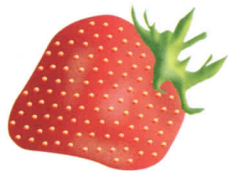
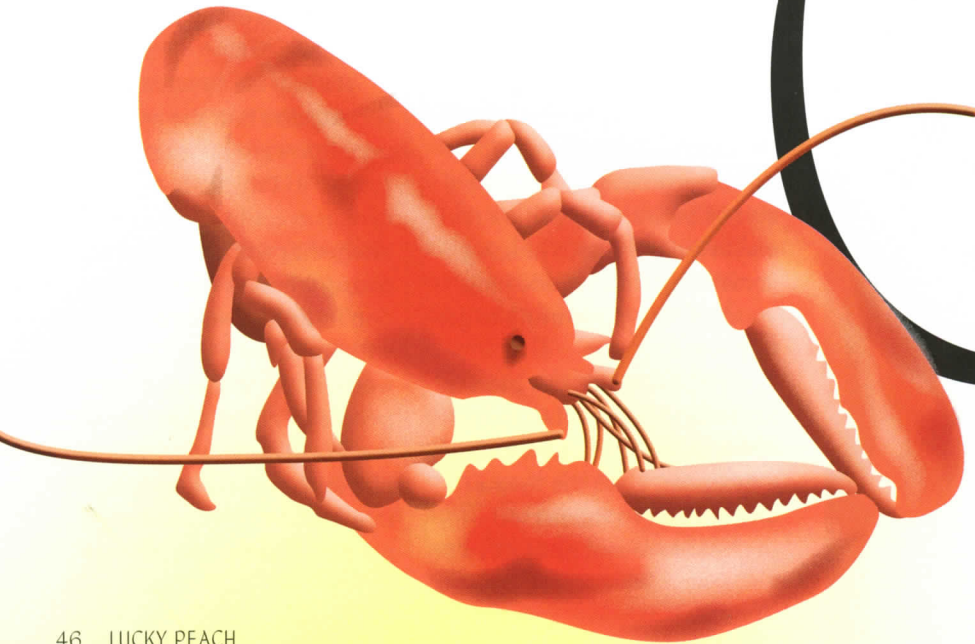




Book



h



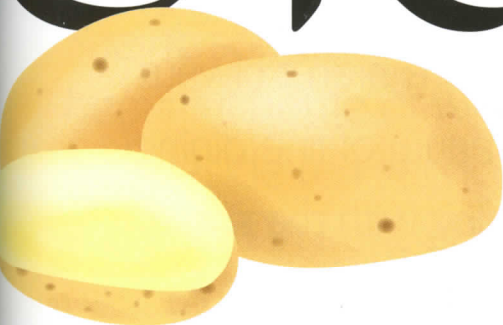


s & efs

The State of Fine Dining

We talked to some of the world's best chefs about fine dining's potential and its problems, its past, present, and future.

Illustrations by
Taci Kessler Lubliner



W

e struggled from the beginning to define fine dining. Even the French, who essentially invented the thing, don't really have a term for it. It's much easier to make declarations about its condition—Fine dining is dead! Fine dining has changed! Fine dining is taking a nap!—than it is to say exactly what fine dining is.

So here are eighteen far-flung chefs answering simple but tough questions about their industry—where the ship is headed, where it's been, who's on board, why anyone should care. They represent a squad that is Taylor Swiftian in its caliber (but hopefully a shade more diverse in its composition): a little bit of the old guard, some young guns, the keepers of the flame, world movers, Californians, Chicagoans, New Yorkers, the French, expats, a New Zealander, and a Dane.

We enlisted our elite team of global super friends to track down a few of the more elusive specimens in this collection. Christine Muhlke interviewed Yannick Alléno; Kevin Pang spoke to Grant Achatz and Noah Sandoval; Karen Leibowitz chatted with Dominique Grenn; and Alex Toledano managed to pin down Inaki Aizpitarte and Olivier Roellinger in Paris. We've merged everyone's answers into one big chorus, but their opinions aren't always harmonious. At the end of the day, that's the beauty of fine dining: people from opposite corners of the planet working with the same fanatical dedication, motivated by wildly different reasons.

What is fine dining, exactly?

Christopher Kostow, The Restaurant at Meadowood (St. Helena, California):

Service is paramount in fine dining. An understanding of food and wine and their relationship is paramount. I think a space that has some inherent beauty is paramount. It doesn't necessarily need to have chandeliers or whatever, but I think it really needs to represent, in all its facets, the beautiful things of life—the same way that going to a symphony or going to a play is a meeting of high culture and consumer. Fine dining is opera; it's well-executed jazz.

Dominique Crenn, Atelier Crenn (San Francisco):

It might be a little bit more expensive, but you have this sense of hospitality, this sense that it's catered just for the guests that come. Maybe you get more service; perhaps you can eat food that you don't eat every day. You feel *pampered*. That would be the word.

Daniel Humm, Eleven Madison Park (New York):

As amazing as the past few years have been for chefs and restaurants, the one thing that's been overlooked is the craft of service. It hasn't been celebrated, and I think there are people out there who work on perfecting hospitality and service—all the stuff that's such an art and requires such an effort. Seeing somebody decant the beautiful bottle of wine and doing a tableside tea service or cutting a chicken in front of you—how

beautiful is that? At Eleven Madison Park we definitely believe in it.

Noah Sandoval, Oriole (Chicago):

The epitome of fine dining is comforting people and wowing people and making them feel special, as opposed to: *We have food, we serve you food, see you next time.*

David Kinch, Manresa (Los Gatos, California):

I just went to Louis XV in Monaco a couple months ago, day of the Grand Prix—I watched the Grand Prix from the terrace and ate after. It could very well be the oldest and stuffiest restaurant around, but instead it's *dynamic*. The dining room is one of the greatest rooms of the nineteenth century, with the walls and the murals and all the gilt—all that is fussy and boring and dead. With the objects they've placed in the room, and the workstations, and what they wear, and the food that is served, they honor all of that, yet it's so twenty-first century, and so of the *now*. To me, that's fine dining. Fine dining evolves just like everything else.

Iñaki Aizpitarte, Le Chateaubriand (Paris):

In France, we know that we'll have an experience both of cooking and of service with a very substantial investment—very inspired and very controlled. We know that every detail, down to the millimeter, will be attended to and that the customer will be led around by the nose from beginning to end. Not much is left for

improvisation. On the other hand, many other approaches to fine dining are getting invented in models other than the French. Here we are under the impression of having a model that is a bit more professional. A bit more reduced. I don't want to say that it's the same all the time, because when you are at someone's place you are specifically at his or her place, but there is still a thread.

Olivier Roellinger, Les Maisons de Bricourt (Cancalle, France):

Fine dining is for me, above all, the coherence between a moment and a place. This makes me think of a potato.

It's eight in the morning right now. We are going to dig up new potatoes. The dirt is warmer than the air. We feel the dirt, we stick our hands in and mix it up and pull out this little bonbon from the earth. There is already a smell—it's completely magical. After cooking them in a bit of water, lightly salted, we'll enjoy them with a thick knob of salted butter—churned, raw-milk butter—crushed with our fork. It should be eaten on a wood table by the sea. At the moment, this, for me, is the best lunch.

Seeing somebody decant the beautiful bottle of wine and doing a tableside tea service or cutting a chicken in front of you—how beautiful is that? —Daniel Humm



The climax of the *dégustation* of flavors is the moment that crystallizes the *bonheur* of a moment in a specific place, because even the most delicious, refined dish—I have a fondness for those by Michel Bras, or by Pierre Gagnaire, or by the Troisgros, or by René Redzepi—comes from the cuisine of its place.

Grant Achatz, Alinea (Chicago): Let's say you're sitting at the sushi counter at Jiro, and all you do is eat sushi, and then you're gone in forty-five minutes because he kicks you out. Is that fine dining? I think it is. If you go to Thailand and eat Indian food at Gaggan, that's certainly fine dining. There's a certain amount of respect for quality of ingredients. There has to be good cooking, delicious food. That being said, you can find that at a place like Fat Rice [a Macanese restaurant in Chicago], as well. It's a really difficult question to answer.

André Soltner, Dean of Classic Studies, International Culinary Center (New York): Today we have too many people who go to expensive restaurants because it's chic, and

that's what they call fine dining. For me, fine dining is when you sit down and you enjoy your food very, very much. For me, fine dining is to use the best ingredients, not sophisticated, the simplest possible, and all the rest comes after.

Joshua Skenes, Saison (San Francisco): I think that we should have restaurants that are either good or not good. That should be our focus, because the lines are much more blurred now. People are trying to do fancy food in more casual environments. A restaurant should focus on being the best of its kind, at every price point. All the rest is irrelevant. The only thing that really matters to me is that you come in, you have a good time, you receive hospitality, and you don't get the silliness. The silliness is when you go into a restaurant that is very busy and they treat you like a commodity. The silliness is that kind of *No, go away, we're busy* attitude.

Ben Shewry, Attica (Melbourne): I guess when I think of the words *fine dining*, I think of the French three-Michelin-star classic restaurant more than I think of my own restaurant. It's not really a tag that I love, to be honest. That's the tag that society's cast upon ambitious restaurants like Attica or Noma or Osteria Francescana.

