The Grand Gelinaz! Shuffle

What happens when someone who will eat almost anything goes to an elaborate, multi-course meal in a tasting kitchen with a visiting star chef.

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On a Thursday late in November 2016, I was invited to a special dinner at an exclusive Brooklyn restaurant by a food scene friend who couldn't make his ticket. My immediate instinct was to tell him to ask someone who could really appreciate it. I don't think I have anything against restaurants but at the same time don't ask me to pick one out. Left to my own devices I'll return to the same handful of favorites, like an old dog who goes around nosing the same people for treats, unaware that the strangers around him might also have something tasty in their pockets. But then I thought for a minute and, this being the Thursday after the Tuesday of the 2016 presidential election, decided I could use the distraction. "Sure I'll go," I texted my friend. "Great," he wrote back. "Be there at 6."

The restaurant was the kind of place that Brooklyn has recently made famous, where you can spend hundreds of dollars on dinner and also enjoy old-school hip-hop playing in the background. The chef was not the restaurant's normal chef. He was an outsider, brought in as part of something called the Grand Gelinaz! Shuffle. Apparently it's been going on for a couple of years. One night annually, forty of the world's top chefs swap restaurants: a chef from Belgium might cook in America, a chef from America might head to France, a chef from France trots off to Japan, and so on. The trick is that you don't know ahead of time—when, for instance, you buy your hard-to-land several-hundred-dollar ticket—who you're going to get. You could get René Redzepi; you could get

someone not quite so famous. You won't know until you show up. We got a profane Australian with a funny Australian name.

We diners were seated in a smallish dining room, perched in high chairs along a communal counter maybe thirty feet long. Viewed head-on we must have looked like a bourgeois re-rendering of The Last Supper, about a dozen figures all lined up facing out and in various lolling poses and conversing subgroups. Across the counter was the kitchen. It was open and filled with staff, half a dozen or more chefs at half a dozen stations, plus something like four waiters—one for water, one for wine, one for taking plates, another for bringing them. The staff were all pros in a way that made them seem like amateurs, all behaving without any noticeable affectations, the waiters dressed in no obvious uniform. They and the diners could have swapped places without anyone noticing.

The chaos in the kitchen looped itself into discernible patterns of movement—the meal was beginning. From the center cooking consoles the waiters spread forward and out to the ends of the counter, dropping little finger bowls at each seat as they moved toward the middle, toward me. Finally my bowl was dropped. I looked down at it. Rising up out of it was a moistly dressed yellow-green leaf the size of a large human hand. It looked supple and muscular, with such a fine armature, outstripping any other leaf I could remember, that it did not seem inconceivable that if I touched it wrong it might punch me. After all of the bowls were placed, the chef called our attention and informed us that we were looking at a piece of vinegared and oiled fancy lettuce he had dubbed "Lettuce & Lovage." We were to simply—carefully—pick it up from the bottom, not the top or the middle, and tenderly place it into our mouths. And so we did. Two bites and it was done. Later, I would recall the brightness of the vinegar and the unbetrayed freshness of the leaf.

Six tattooed men, chefs, all in their late twenties, clustered around a small marble counter flame-torching a dozen tiny individual pizzas. The sight sent

through me a shudder of revulsion that took me by surprise, as if I had somehow felt an emotion belonging to someone else. A few minutes later the little pizzas were brought to us. “In true Gelinaz! fashion,” the Australian chef said, taking a brave stance in the middle of the kitchen in front of us, “I had to fuck with it.” He paused. “It’s actually pizza and steak tartare at the same time.” I took a closer look. Indeed, the pile of beef on the middle of the plate was not, as it had first appeared, lying on top of any dough. The pizza was actually a ring, a flat, golden “O” with a mound of uncooked flesh occupying the void—not unlike, I thought, the face of the man who had just been elected. I pulled a slice away, and some of the mound collapsed into the empty triangle it left behind.

