how we got onto the subject, beyond the fact that every conversation in New York that does not veer into real estate ends up being about food, but she reveals that her son, a rising banker in his 20s, has chucked it all and gone to cooking school. He's traded in the i-banker rank ladder—analyst, associate, vice president, senior vice president, director, managing director—for Escoffier's brigade: *commis, cuisinier, demi-chef, chef de partie, sous-chef, chef de cuisine*. He is currently in France doing *stages* at as many three-stars as will take him. He has secured, upon his return, a job at Daniel, a three star restaurant one block south of that very apartment, as it happens. His mother is immensely proud of him. I, needless to say, am merely envious.

In the kitchen in this apartment is a rusted-out old Garland stove that's looks as if it's been there since the 1960s. Everything else is white tile, grayed-out white cabinets, and nicked white enamel. Nothing has been done over in the manner of what real estate agents like to call a "true chef's kitchen." In here it is still old school Park Avenue. The kitchen is for staff. One block south is not merely Daniel Boloud's restaurant but his apartment. In all directions, north, east, and west—hell, for all I know, even one floor up or down—things are different. The revolution—the wave—has already swept through.

By the way, if you're ever looking for me and you can't find me—emails not returned, calls going straight to voicemail, letters piling up on the porch—you know where I'll be.

Michael Anton is a writer living in New York.