René Redzepi, Noma (Copenhagen): All the gastronomical terms we have—*local* or *molecular gastronomy* or *farm-to-table*—once you dig in to them, they don't mean anything. For instance, at Noma we're considered "local," but our urchin is from two thousand kilometers away. The terms are bullshit. Fine dining, casual dining, fast food. I think what Rosio Sanchez is doing [at Hija de Sanchez] in Copenhagen is fine dining to me. They wake up every day and cook everything with the best ingredients they can get. They cook it fresh and they serve it with generosity.

I mean, what is fine dining supposed to be? A very slow dinner? Maybe in the past, fine dining meant a specific type of restaurant, where you'd get the best food. But that's not true any more. Today, the best food sometimes is actually at Rosio's or Superiority Burger, where you can have freshly cooked broccoli from the same market where the Per Se chefs shop.

One thing I do hate about this whole discussion is that it's always either/or, which I think is so stupid. There's room for restaurants of all genres, and it's a great thing that people can have delicious meals more affordably. I also think many more people in the future will save up a little extra to go and have a fine dining experience. Tasting-menu restaurants aren't over—I don't think that at all. I think all the foodies

The epitome of fine dining is comforting people and wow-ing people and making them feel special, as opposed to: We have food, we serve you food, see you next time.

—Noah Sandoval



The best fine dining is delicious, usually something you haven't seen before, and thought-provoking. It's more than just sustenance. You're eating ideas.

—David Kinch

growing up right now—there are millions and millions—will want to have them around.

Does fine dining still matter as much now as it used to?

Kinch: Of course it does. Where do ideas come from? The top, and they trickle down. It's like the design of a taillight on a Ferrari. It looks like it's a spaceship, it doesn't make sense, and it's beautiful. Six years later, every Acura and every Honda Civic in the world has that feature. The ideas happen in restaurants where they feed forty people a night, where there's a lot of labor involved. Just because you can't afford fine dining, or you reject the notion, doesn't make it obsolete.

Kostow: Fine dining restaurants are the laboratories in which so much innovation is happening, and in some cases it can only happen in those kitchens because of the size of the staff and the financial investment that's being made in those operations. I think it's more relevant now than it ever has been—I really do.

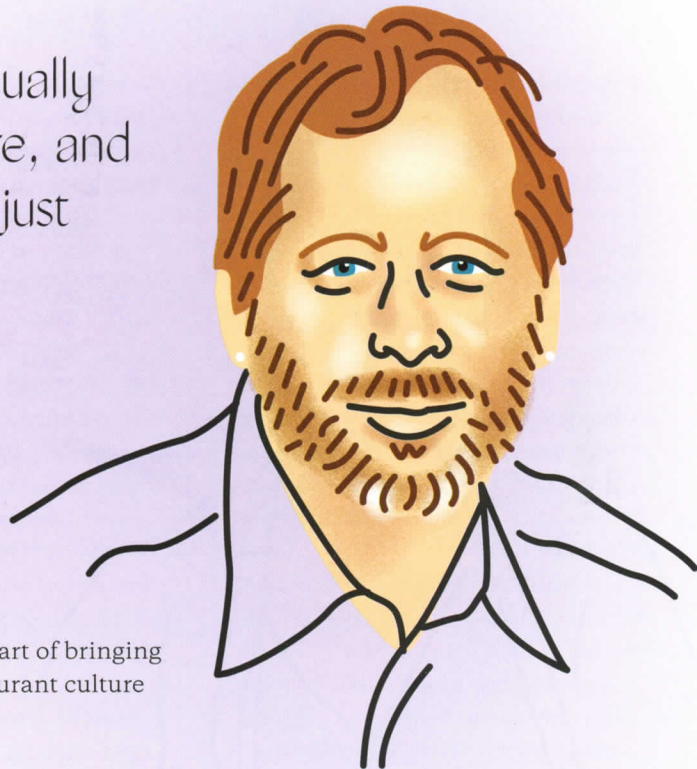
Redzepe: I would not be spending sixteen hours a day cooking for forty people if I didn't feel there was a greater purpose than just making these forty people happy. I don't necessarily consider Noma a traditional restaurant. I see it more as a place where we experiment with things—techniques, ingredients, ideas—and the guests get to try it. Would I want to go to work, would I ask my team to

work sixteen-hour days for minimum pay if the sole purpose was to make money? I would say there are more clever ways to make money. Noma is a part of bringing forward a new restaurant culture for our region.

Shewry: It matters. I see why it matters every day with my young guys, but also almost every night with cooks who come in to eat. But I do think things are a little bit different than they used to be. I think a lot of young cooks look at Attica and see it as some crazy unattainable dream. And they think it's just too hard to start a restaurant like that without a lot of money, without backers. I mean the staffing levels at Attica—compared to a lot of other restaurants—is double. A lot of people seem to be going an easier route, something that's more achievable, something that's more casual.

Achatz: It's more relevant now, because it lacks so much definition. I don't think anyone can say fine dining isn't relevant, because defining fine dining is becoming more difficult.

Crenn: The diner needs to have some type of choice. That's what the culinary world is about: you can have a taco on the side of the street, or you go to a nice place and you can eat an incredible meal, or you can go to a burger bar. It's about diversity. It's like if you go to a movie and can only see



action movies. You need cerebral movies, you need movies that make you think; you need cartoons, or you need comedies, or you need dramas. You need diversity to balance the industry.

Roellinger: Of course I hope a restaurant like Taillevent will always exist, because it's just like how the great masters of sushi in Japan exist today. It's important that there remain temples that embody and mark an era. It is wonderful to say that we can go eat an amazing vol-au-vent. It's something that I don't have any idea how to make, but that I am very happy to go eat.

Aizpitarte: We don't need to see these places disappear, nor imagine that they might disappear. I became a chef late, and my idea was to create a cooking style that I did not yet fully grasp but that would let me move forward and listen to my desires and everything. I was attracted by these Parisian spaces where you were able to immerse a customer in a place—where they were used to going, where they were immediately

Luxury, for me, is about someone taking care of you beautifully. It's not about giving you a five-hundred-dollar glass of champagne. It's about a human connection. —Dominique Crenn



relaxed, almost at home. They create a different welcome and give the bistro feeling to a customer, even if I am not trying to run a bistro. We popularized the term *bistronomie*. I think that it is going to balance out between *bistronomie* and high-level fine dining restaurants. It used to be very categorical—there was fine dining, bistros, and *bistronomie*. I think that the barriers will break down and everyone will find their spot.

Achatz: What we're seeing is what we always see: the ebb and flow of opinion. There was a strong kickback to fine dining five, seven years ago, which I directly attribute to chefs like David Chang and Michael Carlson—guys that had grown up in fine dining restaurants such as Daniel, Alain Ducasse, and the French Laundry. They were chefs in the grind of those environments and hours and seriousness, and they got tired of it. They said, "When I open my own place, I just want to cook, I don't care if it's on fine china or using foie gras." Then

came the popularity of places like Momofuku and Schwa. And everyone said fine dining was dead! And then you see the younger cooks from Momofuku and Schwa have themselves gone into fine dining. They're not doing classic French food, they're doing

something a bit more pricey and a bit more refined, because cooks want to do the opposite of their mentors.

How has the industry changed during your career? How would you like to see it continue to evolve?

Soltner: In my generation, the chef was in the kitchen. Today, it's changed a little bit, but I don't criticize that, because if I were still in the restaurant business, maybe I would do the same thing. But fifty years ago, the chef was there. My generation, you had one restaurant you were in charge of. But today, you have restaurants where you can have a very, very good meal, and the chef-owner is not behind the stove. Maybe thirty, forty, fifty years ago, if you had a restaurant, you made an okay living. Maybe today you need two or three to make a good living.

Shewry: When I came to Melbourne in 2002, it was just after a period of great, small, chef-run, chef-owned fine

dining restaurants had closed. There was one place called Est Est Est, which was a very famous Melbourne restaurant—very, very high-end in terms of what it was doing. There was another one called Pom, which was of a similar kind of ambition and level. Andrew McConnell still had a really ambitious small restaurant then, but he closed that, as well.

Back then, it still felt like you could build a restaurant over time into what you wanted it to be, but now there are more reviewers, more publications, countless websites. You've got all these systems of determining what is a good restaurant and what is a crap restaurant, and I don't think people feel like they have the freedom or the time to take the risk to develop into a fine dining restaurant.

That's not going to change, though. Our desire right now is for newness all the time. I just want to see more cooks and more waiters empowered to open their own places by themselves. That's what I really want to see. I don't like to bring it back to the World's 50 Best, but if you look at that list of restaurants, you see the vast majority of them are independently owned restaurants. The chef or the front-of-house team own it and they work in it and it's individual, and that's what I like.

Kostow: As an industry, we're always looking at what's new, and we've lost a lot of the history. No one uses butters and cream and all that stuff anymore, which is fine. No one does

silver-cloche service, which is fine. But have we ever asked ourselves why not? Why did we go from plating the food in a tight little circle to plating the food with wood sorrel all over the place? We plated the food in a tight circle because that's what Thomas did in *The French Laundry Cookbook*. We went all wood-sorrel-y because that's what René did. We're building on things that happened in the last twenty years. I think chefs are going to start looking further back and asking ourselves why we have rid ourselves of certain things. I think that enables us to teach our staff a lot better and enables us to maintain the history of our industry a lot better.