“Can I not eat the beef?” I texted the friend who had given me his ticket. I was in one of my regular periods of thinking that cows are too cute and too dumb to be eaten. “Do whatever you want,” he wrote back. So I left the mound alone and looked rebelliously down the counter, wondering if anyone would judge me. But the eyes of my fellows were down on their plates, which they were emptying with vigor, and so I turned back to my own. The pizza part, at least, was good. A few minutes later the plate-clearing waiter came by. “Have you finished with this?” she asked of my tartare, without the slightest note of disapproval, and pulled it away when I nodded yes.

A minute later little bowls of bamboo and mackerel came over the counter. The chef explained that their contents had been fermented for “an undisclosed amount of time.” I admired his ability to remember the names and ingredients and life histories of all the dishes, and also the irony with which he could deliver these facts, and I wondered if the part of top chefs’ brains that housed list-memory was enlarged, as it semi-famously is with London cabbies. We chewed on our mackerels, and while chewing I looked into the empty bowl they’d come from. Each of the dishes had been arriving on different and very distinctive plateware. They were all unique, all interesting, many of them resembling crustaceans or oystery things of various sizes, from the tiny finger

bowls to the larger plates. The particular bowl in front of me was glazed ceramic, all clean and milky right up until the ends, where some prickly unglazed bits arrayed themselves.

The fourth course appeared. It was called “Fat Kid Broccoli” and was made of the bits of broccoli that “stick out from the side of the stalk and never grow into a full leaf.” I had never noticed this part of the broccoli before, much less considered its plight, and I thought it was a bit sad. I’m not sure why. Maybe because the pieces were stunted, unable to grow, realize their future, or reproduce themselves. At least they were covered in delicious honeysuckle pickle and honeysuckle syrup. That has to count for something, I wanted to tell them.

The next dish was some guanciale on buttered potatoes covered in pancetta rinds. It was warm, it was pig on pig, and it couldn’t be finished. The following few courses were better, but despite the extraordinary variety of their ingredients, they all pretty much gave off the same heavy feeling. Everyone else seemed into it.

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When I came back from the bathroom, which contained one of those Japanese washlet toilets with a built-in bidet, I noticed for the first time the exquisiteness of our chairs at the counter. They were yellow leather, high, rounded, all-in-all egglike; they allowed us to lean back when we wanted to relax and to lean forward over the counter when something interesting was happening in the kitchen. We could watch the cooks work in the back, watch different waiters come by in front of us, watch the oven temperature dials go up and down. Some of the chefs had applied temporary Gelinaz! tattoos to their necks. The exclamation point looked a bit like a lowercase “i,” one of my neighbors observed. It was our own little theater.

With the next course I began to wonder if the director was a butter fetishist. The dish he now presented consisted of three little pieces of agnolotti filled with some kind of green liquid and paired with three pieces of duck. It was delicious but even heavier than the pig. The man to my right told me that the first bite was so good it made him shiver from the top of his head to the bottom of his spine. What was it called, he wanted to know. The answer came quickly. It was called, the chef announced, "Agnolotti Motherducker."

With that name the strange revulsion I had earlier felt toward the pizza-torching chefs began to make sense. I had been turning the feeling over in my head the entire meal, unable to kick it; indeed its power had grown. The sight of the identical tattooed men urgently burning tiny individual pizzas covered in raw meat was, I had come to believe, maybe the single most useless human endeavor I'd ever seen. It was pathetic, or, even—and I really couldn't believe I was thinking this—unmanly.

"Unmanly" is not of course how the men in the kitchen understood themselves. (One of them even had tattoos that spelled out ROCK HARD across both knuckles.) At the least they fancied themselves craftsmen; at the most, the possibility that they were artists, or would be, had surely crossed their minds. Equally sure was that in thinking about themselves in this way they had given up something important. As I had been trying to remind myself, being a chef, even if it has never particularly appealed to me, is hard and often salutary work; to care for other people by feeding them is as noble a way to make a living as anything. But hearing "Agnolotti Motherducker" was a sign that care had fled the building. Though their hospitality was faultless, the move to cooking as art meant that the chefs no longer thought of themselves as in service, a sort of work which so many men notoriously have trouble going into. Rather, they thought of themselves as in charge. But of course they weren't; their dominance was only a delusion, fed by the names and postures they adopted and doled out, betrayed by the pathos of their pizza torches. My

revulsion, then, was twofold: first at their opening of care up to dominance, second at how pathetic their attempts at dominance were.

