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Cooks Rule.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I have changed the names of some of the individuals and some of the restaurants that are a part of my story.

To Nancy

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APPETIZER

A NOTE FROM THE CHEF

DON'T GET ME WRONG: I *love* the restaurant business. Hell, I'm still *in* the restaurant business—a lifetime, classically trained chef who, an hour from now, will probably be roasting bones for demi-glace and butchering beef tenderloins in a cellar prep kitchen on lower Park Avenue.

I'm not spilling my guts about everything I've seen, learned and done in my long and checkered career as dishwasher, prep drone, fry cook, grillardin, saucier, sous-chef and chef because I'm angry at the business, or because I want to horrify the dining public. I'd still *like* to be a chef, too, when this thing comes out, as this life is the only life I really know. If I need a favor at four o'clock in the morning, whether it's a quick loan, a shoulder to cry on, a sleeping pill, bail money, or just someone to pick me up in a car in a bad neighborhood in the driving rain, I'm definitely *not* calling up a fellow writer. I'm calling my sous-chef, or a former sous-chef, or my saucier, someone I work with or have worked with over the last twenty-plus years.

No, I want to tell you about the dark recesses of the restaurant underbelly—a subculture whose centuries-old militaristic hierarchy and ethos of "rum,

buggery and the lash" make for a mix of unwavering order and nerve-shattering chaos—because I find it all quite comfortable, like a nice warm bath. I can move around easily in this life. I speak the language. In the small, incestuous community of chefs and cooks in New York City, I know the people, and in my kitchen, I know how to behave (as opposed to in real life, where I'm on shakier ground). I want the professionals who read this to enjoy it for what it is: a straight look at a life many of us have lived and breathed for most of our days and nights to the exclusion of "normal" social interaction. Never having had a Friday or Saturday night off, always working holidays, being busiest when the rest of the world is just getting out of work, makes for a sometimes peculiar world-view, which I hope my fellow chefs and cooks will recognize. The restaurant lifers who read this may or may not like what I'm doing. But they'll know I'm not lying.

I want the readers to get a glimpse of the true joys of making really good food at a professional level. I'd like them to understand what it feels like to attain the child's dream of running one's own pirate crew—what it feels like, looks like and smells like in the clatter and hiss of a big city restaurant kitchen. And I'd like to convey, as best I can, the strange delights of the language, patois and death's-head sense of humor found on the front lines. I'd like civilians who read this to get a sense, at least, that this life, in spite of everything, can be *fun*.

As for me, I have always liked to think of myself as the Chuck Wepner of cooking. Chuck was a journeyman "contender", referred to as the "Bayonne Bleeder" back in the Ali-Frazier era. He could always be counted on to last a few solid rounds without going down, giving as good as he got. I admired his resilience, his steadiness, his ability to get it together, to take a beating like a man.

So, it's not Superchef talking to you here. Sure, I graduated CIA, knocked around Europe, worked some famous two-star joints in the city—damn good ones, too. I'm not some embittered hash-slinger out to slag off my more successful peers (though I will when the opportunity presents itself). I'm usually the guy they call in to some high-profile operation when the first chef turns out to be a psychopath, or a mean, megalomaniacal drunk. This book is about street-level cooking and its practitioners. Line cooks are the

heroes. I've been hustling a nicely paid living out of this life for a long time—most of it in the heart of Manhattan, the 'big's'—so I know a few things. I've still got a few moves left in me.

Of course, there's every possibility this book *could* finish me in the business. There will be horror stories. Heavy drinking, drugs, screwing in the dry-goods area, unappetizing revelations about bad food-handling and unsavory industry-wide practices. Talking about why you probably shouldn't order fish on a Monday, why those who favor well-done get the scrapings from the bottom of the barrel, and why seafood frittata is *not* a wise brunch selection won't make me any more popular with potential future employers. My naked contempt for vegetarians, sauce-on-siders, the "lactose-intolerant" and the cooking of the Ewok-like Emeril Lagasse is not going to get me my own show on the Food Network. I don't think I'll be going on ski weekends with Andre Soltner anytime soon or getting a back rub from that hunky Bobby Flay. Eric Ripert won't be calling me for ideas on tomorrow's fish special. But I'm simply *not* going to deceive anybody about the life as I've seen it.

It's all here: the good, the bad and the ugly. The interested reader might, on the one hand, find out how to make professional-looking and tasting plates with a few handy tools—and on the other hand, decide *never* to order the moules marinières again. *Tant pis*, man.

For me, the cooking life has been a long love affair, with moments both sublime and ridiculous. But like a love affair, looking back you remember the happy times best—the things that drew you in, attracted you in the first place, the things that kept you coming back for more. I hope I can give the reader a taste of those things and those times. I've never regretted the unexpected left turn that dropped me in the restaurant business. And I've long believed that good food, good eating is all about risk. Whether we're talking about unpasteurized Stilton, raw oysters or working for organized crime "associates", food, for me, has always been an adventure.