Achatz: When I graduated from culinary school, the epitome of fine dining was Alain Ducasse and Joël Robuchon and the French chefs. I remember going to France, telling myself, *I'm going to the holy land*, and I remember being incredibly disappointed. It was technically perfect and gluttonous in every way, but it wasn't expressive or personal. By the time I got to the French Laundry, food in the nineties was both expressive and incredibly intellectual, and it was fusion—using, say, Moroccan or Japanese spices—which was something new. That was the

start of emotional cooking. Then you get to the 1980s and '90s, and here come the Spaniards. You got Ferran, Andoni, Arzak doing this food that people didn't know what to think of—you either loved it or hated it, but it was certainly new. Then, we're intentionally trying to avoid luxury ingredients, saying the potato is just as important as the lobster tail, like Noma, and this is happening at the same time as a place like Schwa, playing death metal in the dining room and taking shots of Jameson.

Where we're at now, you have a blend of everything. What you're seeing is diversity in fine dining. You go to France and can still go to Alain Ducasse, you can come to Alinea and get emotional, theatrical fine dining, you can go to Noma and get that version of fine dining. Where's it going? I think there'll be a resurgence of classicism. I think you'll see some of those old French-style restaurants come back—tableside boning of Dover sole, elaborate soufflés, ornate desserts. But I also think the blending and diversification will continue.

Sandoval: When I was a teenager, things were a bit more stuffy, a bit more scripted, at least in my world. I grew up in Richmond, Virginia, and D.C. was the best

place I could eat. Even when I moved to Chicago eight years ago, things were still different from today. Servers were instructed to act a specific way, chefs were assholes, sous chefs were even bigger assholes, and cooks were overworked. Nobody seemed to care about camaraderie. Now, I think that's dying. Especially in Chicago, people are being treated with more respect. We're essentially equals here. A lot more younger people are running restaurants, and that's a good and bad thing.

Aizpitarte: There are institutions that will not change, like the Maison Troisgros, which gets passed from father to son. That is one category among many others in fine dining. But I think that fundamentally, for young people who are attracted to this type of thing, this type of fine dining, this idea, it is bound to evolve. We are seeing fewer people taking care of tables, fewer servers. But these historic restaurants must evolve, like bistros evolved, like ways of eating have evolved.

I think that we are right at the heart of an evolution. For generations,

I think there'll be a resurgence of classicism. I think you'll see some of those old French-style restaurants come back—tableside boning of Dover sole, elaborate soufflés, ornate desserts. But I also think the blending and diversification will continue.

—Grant Achatz



Relaxed doesn't mean not professional! —Iñaki Aizpitarte



people have been used to these codes, these expectations. It is clear that there are gaps and that they haven't been capitalized on, but there will be an equilibrium soon. As people have moved on to something else, fine dining has been reinvented. It's been done maybe more abroad, as in France we really have a more traditional culture of fine dining. But many people who like to try the great restaurants also want to go to a more relaxed fine dining restaurant. Relaxed doesn't mean not professional!

Kinch: I hear from a lot of guests that nobody wants to commit four hours to a dinner. I don't. My ass starts to hurt, and my attention starts to flag after three hours, I just start getting tired. I think you're going to see more à la carte options. Fine dining restaurants in France have tasting menus, but they've always had à la carte options. A lot of times that's the way to go over there: larger plates become more complex, ideas become more realized because it's not two bites, three bites. It's not like eating *mise en place*, which a lot of tasting menus are. All the dishes seem to be half-finished.

Alléno: In 2008, I was at Le Meurice. François Simon [former critic for *Le Figaro*] wrote an article about the chefs of my generation—Jean-François Piège, [Eric] Frechon, [Christian] Le Squer, and me—saying that he found my generation lacked personality. We all had the same reflexes, thanks to *nouvelle cuisine*. No individuality: we were all inspired by Ducasse's *Grand Livre de Cuisine*, we all did *sous vide* and plated in an aesthetically perfect way. The

nineties was the start of aestheticized food, so we were all inspired by it. He listed the names of dishes—all evocative of the phenomenon, with practically the same wording for each—and said, *Chefs, this weekend, your job is to find out where these dishes came from*. I took the paper, balled it up, threw it in the wastebasket. I hated it. In the evening, I came back after playing soccer with my kids in the Tuileries and reread it. I was angry, but I said, "Well, he's right. Obviously he's right." I said to myself, "Who are you, anyway?" I looked within.

I was born in the suburbs. Parisian kitchens were run by people from the provinces. In those communities, if you weren't Basque, Breton, or Auvergnat, you practically couldn't work. I could never say that I was a suburbanite, so for years I didn't tell people where I was from. Therefore, I was constrained in a thing that wasn't me. Simon's article made me understand who I was. My parents had a bistro. We moved every two years. So I did the tour of Paris. I didn't have childhood friends. I lived in so many neighborhoods. I wanted to say, *Okay, if I'm a Parisian, why can't I talk about Parisian food?* So I took out books. Parisian agriculture was once like Lyonnais agriculture: it was amazing! The guys were growing pumpkins at the feet of the Église Saint-Jacques just before the war. In Paris you ate cantal with butter, or oysters with butter, because it was the crossroads of provinces, so people enlisted in a kind of exchange. I looked for the history of

Parisian food and then I introduced our Terroir Parisien menu: one hundred *grands plats* of Parisian food.

Now we have just introduced le Principal [the main course] menu. For me, the main course is the thing around which the entire meal should unfold. We had an era where the main course—*main!*—was 30 percent of the duration of the meal. It was born with *nouvelle cuisine*. That's not normal. Why not put 70 percent of our attention on the main course and build on what the Spanish brought us in the 2000s: emotive cuisine?

Crenn: You have to bring people in, and you get to make them comfortable and also invite them into your world. Luxury, for me, is about someone taking care of you beautifully. It's not about giving you a five-hundred-dollar glass of champagne. It's about a human connection.

Kinch: There was a whole meme ten or fifteen years ago about, *Food doesn't need to be delicious, it just needs to be thought-provoking*. I completely reject that. Food has to taste good. It can still be thought-provoking. I can make food that tastes like shit that's

interesting. That's easy to do. A lot of molecular gastronomy is that. The best fine dining is delicious, usually something you haven't seen before, *and* thought-provoking. It's more than just sustenance. You're eating ideas.

Redzepe: Today you can get a sorbet at Superiority Burger that's better than what most restaurants can make. I think fine dining will really have to start specializing, having a specific focus, instead of being a broad spectrum of everything.

I think that'll be an exciting future, where different restaurants are cooking different things at different parts of the year. Sometimes it can be a bit of the same, and that's a problem the guidebooks created. They increase the standard, but they also make everything very formulaic and very much the same. There used to be the obligatory slab of foie gras. There would be all the same ingredients invoked all the time; it was almost guaranteed to have pigeon or beef on the menu. Today, it's different, because everyone knows a decent butcher and can get a steak that's just as tender as the one they can get in a restaurant. I think we're all going to have to up our game. It's going to be harder, for sure. You'll have to really give people a reason to go to your restaurant. The fact that the meat is

cooked perfectly won't be enough—everybody will be able to do that.

I think fine dining restaurants will have to showcase more of the natural world to stand out—we're going to have to be explorers. But we're also a fine dining restaurant. Fine dining restaurants are going to have to be much more specialized, and I welcome that. I think that's going to be so exciting. You see it in Japan right now: more focus on the ingredients, more focus on the season so that it isn't just pork and beef all year long—true diversity. It's something extraordinary that I think is going to happen much more in our region and the West in general, as well. Luckily it's more open now; there's not just one or two ways to set up a so-called fine dining restaurant anymore. For instance, at Noma we're vegetarian six months of the year.

Liz Benno, Lincoln Ristorante (New York): I would like to see fine dining not be bashed as much as it has been. It should be treated differently from casual dining, especially in the reviews. It's different, and it needs to be treated different. To have nine courses at Per Se, different for each person depending on which tasting menu they choose, be given two stars—the same as Superiority Burger... there's a huge difference. I think casual

restaurants should be just as appreciated, just differently.

Skenes: Honestly, I would like to see better quality in America. I'm not even talking about the cooking; I'm just talking about the quality of the shit people are willing to serve, especially at the fancy places. You should be trying to get the best thing you can get, and not just picking up the phone and calling some dick who's going to deliver it in a truck from a warehouse around the corner. You should actually, really, in earnest, try to get real quality.

Let's just be clear, I'm also talking about myself. If I look back, I hate Saison from before. I hate everything about last year. I don't like anything other than right now, and in fact I hate that also, to be honest with you.

