

PREOCCUPATIONS

For a Chef, a Comfort Zone Among the Pots and Pans

By Floyd Cardoz

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THE day I started my first restaurant internship, one of the managers accosted me as I walked into the kitchen. “You want to be a chef?” he shouted, pointing at a 100-kilo bag of onions. “Peel those!”

Growing up in India, I never thought I would cook for a living. My parents wanted me to be a doctor, and I loved everything to do with the living sciences. I got my bachelor’s in biochemistry, then went on for a master’s.

Yet in many ways, my early life centered around food. Our family loved eating, and loved talking about eating. Just as we began enjoying one meal, we’d discuss what to have for the next. Like most other middle-class Indian families, we had a cook, and I spent a ton of my free time as a child hanging around the kitchen, getting little tastes of what she was preparing.

Halfway through graduate school I read “Hotel” by Arthur Hailey, and I became completely fascinated with the hospitality business. I decided to switch careers and go to hotel school instead.

My father was disappointed, and my grandmother asked derisively if I “planned on being a cook.” At that time in India, being a chef meant being part of a low-pay, low-prestige occupation. Nonetheless, I loved my new studies, particularly the required courses in cooking and restaurant management. I came to realize that there was nothing I was more passionate about than cooking for people.

But that first day in a professional kitchen, staring at that bag of onions and at the other heaps of produce that needed to be cleaned, seeded and chopped, I thought, “What have I gotten myself into?” Then I put my head down and went to work.

Cleaning onions isn’t easy. My hands got sore from holding the knife, and my eyes watered from the fumes. The next morning, I was told to shell a gigantic pile of shrimp. The day after that, it was okra. The whole experience was like basic training. I decided right then and there that if I ever led my own kitchen, I would motivate people in a far more positive way.



Floyd Cardoz, the executive chef at Tabla in Manhattan, says he loves being “down in the trenches.”
Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Over the past 20 years, things have changed dramatically. In India and other countries, saying you're a chef or restaurateur usually generates excitement there are a lot of well-informed diners who love thinking about food, too. The boot-camp mentality has subsided as well. And after surviving that first internship, I found mentors like Danny Meyer, who founded Union Square Cafe. Today, as the executive chef and partner at one of Danny's restaurants, Tabla, we serve what we call "New Indian" cuisine, a blend of American food, European cooking techniques and Indian flavors. We also make some of the home-style Indian street food that I loved while growing up.

I devote many hours to managerial tasks, but my real work is to be the soul of the kitchen. Each morning, after checking e-mail, I jump into my whites. I head into the kitchen and walk the stations, stopping to talk to each employee. I ask how they're doing, taste different dishes and inspect the produce ordered in the night before.

Given our schedules, it's hard for executive chefs to be in the kitchen as often as we'd like, but I believe that my team performs better when they see me down in the trenches with them, appreciating the little things. It's also where I'm happiest.

On my walk-throughs I mostly catch employees doing things right. But I also immediately notice when a sauce, for example, is wrong: too salty, too dark, too red, too loose. When that happens, the cook and I together will go back to the recipe to figure out what went awry, and I'll give pointers on how to fix it. Mistakes don't make me happy, but they happen all the time, and I see them as excellent opportunities to teach. Nobody wants to stagnate in their job; they want to master new techniques. My job is to continually help them grow.

In a business where your attention is constantly on the next five minutes, on getting your pot to boil or sautéing a piece of meat, it's motivating to think bigger picture. After Hurricane Katrina, a small group of us traveled to New Orleans with a commercial fishing enterprise established to try to save the Gulf Coast shrimping industry when it was left immobilized. The storm had turned up the waters, resulting in an abundance of shrimp, but no local restaurants to buy them and no facility to ice them.

Joining other restaurants in New York, we began buying shrimp from the region. It became a source of pride to our chefs to know that their skills and love of cooking were, in some small way, affecting the broader world.

The restaurant business is tough. We work long hours on our feet all day. If you don't pause to recharge your batteries, you risk losing your love for the job. When employees have time off, I make sure they take it. When you're here, you're here, and when you're not, you're not. If I get an e-mail from a chef on vacation, I write him right back and tell him to knock it off.

I'm out of the restaurant on weekends, and people at Tabla know not to call me unless they really need to. I spend that time at home with my family, cooking three meals a day. It drives my wife insane. She doesn't understand why I can't just relax and eat cold cereal. I tell her I don't think of cooking as work. I really love what I do.

As told to Daisy Wademan Dowling. E-mail: preoccupations.com.