FIRST COURSE

FOOD IS GOOD

MY FIRST INDICATION THAT food was something other than a substance one stuffed in one's face when hungry—like filling up at a gas station—came after fourth-grade elementary school. It was on a family vacation to Europe, on the *Queen Mary*, in the cabin-class dining room. There's a picture somewhere: my mother in her Jackie O sunglasses, my younger brother and I in our painfully cute cruisewear, boarding the big Cunard ocean liner, all of us excited about our first transatlantic voyage, our first trip to my father's ancestral homeland, France.

It was the soup.

It was *cold*.

This was something of a discovery for a curious fourth-grader whose entire experience of soup to this point had consisted of Campbell's cream of tomato and chicken noodle. I'd eaten in restaurants before, sure, but this was the first food I really noticed. It was the first food I enjoyed and, more important, remembered enjoying. I asked our patient British waiter what this delightfully cool, tasty liquid was.

"Vichyssoise," came the reply, a word that to this day—even though it's now a tired old warhorse of a menu selection and one I've prepared thousands of times—still has a magical ring to it. I remember everything about the experience: the way our waiter ladled it from a silver tureen into my bowl, the crunch of tiny chopped chives he spooned on as garnish, the rich, creamy taste of leek and potato, the pleasurable shock, the surprise that it was cold.

I don't remember much else about the passage across the Atlantic. I saw *Boeing Boeing* with Jerry Lewis and Tony Curtis in the *Queen's* movie theater, and a Bardot flick. The old liner shuddered and groaned and vibrated terribly the whole way—barnacles on the hull was the official explanation—and from New York to Cherbourg, it was like riding atop a giant lawn-mower. My brother and I quickly became bored, and spent much of our time in the "Teen Lounge", listening to "House of the Rising Sun" on the jukebox, or watching the water slosh around like a contained tidal wave in the below-deck salt-water pool.

But that cold soup stayed with me. It resonated, waking me up, making me aware of my tongue, and in some way, preparing me for future events.

My second pre-epiphany in my long climb to chefdom also came during that first trip to France. After docking, my mother, brother and I stayed with cousins in the small seaside town of Cherbourg, a bleak, chilly resort area in Normandy, on the English Channel. The sky was almost always cloudy; the water was inhospitably cold. All the neighborhood kids thought I knew Steve McQueen and John Wayne personally—as an American, it was assumed we were all pals, that we hung out together on the range, riding horses and gunning down miscreants—so I enjoyed a certain celebrity right away. The beaches, while no good for swimming, were studded with old Nazi blockhouses and gun emplacements, many still bearing visible bullet scars and the scorch of flamethrowers, and there were tunnels under the dunes—all very cool for a little kid to explore. My little French friends were, I was astonished to find, allowed to have a cigarette on Sunday, were given watered *vin ordinaire* at the dinner table, and best of all, they owned Velo Solex motorbikes. *This* was the way to raise kids, I recall thinking, unhappy that my mother did not agree.

So for my first few weeks in France, I explored underground passageways, looking for dead Nazis, played miniature golf, sneaked cigarettes, read a lot of Tintin and Asterix comics, scooted around on my friends' motorbikes and absorbed little life-lessons from observations that, for instance, the family friend Monsieur Dupont brought his mistress to some meals and his wife to others, his extended brood of children apparently indifferent to the switch.

I was largely unimpressed by the food.

The butter tasted strangely "cheesy" to my undeveloped palate. The milk—a staple, no, a mandatory ritual in '60s American kiddie life—was undrinkable here. Lunch seemed always to consist of sandwich au jambon or croque-monsieur. Centuries of French cuisine had yet to make an impression. What I noticed about food, French style, was what they *didn't* have.

After a few weeks of this, we took a night train to Paris, where we met up with my father, and a spanking new Rover Sedan Mark III, our touring car.

In Paris, we stayed at the Hotel Lutétia, then a large, slightly shabby old pile on Boulevard Haussmann. The menu selections for my brother and me expanded somewhat, to include steak-frites and steak haché (hamburger). We did all the predictable touristy things: climbed the Tour Eiffel, picnicked in the Bois de Boulogne, marched past the Great Works at the Louvre, pushed toy sailboats around the fountain in the Jardin de Luxembourg—none of it much fun for a nine-year-old with an already developing criminal bent. My principal interest at this time was adding to my collection of English translations of Tintin adventures. Hergé's crisply drafted tales of drug-smuggling, ancient temples, and strange and faraway places and cultures were *real* exotica for me. I prevailed on my poor parents to buy hundreds of dollars-worth of these stories at W. H. Smith, the English bookstore, just to keep me from whining about the deprivations of France. With my little short-shorts a permanent affront, I was quickly becoming a sullen, moody, difficult little bastard. I fought constantly with my brother, carped about everything, and was in every possible way a drag on my mother's Glorious Expedition.