Before, we would buy stuff from Tsukiji, because it was the best thing we could get here. Finally, we just said, *Fuck it, we're going to do it:* pay fishermen to go out for us, pay their fuel, pay their labor, to get us these fish

You're a chef in a fancy place—it's going to be difficult. If you don't like that, then do something else. This is a craft that is meant to be improved on a daily basis, and come on, if you're not doing that, you're just tricking people. —Joshua Skenes



alive—jellyfish, sea cucumber, shit that nobody was using at that time but we knew was there. The quality ended up being ten times better. You can ship something from Tsukiji but everything goes through transformation when you ship it. There are so many things that are beautiful and amazing, but our food systems are so fucked up in America—everybody just wants salmon. We need a real shift in thought, and we need to really follow nature and the seasons.

It's more difficult, yes. You're a fucking chef in a fucking fancy place—it's going to be difficult. If you don't like that, then do something else. This is a craft that is meant to be improved on a daily basis, and come on, if you're not doing that, you're just tricking people.

Anita Lo, Annisa (New York):

I think things have to change. I think our industry is broken in many ways, but damn, it's incredibly hard. Everyone seems to be trying to do their fast-casual concept and a lot of these higher-end restaurants are closing—Bouley is closing—and it's very sad to see.



We can't find cooks anymore. The problem is money. I think New York has been the culinary center of North America on some level, but it can't continue the way it's going. We're losing restaurants. I find it outrageous that someone like Bill Telepan can't make it—he's a really great chef with a big name. They raised the minimum wage for waiters, and it crushed him. For a tiny little restaurant, that just doesn't make sense. I'm a liberal and I totally get why you need policy for places like Denny's. But is that really necessary for a high-end place where waiters are making decent money from tips?

We've tried out a no-tipping policy, and it hasn't been great. We've lost a lot of diners. I think people just don't get it—they have sticker shock and don't really get what it means.

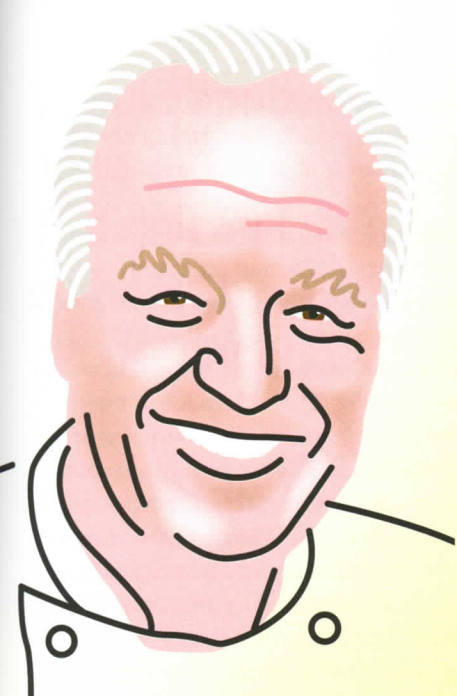
Sandoval: I want to see more patience from chefs. I'd like to see cooks working under talented chefs longer than they are. I was twenty-six and an executive chef in Richmond. I shouldn't have been. I should have been working for someone else. I see others making that mistake. Once you're an executive chef at a restaurant and telling people what to do, your own learning slows down. The longer people wait to make that leap, the better they're going to be when the time comes. This is why it's so difficult to find cooks.

Is it important that young cooks spend time working in fine dining restaurants?

Shewry: If you look at all the successful young cooks in Australia—Dan Hong, Phil Wood, Dan Puskas, Josh Murphy, Aaron Turner, Analiese Gregory, all these young people on the rise—they've all had significant experience in fine dining restaurants. None of them, with the exception of Dan Puskas at Sixpenny, are doing something you could define as a traditional fine dining restaurant, but I guarantee they wouldn't be where they are if they hadn't spent the time in those kitchens.

Benno: I went to the French Culinary Institute in 1998. While I was there, fine dining was huge. Daniel Boulud came to the school to talk to us about doing externships—that's where I felt like I needed to be. I got the externship and it was really, really hard, because I was basically doing forty-plus hours of free work while going to school full time. Alex Lee was at Daniel when I was there, throwing garbage cans at people. I was basically cleaning mushrooms, watching service, and then getting all the mise en place for the cooks, and having them yell at me. It was crazy. I really didn't mind getting yelled at. It made me want to become a better cook, to work

I think it's important for cooks to work in a place where food is paramount and it's an exacting kitchen—and that can be rustic-exacting or more fancy-exacting—but it's got to have all the details, because it's really the details that make great food. —Anita Lo



In my generation,
the chef was in
the kitchen.

—André Soltner

dining isn't the food. It's their whole approach to things.

Kinch: It takes a certain individual to want to do fine dining. It's a lot of hours, a lot of information. The margin of error is much smaller, and expectations are much more demanding. Everything is, *How do we make it better?*

Benno: I loved my externship at Daniel, and it was a great learning experience. But I don't think it was where I wanted to be, though I still wanted to be on the higher end of dining. I didn't think I could handle a four-star French restaurant. I thought I needed to go a step down. I wanted to dedicate my life to cooking, but not 90 percent of it. I wanted to work at a really, really good restaurant, but I also wanted to take care of myself. I work to live, I don't live to work.

Crenn: Some people don't connect with fine dining; it doesn't make them less if they never work in fine dining. A cook is a cook.

Humm: When we have staff meal, there are some cooks who have a soulful approach to cooking and can cook anything and make it taste really good. And there are some cooks who've spent all their time in fine dining and are technically very good, but don't really cook from their heart as much. I'm really lucky that I grew up with a mother who's a great cook, so I sort of learned that soulful connection with food at an early

age—the connection to the farms, to washing greens and making a salad, and braising a piece of meat. If you didn't have that growing up, you can learn it in casual restaurants.

I do think working in fine dining as a cook is super important at some point in your career, but I also think working in a little restaurant, where everyone does everything and there are three cooks and you create beautiful meals with inexpensive ingredients, is also very important.

Sandoval: Working for a dynamic group of chefs—all different types—would be the smartest way to do it.

Kinch: I worked in a banquet kitchen at a hotel. God, I hated it. But it's important. There's a real art to feeding a lot of people in a short amount of time. I don't have much of an interest in it, but I'm glad that I did it.

Kostow: The lengths that we go to in our restaurant to educate our people, the amount we invest in our people, is bananas. A lot of this has to do with resources as much as anything, and it has to do with the kind of people that come into those environments. But do I think it's necessary to learn how to cook? No.

Lo: I don't think it's that important to work in fine dining. It depends on what you want to do in the long run. I think it's important for cooks to work in a place where food is paramount and it's an exacting kitchen—and that can be rustic-exacting or more fancy-exacting—but it's got to have all the details, because it's really the details that make great food.

Soltner: I did my apprenticeship in 1948. At this time, we did three years of apprenticeship, and from there, we went to work for one year at one restaurant, another year at another restaurant, and so on for a few years,

harder to not get yelled at. I actually appreciated it. One chef yelled at me so bad that foam was forming at the corners of his lips like a rabid dog. I never wanted that to happen again, because it's embarrassing. I feel like any cook should have that kind of experience and then do what they want to do.

Yannick Alléno, Pavillon Ledoyen (Paris): It's an education. I think it's a *métier* of gestures above all. To play piano or saxophone, you must work a lot. It doesn't come on its own. But you can come from anywhere; it doesn't matter. It's knowing where you're going.

Redzepi: For the most part, fine dining kitchens bring forth a high level of organization and work ethic, and they also train people to be very good craftsmen. Cooks go through one or two years, being in all the seasons, butchering, and doing all the hard work, and then many of them take that knowledge of flavor and organization and put it into an everyday environment. The way I see it, there used to be a lot of very bad everyday restaurants. The bar is higher now. I think the importance of fine

until you could be a sous chef, and from sous chef to chef, and eventually to chef-owner. That's how I started. You have old timers like me who say apprenticeships are better—if we were in good restaurants we learned quite a lot, but we also did a lot of cheap work. Many times at our school, when I see what the students produce after six months, I know that I was not able to produce that after six months of apprenticeship. We learned by working, so we didn't learn as fast.

Alléno: I was a student of nouvelle cuisine. It was an era when you learned cooking with the habit of "Oui, chef!" The chef said something, you said yes, and you executed it. And therefore the reflex was one of boredom. The apprenticeship for this style of cooking was long. I was a good student of this cuisine, with its reflexes and its ways of doing things. It's good because the foundations are very strong, and with them you arrive at a "long-termist" creativity. It's also a very flavorful cuisine, one that couldn't survive today, because now everything is accessed through the image, and one often forgets one thing, and that's the taste.



What were your early experiences with fine dining, both as a diner and as a cook?

Crenn: I was eight or nine years old when I ate my first tasting menu, in Brittany. People's clothes were so well tailored, and it was black and white and ties and white gloves and everything was shiny and it was just so different from just walking into a bistro. I don't think I knew what I was experiencing, but I knew that it was different and for me, and it was just amazing.

Kinch: I was working in France, in a really traditional French restaurant that had one Michelin star, when I first had a meal click for me. I was twenty-three, and I knew everything. It was my first extended period in France, and I had just started eating at restaurants. I had only been to a couple three-star places. I went to this restaurant; it was called Alain Chapel...

The food was so bright and so simple and so delicious, yet so unlike anything I'd ever seen before. It was alien. There was a courtyard, and you sat underneath the trees underneath the veranda; there were birds in the fucking trees singing. It wasn't traditional, it wasn't classical—it was outside. It was innovative, but really, really simple. I think about that meal all the time—about how it made me feel. I

remember taking the train back home and realizing I knew nothing about food. I knew absolutely nothing.

