

Coming to Fruition

By Nico Earhart

It was my first day as a *stagier* in what I consider as one of the top restaurants in Denver. I had just returned to the States from a six-month tour of duty in a Northern Italy, working in one of those places that could get two Michelin stars in a heartbeat if the 24-year-old chef gave a rat's ass what some French guidebook said. And he knew his food was some of the best in the whole entire region so I didn't blame him for not pandering. So, I had spent almost a half year working 18-hour days in a damp, cold basement without compensation: Peeling 40 kilos of potatoes here, hand rolling 5,000 gnocchi there and dispatching and butchering every woodland creature under the canopy, occasionally getting to touch a frying pan for 10 minutes during nightly dinner service. And now, here I was back in the U.S., ready to grab the Denver culinary scene by the throat. I showed up at the back door of the kitchen around noon and was greeted by one of the chefs outside who was finishing a smoke.

My first assignment of the day was to shuck a heaving bag of oysters, roughly 50 pounds of them, then dump the extracted meat into a bucket and wrap each oyster individually around with a cross-section of potato to be later topped with sautéed spinach and deep fried for service. A Midwestern take on the infamous Oysters Rockefeller. This first pedestrian task came as a relief to me. Yes, that was a lot of oysters but people who have worked in kitchens know that the best thing to do on your first day of the job is to not fuck up, and given the delegation to split a bunch of bivalves in two, I figured it was likely I wouldn't accomplish my greatest fear. So, away I went to that bulbous, fishnet bag of oysters, sliding

through them with a blunt stiletto and dropping the goopy creatures below me into a waiting bucket.

About the time I had shucked my last mollusk, the chef de cuisine came over to my secluded station and asked if I wanted to fire something, which of course I did, my hands pulsating and bruised, covered with oyster juices. For this next, all-important task, I would be frying an intricate bird's nests of extracted potato, like shoestring fries but even finer, to prepare for a garnish. I was allotted a four-top burner, some small sauté pans and a squeeze bottle of canola. I placed all four pans atop the burners and lit the ignition on them one by one, keeping the flame at about half-mast as I got the handle on flipping each one to keep the nest intact, giving them about 30 seconds a side to crisp up. I chugged along, dropping the finished nests onto a waiting sheet pan covered in paper towels. A few minutes in the chef passed my station again, examining my progress and lifting one of the sauté pans.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

I had been asked the question many times before in kitchens, both hyperbolically and not and in multiple languages, so I was familiar with the query. But as usual, I didn't have any answers. He brushed me aside and tilted the control knobs to their full potential, discharging a fountain of flame that rose nearly a foot off the deck.

"You gotta do this shit faster, Man," and saying this, leaving my burners brightly aflame, he walked away.

What happened next is still unclear to me, the events having unfolded at such a furious pace I couldn't tell where one arm ended and the other began, as the multi-armed Shiva. I had to ditch the first few batches of product, having been torched to a funereal black insipidness. Eventually, I was able to catch up with myself, doing as I had done the first few rounds but having

kicked myself into a mental fast forward. This fury went on for a few minutes and finally, my left hand began to run out of the waiting, uncooked spud-baskets. I had reached the end of my audition on the line.

Looking over my pile of finished product, I searched for outliers who might throw off my golden-brown medium. One or two individual threads stood out as being well-done, maybe a little darker than their peers, but other than that it looked as though the chef would have to lend me his approval. Then, like an unseen phantom, he appeared over my shoulder, noiselessly perching his head in my peripheral. He surveyed the sheet pan, still sitting there like an idol ready for worship. He reached towards the pan and proceeded, with his sandpaper hands, in the direction of my few just-less-than-perfect threads of starch. He clipped off a couple of the brittle stems and flung them into his mouth.

"These things are fucking burnt, Man."

And with that he tilted the tray towards the trashcan resting below my station, edging the bundles closer to the precipice, urging them to join their charbroiled friends in the smelly mire of the trashcan. From inside my being a grumble went up, that turned suddenly into a pulsation of energy reverberating out from my body in the form of gyrations and shivering anxiety. Of course, I didn't do any of these things openly and in reality, having harnessed all my personal strength to shovel these feelings back down into the crawl-space of my soul, but I was close. What came out instead would have been an impish stutter, not unlike the sound a mouse might make, that would eventually form the origins of the phrase, 'Yes, Chef.' But then the tilting halted and the pan cemented itself back onto the countertop, Chef having released his vicelike grip from the hinges of the sheet pan.

"Just kidding," he laughed as the oxygen began recirculating throughout my brain, the mirthless joke revealing itself to me.

"Well done, now get back to those oysters."

"Yes, Chef."