Or it was threefold. The meal further suggested itself to me as a vision of this country's future and of my own: after the robots took most of the worthwhile work, the rest of us would all be drafted as personal servants to the rich. Some of us would flame-torch their pizzas, others would tong over their premeal hot towels. Yet others would give exciting speeches to our masters about the rare ingredients they were about to consume. We would be drafted for these jobs not because the robots couldn't do them well enough, but because we in our pathetic dependence could suffice as entertainment on top of service, thereby filling a sort of new-old social role—not artist, not actor, not servant but some jester-like blend of all three. "Reality-servant," call it.

I stared off into the kitchen as the agnolotti burst green inside my mouth. Then, as if I were being taught a lesson for my moralizing, I caught a glimpse of something extraordinary. To the left of the kitchen was a chef carving a large mass of beef into small pieces. He didn't cut quite like a sushi chef, the only other sort I'd seen cutting like that; there was a touch of scientific awkwardness about him. He wiped the knife clean after each cut, and neatly lined the pieces up afterward as if they were components of an architectural model. He must have clenched his jaw when he focused, because it was balled up, throwing off his face in a way that made him look like a young incarnation of the actor John Turturro. The meat itself looked beautiful, the most beautiful meat I'd ever seen. I suppose this is because it did not look like meat at all—it looked rather like a miniature glacier that had been washed clean of snow and rock to reveal a smooth, slightly convex red-marbled ice wall. And so it turned out that not only were the night's greatest pains mostly visual, its greatest pleasures were as well—the scene could have been filmed in HD and broadcast with the narration of an Attenborough.

A few minutes later, the Australian chef told us we had been watching the formation of wagyu beef with eucalyptus paste, then waved a pail of the paste under our noses for a sniff. It smelled nearly as good as it looked, tart, sour, and rich all at once, and apparently tasted even better. When the be-beefed plates finally came around, my neighbors were in rapture. After a moment's jealous hesitation, I offered them my portion, which they accepted gratefully. As I passed them my plate, I caught the water waiter's eyes flicking my way. "What do you think you're doing?" they seemed to say. "What do you think you're doing?" I wanted to hiss back.

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A long pause after this course, the tenth. Dessert was next, and the chef turned out to be a wizard at it, although it was dessert like Louie CK's comedy: elevated by the black-souledness of pepper but also made less itself by it. We were first given some white chocolate and black pepper ice cream. The pepper, the chef said, was from a tropical rain forest indigenous community. He warned us it would be strong at first, then disappear, then come back, and he was right. It was a neat trick, and my favorite dish thus far. The coldness of it cut through the heavy room-temperature of the savory dishes.

Our second dessert was cooked cheesecake that had been dehydrated and crumbled atop uncooked cheesecake. Are all big chefs this matchy-matchy? We'd had pig on pig, honeysuckle on honeysuckle, real clam on ceramic clam, and now cheesecake on cheesecake. But it was excellent. Then there was a licorice, and, finally, an attempt at an elevated Baby Ruth bar, accompanied by a speech from the Australian chef about how he had always loved Baby Ruths as a kid, had seen them as a symbol of America, and had known immediately once he had finally gotten here that they were what he wanted to close out the night with.

By this point we had mostly stopped paying attention. A nice, patient contentedness had fallen over the room. One of my neighbors looked happily ten years older than he had at the start of the meal, the many wines having loosened the muscles in his face. I was tired, though not too full, as the courses had been many in quantity but small in portion. People had over the last couple of days been saying that somehow life post-election would go on, and lo, it was—the proof was all around me. There was a tinge of sadness, sure, but there was also a chef cursing in a cool accent and fourteen different wines to try. Life would indeed find a way.