



with Lou Perri from the Stunned Mullet.

palate pleasures

The Temperamental Chef

Why is it that “chef” and “anger” go together like peas in a pod?

Across an infinite range of occupations, and apart from—let’s say an army drill sergeant perhaps; chefs are widely regarded as being by far, the most volatile, the crankiest, the most likely to EXPLODE at any second.

Okay, perhaps I’m being unfair and citing the more negative fury-based terminology. Let’s say that chefs are renowned for their “passion”. There, that sounds better doesn’t it?

It’s a cliché that has maintained throughout the history of food preparation. Think of the archetypal French chef with his voluminous chef’s hat and moustache flailing and exclaiming with full Gallic melodrama at the poor underling whose fault it was that the soufflés did not rise.

Cut to today and of course there’s Gordon, letting us into his overheated kitchen and making us fervently decide that we’d rather be hand sorting raw sewage than be the poor apprentice whose character is being systematically decimated into a thousand tiny pieces for not garnishing the cod correctly.

And it’s not just Gordon who is out there allowing the world to see the dark and dastardly workings of a real restaurant kitchen operation. There’s New York guru chef

Anthony Bourdain who penned the insider’s expose “Kitchen Confidential”, where the author tells of cutting his cheffing teeth in an unforgiving macho world of ex-cons ... A world where, when you grab a searing hot pan, drop it and watch a searing nasty red burn appear on your hand – you ask for a bandaid and receive utter ridicule from your colleagues – “Whatchoo want, white boy? Burn cream? A bandaid?”.

Tyrone, the broiler man is described as being “8 feet tall, 400 pounds ... with a shaved head, a prominent silver capped front tooth, and the ubiquitous fist-sized gold hoop earring”.

He shows Anthony his own hands - “the hideous constellation of water filled blisters, angry red welts from grill marks, the old scars, the raw flesh where steam or hot fat had made the skin simply roll off”. *

Enough said. Then there’s Marco Pierre White, also penning an autobiography, aptly named “The Devil in the Kitchen”. When staff irritated him he threw them in the bin. When customers irritated him he personally came to the table and removed them from his restaurant.

Yes, and chefs are so temperamental that their ire can be wantonly focussed on the customer. This can be for a variety of reasons, usually “food crimes” such as well done steaks, vegan/vegetarianism.

Mr Bourdain, for example, describes vegans

as the “Hezbollah-like splinter faction of vegetarians” but in some cases a chef will throw out customers who do not respect the sanctity of a fine dining restaurant.

As Marco Pierre White says “I was trying to create something special and they were trying to spoil it. My pet hate with customers, is those that think it’s all about wallets. You get four silly boys, spoiling it for some guy and his wife at the next table, so you ask them to behave, and they take the attitude, ‘bugger you, we’ve spent a lot of money’. Well bugger them” *.

This has happened to myself and if you were the unfortunate guests on that night, well, you know the details.

It takes ego to be a chef. It is said that the customer is always right, but in the restaurant the chef is always right. It takes arrogance to be a chef. You need lashings of confidence and superiority to survive. A temper is almost a pre-requisite of being a chef. You are in charge of a motley crew of wayward teenagers in an enclosed, overheated, testosterone filled room. Discipline is required.

It is no wonder the chef is angry. There are 10 tables worth of orders on the docket rail which include the gluten intolerant, vegans and dairy abstainers. Everyone wants to eat at the same time. The temperature in the kitchen is hotter than 40°C and every

customer wants special attention.

Food preparation and service is the culmination of a 16 hour day, procuring, assessing, cooking and delivering one finely executed meal over and over again within a very tight window. Think how much stress is involved in just putting on a dinner party for 6 friends in your own home and now, add another 70 people. Perform that same day, over and over again for a few years and your fuse may just begin to shorten ...

But at the end of the day we are all lucky to have our temperamental chefs, in all their kicking and screaming glory.

Sure, they may exhibit the odd character flaw – but a liberally applied ‘F’ word and a harassed apprentice or two aren’t going to detract from the fact that these people who love their trade with a passion which sometimes occasions a colleague being thrown in the bin, or a disrespectful city boy booted out on the street - still deliver us culinary magic on our plates that has the power to transform our day, making our tastebuds sing and our hearts fill with joy!

* Anthony Bourdain – “Kitchen Confidential” Bloomsbury Publishing 2000

*Marco Pierre White – “The Devil in the Kitchen” Orion Books 2006

Comments and story ideas welcome:
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