Alléno: The first three-star I visited was Bernard Pacaud [at L'Ambroisie]. I ate a *feuilleté de truffe* with foie gras and truffle sauce—it was the era when the truffles had flavor. This was in 1992. Then I had lobster with red-wine sauce, in *civet*, with a purée of split peas. I didn't know that split peas could have such an exceptional flavor. Then I had lamb and a chocolate *tarte*. The second was Robuchon, when it was still in the 16th Arrondissement. It was the first time I had warm gelée, of foie gras. It incited me even more. I was a hotel chef—at that time, the hotels weren't like they are today; there weren't starred restaurants. We did our job well, but it wasn't our goal. When I had tasted this emulsion, that's when I thought, *This is what I want to do*.

Achatz: My very first experience was at Charlie Trotter's, in 1995. I was applying for a job there. Charlie said I could come in as a *stage* and try out. He made the tryouts cook a five-course meal for him and the sous chefs—there'd be a black box of ingredients and a set amount of time, and they'd say, "Ready, set, go." So immediately after Charlie invited me, I hung up the phone and booked

I tell my guys this: If you're going to put yourself out there, you have to make sure that it's going to taste better—it's going to feel better—than going and getting a good burrito. Just saying it's fine dining isn't enough to create its value.
—Christopher Kostow

I would not be spending sixteen hours a day cooking for forty people if I didn't feel there was a greater purpose than just making these forty people happy. —René Redzepi

a reservation. I wanted to see what ingredients they were using in the kitchen, so I could think it through. I was twenty-one, a single diner, and nervous as hell. It was my first fine dining experience—I remember ordering two bottles of wine knowing I wouldn't drink any more than a glass or two, but I wanted them to know that I knew wine. And the meal was so magical. The elegance, professionalism, hospitality, it felt like you had stepped into somebody's made-up world. It was like being in a Harry Potter movie.

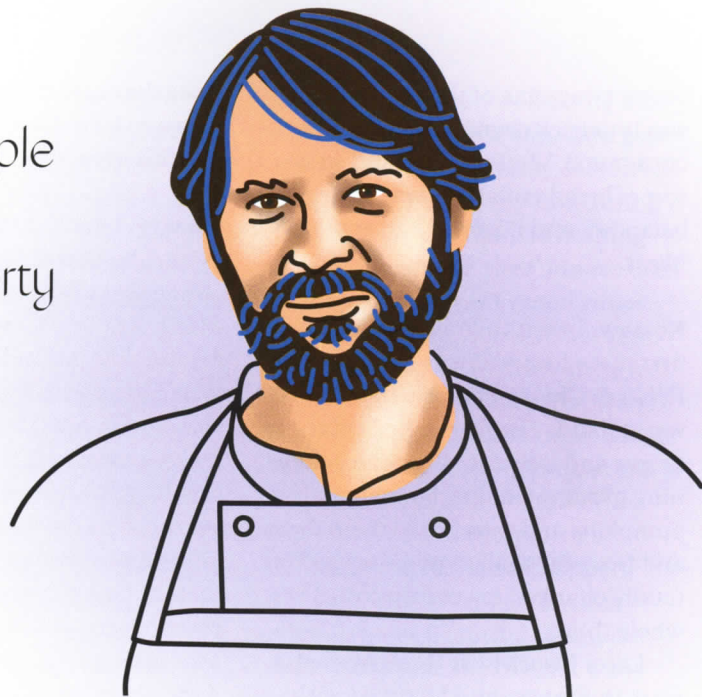
Shewry: I didn't grow up in a country with a system of judging restaurants with stars or numbers or hats. Now, there are so many different ways of finding out what the best restaurants are. But back then it was more word of mouth. When I first moved to Wellington from Taranaki, all the cooks used to whisper in hushed tones about this restaurant called the Roxburgh Bistro, about how incredible the chef was and how amazing the food was. They talked about it like it was some kind of pilgrimage to go there. I was maybe twenty-one, and I was pretty excited by that. My mother came down to stay with my wife, Natalia, and me, and she booked us dinner there. I went with my mother and wife, and after that point, it was real clear what super high quality was. I'd been cooking since I was fourteen, and I had never seen food like that—I'd never tasted food like that. I wanted to be a part of that, so a

few months later I applied for a *com-mis* position there.

Humm: When I was fourteen, I stopped going to school to become a professional cyclist—I was on the junior Swiss national team, I was sponsored, the whole thing. My dad, who was an architect, was totally against this idea. He said, "I'm not paying for any of this, you're on your own." And so I went on my off time and got a job in a kitchen and learned to cook. But when I was eighteen, I had a meal—ironically, it was for my father's birthday—at the restaurant of Frédy Girardet, who was one of the really great Swiss chefs with one of the best restaurants at that time.

We had dinner in the kitchen, which was super special. I saw these cooks with the toques and the way they moved around this kitchen and the way Girardet's voice was the only voice you could hear, and I could see how they were so concentrated and so focused, and it really blew me away. At that moment, I realized cooking could be competitive, that what they were doing was what I was doing on the bike all day long. I raced for a few more years afterward, but that moment was very, very big for me. When I decided to go full on into cooking, I wanted it to be with that intensity and precision.

I went to work for three-Michelin-star chef Gérard Rabaey at Le Pont



de Brent. In the five years I worked there, I got exactly what I wanted in the kitchen. It was amazing. Intense, focused, precise—it was just unbelievable. But in those five years, I never even saw the dining room. During service, Rabaey would pull down a glass window over the pass, leaving just enough room to pass your plates because he didn't want any communication between the kitchen and the dining room. No joke, the only way to communicate was with little notes with questions or answers on them. So fine dining was attractive to me, but only really for the kitchen side of things.

Sandoval: I was living in Richmond, Virginia, where I'm from. I moved out of my parents' house when I was sixteen, dropped out of high school, realized I needed to make some money, pay rent, and buy weed. So I started washing dishes at a place called Helen's Restaurant. For that time and for Richmond, it was the finest of fine dining places. I went from washing dishes to plating salads, and then developed a relationship with the chef, David Shannon. He said I should come in and dine at the restaurant as a customer. I was completely

blown away. One of the first courses was littleneck clams with watercress consommé, Virginia ham, and some sort of bread crumbs. It was perfectly balanced, and I'd never had anything like it.

Kostow: I went to France, and the first place I worked was a one-star Relais & Châteaux where the food was a fraud. They'd buy beautiful *loup de mer* and freeze it all. At the beginning of summer, they bought all these pumpkins and then broke them down and froze them all to make soup. That totally changed my perception of the whole thing.

Later I worked at three-Michelin-stars in France, and I worked with Daniel Humm at Campton Place and it taught me a really big lesson. Just putting food in a pretty pile is not enough. I don't think your consumer now has the patience for the unnecessary pomp and circumstance. I tell my guys this: If you're going to put yourself out there, you have to make sure that it's going to taste better—it's going to feel better—than going and getting a good burrito. Just saying it's fine dining isn't enough to create its value.

Roellinger: Let's leave the world of the chef. One of the most important emotional moments I've had with food was with strawberries. I was going to pick them with my grandfather in the garden at eleven o'clock—the sun had begun to heat up the berries. There was still a bit of dirt on top of them, so we went to the water pump and turned it on all the way. There was quite a particular smell there, I know there were two or three frogs hanging around. The water was cool and we rinsed the hot strawberries, we cleaned them, and then we bit right into them. They were hot inside, but on the outside they were cool. For me, that was the first gustatory emotion that I remember.

Does the exclusivity of fine dining threaten its existence? Or does it create a necessary mystique?

Shewry: I don't think it's a threat. I was talking with one of my front-of-house staff the other day about whether or not we should block the front-door glass or leave it open. When people walk along the street, sometimes you'll see them peering in, wondering what's going on in the building. There needs to be a *What are they doing in there?* kind of feeling.

There's a part of me that knows that the cost of coming here—even though it is a good value—means that a lot of people in society can't come. In a way that's what fine dining means: it definitely excludes the majority of people in Australian society. That's a fact. But I don't feel like my idea of fine dining or Attica is elitist. Generally, restaurants of the ambitious nature are smaller. It's hard to get into the best restaurants in the world. There's a lot of exclusivity around that basic fact, not even bringing in the cost.

Alléno: I believe that fine dining can't be populist. A great restaurant is something luxurious, and the luxury, I believe, is earned. You must keep these parts of dreams so that a kid will want to be able to eat and drink great wines in a restaurant like that one day—it's a value in which everything is exceptional.

There are events where great chefs come to serve their food in cartons. I don't believe it's good. Fine dining should remain an environment, a smile, a greeting, a scent, a thickness of table, of crystal—it's part of things. In terms of food, most often our clients come to us and say, *Wow, I would never have been able to make this at home.*

Humm: I think it's a threat to fine dining. I really do. When I was young and cycling all over Europe, when I would

be in a town with a great restaurant, I would go by to see them, how they looked from the outside. Sometimes they had a menu outside and sometimes I could look through the windows. But I had such a fear of those restaurants, because I never felt like I could go in to eat and enjoy myself. And that huge, strange fear followed me, even after I'd worked in the best restaurants for so long. I was almost thirty years old before the terror started to fade. But I'd think to myself, *I don't have enough money. I don't wear the right clothes. I don't do this.*

We have to work hard to combat that, and the one hurdle that we cannot really remove is the price. This kind of dining is expensive. But everything else we try to overcome: we don't have a dress code, we have a bar where we allow walk-ins, and we offer à la carte dishes. We like when the bar gets a little loud sometimes, we like that energy in the room. Anyone is welcome, but it takes work on our part to try to make people understand that.

Lo: I think eating out is a privilege. On some level eating at all is a privilege.

Is fine dining exclusive? It's exclusive in that you have to be able to afford it. It's privileged, certainly, because a lot of people can't even afford to go out to dinner.

Is the question: Should fine dining not exist because it's expensive? I think it needs to exist. I think it's probably going to become more exclusive because of the current economic situation. But my mission here has always been about dialogue, about being able to sit down and talk, about bringing different cultures to the table. That message is not exclusive. I've tried my best to keep my prices low, to be the affordable fine dining, but it's almost impossible, especially now.

Skene: There are expensive restaurants, restaurants that are medium-expensive, restaurants that are cheap,

and whatever varying degrees in between. At each place, you should expect a certain level of quality, right? When you pay the prices you pay at Saison, then you should expect a fucking heap of caviar that's cured in salt that we harvested from seawater that we brought in, that we smoked and gave to our caviar packer, who aged it for three months. Everything is perfect about it, or as perfect as it can be at that time. You should expect that.

We have to accept that if you're going to cook really great food, it can't be on a really large scale. You can cook *good* food on a large scale—if you're going to do a casual chain you can still do it really well. I don't even like how big Saison is now, and the quality of the products we have here is as good or better than anywhere in the country. But for me, I still want better shit, because there is better shit that exists in the world.

Crenn: Sometimes I want to go and buy something from a designer that I like, and it's quite expensive. But I'm just so attracted to it and I love the designer. I'm not gonna buy that every day. There's also just go-to, no-brand clothing. It's also about finding that balance, how we can have two places. One will maybe play with their mind and their brain a little bit and maybe their taste also, but the other one is more familiar.

Kinch: I think there will always be a market for fine dining. It's that combination of innovation and people with the budget to support it. That's like asking if Dior is going to go out

of business, or if Ferrari is going to go out of business. Drive one. Drive one and appreciate what it is, the sensation it's creating that you don't even understand.

The older I've gotten, the more I appreciate the all-encompassing experience of going out to a restaurant. The service, the ambience, the food, of course, how you're treated, the welcome—is it genuine, is there eye contact? Then you get down to details, the quality of the bread, the water, the coffee, the butter on the table. Does that mean I don't like restaurants where you go and only care about the food? No, but you don't go to those places for your thirtieth birthday or your fortieth birthday, your fifteenth wedding anniversary, or whatever it is. There have to be restaurants that rise to the occasion, that grasp the gravitas of the situation.

Manresa doesn't feed two hundred and fifty people a night, we feed two hundred and fifty people a week. That's it. There are fifty people, scattered around the Bay Area at night, who understand what we offer and are willing to pay for it.

Alléno: Like art, gastronomy has always had a relation to the social evolutions of the time. When you look at China, there have been periods of fantastic glory. The arrival of communism meant that knowledge atrophied. It's coming back. You look at the great, great, great French age—it happened because the intellectuals gathered to eat and drink great wines. There is a real

relationship between well-being and the search for the absolute. And gastronomy is that in fact: the search for the absolute. That's why fine dining won't die, because there is nothing better. For example, the Chinese take great delight in great French wines. When the Chinese come to our restaurant, they come to drink the great wines, to have the beauty that we've had since 1840, in this *maison*, which was built in 1792. Could fine dining today find its place in a dark little street at the end of the *quartier*? I don't think so. Yes, it can happen, but if your wife, who's gotten out her jewelry, her beautiful dress, is stressing because she doesn't want this quirkiness in a difficult environment, it won't be the same pleasure. It's a whole.

How is the current economic atmosphere affecting fine dining?

Benno: I think after 2008, people are a little more conscious about money. *Why am I going to spend five to six hundred dollars on a meal when I can also get a really fantastic meal for thirteen dollars?* That's what's happening now; great restaurants are so

I believe that fine dining can't be populist. A great restaurant is something luxurious, and the luxury, I believe, is earned. —Yannick Alléno



much cheaper. You can get the same service, great service, and great food for cheaper.

Aizpitarte: Back in the day, many of the high-level restaurants worked at lunch like at dinner—especially in Paris and in bigger cities, but even in smaller towns—as they tried to follow their customers, especially businessmen. Now they offer more affordable set menus, because people are no longer required to do business meetings in the grand fine dining restaurants. Most people, I think, are much more open-minded now and, even for more important meals, go to more open-minded places. They already have said everything they need to say to each other on the Internet! But they still need to see each other.

Lo: I wouldn't recommend opening a restaurant, honestly. You do it only if you absolutely have to, because in order to succeed, it needs to be an obsession—you need to have that

kind of tenacity. It's not really worth it, especially right now in this economic climate. It's so much money. I've said that to people underneath me, to my offspring, as well, and it's great when they do and they succeed—I'm not anti-restaurant by any means—I just think that it takes a lot. If you really, really love it, then it can be great for you.

Crenn: It's an interesting question. When I opened Atelier Crenn, we were in a crisis here in San Francisco. We had a vision, and we kept pushing for the vision, and we struggled a lot, until suddenly the tech came back to the city and it really changed the landscape of the city economically, for good and bad. Obviously, those people are looking for fine dining. They have disposable income and instead of going to a theater or to the symphony, they'd rather go to a restaurant and eat and have an experience. The new money is in their twenties—interesting people. A little bit annoying sometimes when they come with their phone and their iPad and things like that, but they are the new generation of wanting to go and try different things and are willing also to pay for it, which is great for us.

But we are blue-collar, and it saddens me that things are not balanced. And I'm concerned about it. Those are the cons of how the economy evolved here in San Francisco. I think San Francisco and the mayor should have

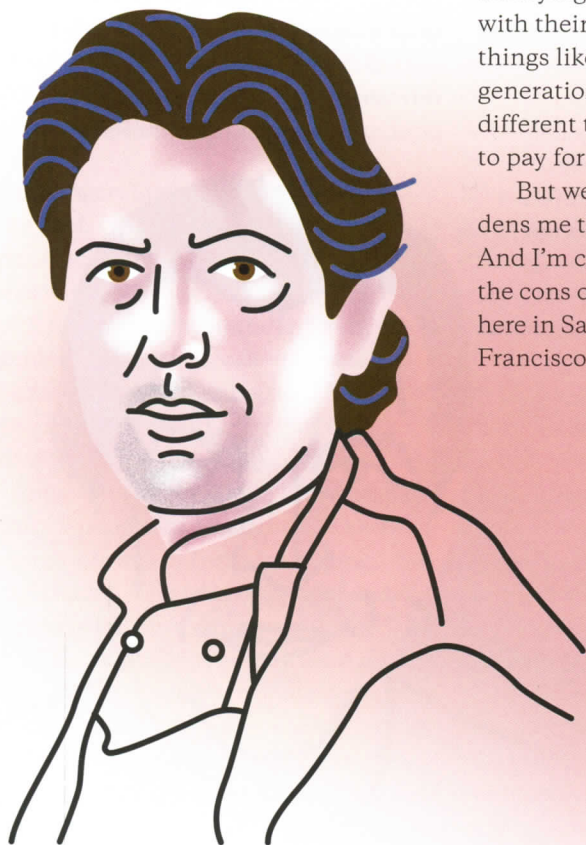
done something about it. Rent control should've been everywhere. You can't take away the core of what a city is about. A city is about workers who work everywhere, and live here, not just some tech company that comes and goes. It's been hard for cooks to live in San Francisco. Working at a restaurant, you don't make a lot of money, and it's difficult.

Kinch: Everybody is invincible when the economy is strong. I mean, all these people are investing in restaurants and going to restaurants right now. The last economic downturn? I mean, they were juniors in high school last time. I've seen the entire San Francisco restaurant scene flushed down the toilet twice in the past twenty-five years. It's going to happen again. San Francisco is a town with a restaurant for every seventeen people, and they continue to open restaurants. What's going to happen?

What continues to excite you about fine dining? What exasperates you?

Alléno: My favorite part is when it starts. The worst is when it's over.

Achatz: I like the social aspect of sitting at a table for long periods of time. I like the interaction with front of house, watching the ballet and choreography, the elements of the wine marrying with the food. I love the intentional aspect of fine dining.



In one word, freedom. That's why I'm drawn to it. That's why I run the business the way I do, because I feel like I have the freedom to decide whatever I want at the restaurant. —Ben Shewry

I like the planned elements, that someone is directing the show I'm sitting here and experiencing.

Crenn: What excites me about fine dining is meeting chefs who are cooking in a way that is very personal and doing things that no one's doing, and not following a cookbook or a stricture that has existed before. What I'm getting bored of sometimes is there's no soul on the plate, and it's just a machine.

I need to feel the chef's personality and how they think about food and also the emotion they bring through the way they cook. Not every dish is to my liking. But I appreciate the effort behind it and trying to understand what really made them go that far. Some people would be like, *Oh, god, why do you like this fine dining restaurant? It's not even food.* I'm like, *No, it is.* You have to take away what you know. That's very important because when you go out there, you have to leave your expectation and your egos, and really allow yourself to surround yourself with that experience. You're going to someone's house and she or he can showcase who they are as people. If you don't allow that, then you're not experiencing anything.

Kostow: What continues to excite me is the pressure and the idea of being the tip of the sword and trying to innovate, and, in some ways, trying to justify all of the accolades and attention. You wake up every day and say, *All right, how do we get better?* Very few people in any field have that. And that's exciting. The flip side is that the emotional math doesn't really pencil out, meaning what we put into it—our efforts, our stress, our time, the emotions and everything that goes into it—is not necessarily reciprocated by the understanding of the guest at all. I would imagine most chefs in my world probably feel the same. You walk out on a Saturday night and you wonder

sometimes, *Do they understand how beautiful that vegetable is?* Do they understand that nine people toiled in the field to grow that potato and that other people came in at six a.m. to make sure it was washed and someone else came in to cook the potato and so on and so forth? We have sixty people at the restaurant who spend their lives trying to make experiences for people, and I wish I could say that 100 percent of our guests understand that, appreciate that, but it's simply not the case.

Redzepi: I do like the commitment, and having the time to really go in-depth with the ingredients and products. Eating at the best restaurants can be some of the best experiences of your life that you will always cherish and remember. I really love to do that for people. When that happens and you feel you've done something special for people, it's the most gratifying thing.

But the spirit of fine dining came from the royal courts, and it still feels like it's been formulated with that aesthetic in mind, like you're dining with the upper echelon of the bourgeoisie. Of course, that's not how most people are comfortable, and there's a new standard for how to be comfortable today. Luxury today is about being comfortable. Yes, you still have to wear clothes, but you don't have to wear a specific kind of clothes to eat a delicious meal and sit for hours and talk with your wife while learning new things about food. You don't have to perform that ritual in that way anymore; places now have to allow people to be themselves and to be comfortable. If they don't do that, I think the fine dining establishment will die out.

Sandoval: Let's start with what pisses me off. I think aesthetics over taste is the worst thing right now. Making food look good is an art in itself, but food is food and it needs to taste good. There are a lot of filters on Instagram

that makes things look nice. What excites me? That there's more places opening. Having options to go out and eat. I feel like the fine dining community is coming back together after the last five to ten years on the decline.

Benno: I'm almost forty. Now I can't sit for four-plus hours eating. My stomach can't handle it, my brain can't handle it. I can't sit still. I get very antsy. I still appreciate it and love the hard work that goes into it, but I just can't.

Skenes: I really do enjoy and love going out to fine dining restaurants, I really do. I just don't like when you get somewhere, and the food is over-manipulated, and you can taste the fact that the whole line has touched your carrot, picked it up, blanched it in fucking water, put it in their pocket, put it in the fucking deli cup, left it there overnight, taken it out, forgotten it was on the counter for a couple hours, put it back in their pan, and then served it to you. It's fucked up. It just shouldn't be that way.

Here's what you do. You take that beautiful little carrot that just came out of the fucking ground—that poor fucking carrot, it's screaming. Just wipe that little thing down with a cloth and then peel it. Take those peelings, put that shit in a little carrot juice or a little chicken bouillon or a little vegetable bouillon. Maybe don't put it in anything. Maybe just brush it with a little butter that you made, because it's fucking so easy to make butter that's actually good instead of buying Plugrá from a fucking disgusting commodified feedlot, and then just grill it and serve it when it's cooked. See how simple that process is? Let's compare the two. Blanch it in water, shock it, put it in a deli cup, store it, pick it out, cook it again in some other way. Peel, cook, serve. I think there are some serious questions we have to ask ourselves as craftspeople in our profession.

Alléno: What excites me is the opportunity to prepare French cuisine of the twenty-first century, because the century's going to be very strange. Socially, it's going to be a very disturbed century, so we as cooks should prepare for that. It's going to be very different in ecological terms, social terms, etc. French cuisine should prepare itself for that. It's still really stuck on the codes of the nineteenth century.

Shewry: In one word: freedom. That's why I'm drawn to it. That's why I run the business the way I do, because I feel like I have the freedom to decide whatever I want at the restaurant. People come to see our expression of cooking and hospitality; they don't want to see another person's or another organization's expression.

Kinch: What makes me really excited about Manresa right now is that I don't have a lot of limitations on exploring things I want to explore, culinary-wise. Quality ingredients, technique, development of a new dish—I got nothing that really holds me back, logistically or from a financial standpoint.

What exasperates me, I hate to say it—it's not just in fine dining—are dietary restrictions, when people fine-tune menus to their own personal preferences. People who are afraid of food and feel that they need to dictate what we do. (Allergies, I completely understand.) I have a staff of thirty-six people, we feed fifty people a night, and we work long, hard days. Our entire individual and group focus is to create the best possible meal experience that the guests have. And yet, we have people come in and say,

I don't like red peppers and mushrooms, and they don't want to see it. It's not a restriction. They are dictating their concerns as opposed to allowing us to maybe open up their eyes a little. It's literally people who are afraid of food, and I find that exasperating. To me, that's not a good sign. You don't have to worry about the death of fine dining. You have to worry about the death of a certain kind of... hedonistic sensibilities.

I want people to come in and I want them to leave everything, including their cell phones, and their angst, and their anxieties, and their entire frantic outside world—that's what fine dining does. You're paying a lot of money—when you come into my restaurant, put the fucking phone away. Sit down and let us drive, and we're going to give you three hours, and when you leave it's going to feel like ten minutes.

Shewry: Another thing that fine dining affords me is some of the best young talent from all across Australia and the world. That is an amazing privilege. It's just a nice thing to be involved with passionate people all the time. It drives me, as well, because I have a responsibility to keep creating and doing new things for my team, as well. I feel exhilarated by that, but maybe I'm a bit of a psycho like that. I like the work. It's not hard work. It's massive fun. It's not a chore. Don't feel sorry for me.

Who are fine dining restaurants intended for?

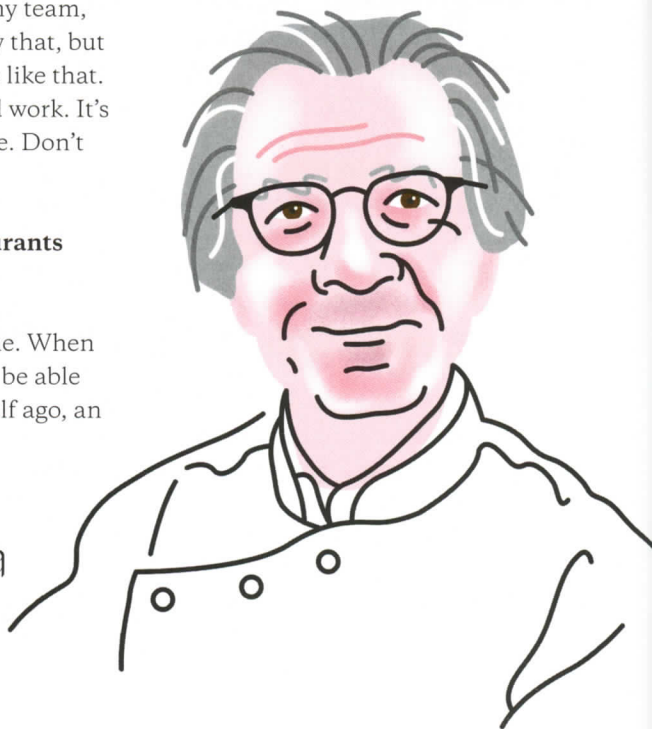
Alléno: They're for everyone. When it interests you, you should be able to afford it. A year and a half ago, an

eighteen-year-old couple came in. They were shy, a little frightened to be there. It's an impressive restaurant! It's up to us to understand, to feel, to put them at ease. We took care of them. They were so moved. They stayed more than four hours. They were interested, they were passionate. We could see they didn't have a lot of money. They had a little glass of wine. It was cute!

Sandoval: We're focused on getting people interested in food and wine, people who have an open mind, people who'll let us feed them. The ideal customer is trusting and willing to have a good time.

Crenn: Everyone. I think fine dining is intended for everyone. It's not a class thing, because people need space to celebrate. It's very important for someone to travel the world, and to find different experiences or understand different cultures, otherwise you're just narrow-minded. I remember this writer a long time ago was complaining about fine dining and how expensive it was, and it's like, *Why are you a writer?* To

Fine dining is for me, above all, the coherence between a moment and a place. —Olivier Roellinger



I want to give the guests a few things that are beautiful and nice and light and then send them on their way.
—Nick Muncy

think: *It's just not worth it, worth my time, and this is wrong.* That's not the right way to think about things.

Shewry: It's meant for anybody who loves life, seriously. I know that sounds like a weird thing to say, but I'm a passionate person, and I always surround myself with other passionate people, and I'm hopeful that that positivity and that passionate attitude makes like-minded people want to come to Attica. We can gain so much energy from the positive exchange between humans when we get our job right.

Kostow: Anybody who craves a perfectly created experience and is willing to immerse themselves in that. We have people who come in who perhaps aren't that savvy, but man, when they have a good time, that's super rewarding. I don't know if there's a demographic I wish I would see more of, I just wish everybody would come in maybe less jaded, maybe get off their phones, maybe just understand that there are a lot of people working in the service of their experience. You've just gotta lift your head up and meet them halfway.

Kinch: I used to save my money for months to go have a meal in a great restaurant, because of what I learned and how it made me feel—excited. It's the cost of doing, the cost of education.

There are a lot of people who just have a lot of money, and spend it, of course. There are always going to be restaurants where rich people eat, and rich people who don't really care about

food. There are always going to be restaurants and environments that cater to these people. But that shouldn't be the stereotype of what fine dining is. Nobody and nothing is perfect.

It's not easy being a pastry chef in fine dining. Dessert is both the last impression the restaurant will make, and something that must fit into someone else's tightly conceived vision. We spoke to two pastry chefs, a pastry-chef-turned-taquera, and the chef of a three-Michelin-star restaurant who has chosen not to have a pastry chef on his staff, about how the sweet stuff survives in a savory world.

How do you approach developing desserts for a fine dining setting?

Stephanie Prida, Manresa (Los Gatos, California): At the restaurant, dessert always comes after a huge tasting menu. I can't stuff this person full of pastry, as much as I want to. So instead we serve a first dessert and second dessert. First dessert is smaller, lighter, cleaner, with a kick of acid, and then second dessert is



chocolate and one fruit dish, so if it's a two-top, each person gets a different dish, and if it's a four-top, there's two and two. Everyone gets something different.

Nick Muncy, Coi (San Francisco): It's different than dealing with a casual dessert menu where people want an ice cream, cake, and this and that all in one dessert, because they're only getting one thing. Here at Coi, I'll have one ice cream out of two or three desserts. I want to give the guests a few things that are beautiful and nice and light and then send them on their way.

My process has changed a little bit, because we were with Daniel Patterson and now it's Matt Kirkley as chef. With Daniel, there was no reusing ingredients and we had to keep everything local, so I would watch what stuff he was going to use for his menu, because I'd be getting whatever was left. (Whenever I'd put a new dessert on, the chefs would always jokingly say something like, *Ooh, raspberries sound good, maybe we'll take raspberries!* which would mean I'd have to change my menu.) Now we don't have the same limitations with keeping things local,

because Kirkley's more concerned with getting in the best stuff. If there's something that's not grown here that he wants on the menu, we'll put it on—truffles, caviar, whatever. I just made a dessert with banana, and I'd never been able to use banana before.

How collaborative is the relationship between pastry chefs and head chefs?

Muncy: Daniel was more involved, especially in the beginning, because this was my first pastry chef job. I would work through dishes a lot with him. He's a very hard person to cook for and put dishes up to. He definitely knows what he's talking about and what he's doing. There'd be times where I'd give him the beginning of an idea, and if I didn't think he was really feeling it, I would just ditch it. I think it becomes difficult when you have someone trying to manage a vision in your head.

Kirkley wants me to figure things out on my own and go through my own creative process. I like to keep him in the loop and see if he has good ideas I wasn't thinking about. But really I'll just have Chef Matt taste it, and if he likes it, it goes on the menu.

I think the only thing that I've really changed is how I present the

stuff. I changed styles to match Kirkley's food, because it's important for the meal to look cohesive and not switch completely when the dessert courses come out. If I was still making dessert courses like I did with Daniel it would look weird, going from all this super meticulous food that Kirkley is doing back to natural plating. And Kirkley helped a lot with that kind of fine-tuning.

Prida: It all depends on the restaurant and the chef, to be honest with you. Sometimes it's a little bit of a fight because pastry is a way more narrow road, in terms of what product we can use. I'm really extremely lucky at Manresa. It's not like any other fine dining restaurant I've ever worked in. It's a very fair kitchen, and we're all very understanding of each other. Pastry usually has the makeshift den upstairs, where it's completely separated from the rest of the kitchen. It's not like that here. Pastry at Manresa is literally in the middle of the kitchen, so we're right there.

There really isn't a huge jump between savory and pastry. I think David Kinch has hired the same type of person to run both sides of the kitchen, people who have the same mind-set of what they think the food should be. We try to make it one cohesive menu, so that there's not

this idea for the guest of, *I'm done with savory, now I move on to pastry.*

Rosio Sanchez, Hija de Sanchez (Copenhagen): Pastry chefs like to be alone in their room—*don't touch my stuff, I'm gonna do this, it's my schedule, this is my pastry scale.* When I started doing pastry, I would do it alone at night when everybody was sleeping so I could be left alone, and then have people enjoy the pastries or whatever I made in the morning. A lot of pastry chefs are comfortable with that.

It was actually a little difficult in the beginning to work at Noma, because I was working with savory as well. It was just like, *This is how we work,* and savory chefs would come and help with plating, and it was a complete nightmare to me in the beginning. At Noma, we were a big team working on the menu. I adjusted to it, and I really like it now. I think it's just a matter of breaking down that wall—anyone can be trained.

When I started, Torsten Vildgaard and Søren Ledet worked on the savory, and I worked on the desserts.

When I started doing pastry, I would do it alone at night when everybody was sleeping so I could be left alone, and then have people enjoy the pastries or whatever I made in the morning. A lot of pastry chefs are comfortable with that. —Rosio Sanchez





There really isn't a huge jump between savory and pastry. —Stephanie Prida

a lot of desserts are way too sweet, they're too straightforward.

It was attacked in a way like, *Potatoes are coming in season, Rosio. You should maybe try to work on a potato dessert.* And then people give some suggestions, there's a dialogue of where it should go, and then it's divided into who works on it.

The last couple of years that I was there it was totally different, because I moved into the test kitchen. That same process still happened, but it was more of a free-for-all. Some apples would come in and then me, Thomas, and Lars would start working on apples with no clear direction of where it was going. I was working on something that I thought was going to be an apple dessert—whole cooked apple, really nice and sweet and soft but still firm so you could kind of scoop into it—and René was like, *This is an appetizer.* In my head, I'm screaming, *No, it's a dessert!* But it was really liberating in that you don't have to confine yourself to something. I really enjoyed being able to work on something and figuring out what was the best for it.

It's super unusual. It's crazy. It's very hard to find a pastry person who is willing to make savory applications or even to take advice and critiques from savory chefs. I think having a lot of critique from savory chefs is a good thing, whether good or bad, because

Joshua Skenes: For me, it's more cohesive not to have a pastry chef. A lot of chefs don't know how to make pastries, but if you do, then just make them yourself. The flow of the menu makes more sense. I think that there's a tendency with pastry chefs to over-complicate. When you put together a complicated pastry, where you have a base layer, a middle layer, a side layer, a garnish, a crumble, a streak, an ice cream, and some flowers, it's just not going to come together. Does it make sense to go from your main meat course—a simple broth made out of grilled bones—to some silly architected shit? Focus on just a scoop of ice cream that's the single best-tasting and best-textured ice cream that exists, and you're gonna wind up with a much better product and a much better experience overall.

But there are lots of pastry chefs out there who would be able to do what I'm saying. If I had a pastry chef right now, it'd be fine, I'd be able to give them very clear parameters. Back when I had a pastry chef, everything was a hundred percent from the hip. Very little time was devoted to really sitting down and having a conversation and taking a step back.

What are the specific difficulties you face in the pastry kitchen?

Muncy: You can sometimes tell when there's a savory chef doing desserts. They'll go to the same old tricks that everyone was doing ten

years ago, like a crumble and a torn up piece of cake with a quenelle of ice cream that doesn't look right. It's a little dated. A good pastry chef brings a lot to the meal: I'm doing fresh bread and well-thought-out desserts. I think it's important.

It's hard because people love desserts, but given the option they'll be like, *I'm not that hungry. I'll be good today.* I feel like people only get desserts here because it's part of the deal.

Sanchez: Not many restaurants can afford a pastry chef. And only maybe ten percent of people order dessert if it's not a tasting menu. When I started at wd-50 there was this huge pastry-chef boom in New York City. All these pastry chefs from these big restaurants were trying to make something happen, something cool. Johnny Iuzzini, Alex Stupak, Sam Mason, Dominique Ansel, Will Goldfarb were the major restaurant pastry chefs, and then they all left. But these restaurants still exist with pastry chefs—a lot of the chefs there just aren't really pushing to be in the magazines and spotlight. I don't think there's a lack of pastry chefs.

Prida: There is usually this idea that *I may skip pastry and do cheese.* It sucks because we work so hard and to have dessert be supplemental sucks. We can't control the guests and their opinions, but our job is just to make it as special and as interesting as possible.

For a savory chef there's no ending point—you can own your own restaurant, be a chef forever, but in the end, there's nothing really in it for a fine dining pastry chef. I think it's hard for chefs to find the right pastry person, because there aren't very many of us. I think a lot of chefs don't have a pastry department because they just haven't found the right person. And after they've gone through so many people, they're like, *I'm not going to deal with this again.* **LP**