My parents did their best. They took us everywhere, from restaurant to restaurant, cringing, no doubt, every time we insisted on steak haché (with ketchup, no less) and a "Coca." They endured silently my gripes about cheesy butter, the seemingly endless amusement I took in advertisements for a popular soft drink of the time, Pschitt. "I want shit! I want shit!" They managed to ignore the eye-rolling and fidgeting when they spoke French, tried to encourage me to find something, anything, to enjoy.

And there came a time when, finally, they *didn't* take the kids along.

I remember it well, because it was such a slap in the face. It was a wake-up call that food could be important, a challenge to my natural belligerence. By being denied, a door opened.

The town's name was Vienne. We'd driven miles and miles of road to get there. My brother and I were fresh out of Tintins and cranky as hell. The French countryside, with its graceful, tree-lined roads, hedgerows, tilled fields and picture-book villages provided little distraction. My folks had by now endured weeks of relentless complaining through many tense and increasingly unpleasant meals. They'd dutifully ordered our steak haché,

crudités variées, sandwich au jambon and the like long enough. They'd put up with our grouching that the beds were too hard, the pillows too soft, the neck-rolls and toilets and plumbing too weird. They'd even allowed us a little watered wine, as it was clearly the French thing to do—but also, I think, to shut us up. They'd taken my brother and me, the two Ugliest Little Americans, everywhere.

Vienne was different.

They pulled the gleaming new Rover into the parking lot of a restaurant called, rather promisingly, La Pyramide, handed us what was apparently a hoarded stash of Tintins . . . *and then left us in the car!*

It was a hard blow. Little brother and I were left in that car for over three hours, an eternity for two miserable kids already bored out of their minds. I had plenty of time to wonder: *What could be so great inside those walls?* They were eating in there. I knew that. And it was certainly a Big Deal; even at a witless age nine, I could recognize the nervous anticipation, the excitement, the near-reverence with which my beleaguered parents had approached this hour. And I had the Vichyssoise Incident still fresh in my mind. Food, it appeared, could be *important*. It could be an event. It had secrets.

I know now, of course, that La Pyramide, even in 1966, was the center of the culinary universe. Bocuse, Troisgros, *everybody* had done their time there, making their bones under the legendarily fearsome proprietor, Ferdinand Point. Point was the Grand Master of cuisine at the time, and La Pyramide was Mecca for foodies. This was a pilgrimage for my earnestly francophile parents. In some small way, I got that through my tiny, empty skull in the back of the sweltering parked car, even then.

Things changed. *I* changed after that.

First of all, I was furious. Spite, always a great motivating force in my life, caused me to become suddenly adventurous where food was concerned. I decided then and there to outdo my foodie parents. At the same time, I could gross out my still uninitiated little brother. I'd show *them* who the gourmet was!

Brains? Stinky, runny cheeses that smelled like dead man's feet? Horsemeat? Sweetbreads? Bring it on!! Whatever had the most shock value became my meal of choice. For the rest of that summer, and in the summers that followed, I ate *everything*. I scooped gooey Vacherin, learned to love the cheesy, rich Normandy butter, especially slathered on baguettes and dipped in bitter hot chocolate. I sneaked red wine whenever possible, tried fritures—tiny whole fish, fried and eaten with persillade—loving that I was eating heads, eyes, bones and all. I ate ray in beurre noisette, saucisson à l'ail, tripes, rognons de veau (kidneys), boudin noir that squirted blood down my chin.

And I had my first oyster.

Now, *this* was a truly significant event. I remember it like I remember losing my virginity—and in many ways, more fondly.

August of that first summer was spent in La Teste sur Mer, a tiny oyster village on the Bassin d'Arcachon in the Gironde (Southwest France). We stayed with my aunt, Tante Jeanne, and my uncle, Oncle Gustav, in the same red tile-roofed, white stuccoed house where my father had summered as a boy. My Tante Jeanne was a frumpy, bespectacled, slightly smelly old woman, my Oncle Gustav, a geezer in coveralls and beret who smoked hand-rolled cigarettes until they disappeared onto the tip of his tongue. Little had changed about La Teste in the years since my father had vacationed there. The neighbors were still all oyster fishermen. Their families still raised rabbits and grew tomatoes in their backyards. Houses had two kitchens, an inside one and an outdoor "fish kitchen". There was a hand pump for drinking water from a well, and an outhouse by the rear of the garden. Lizards and snails were everywhere. The main tourist attractions were the nearby Dune of Pyla (Europe's Largest Sand Dune!) and the nearby resort town of Arcachon, where the French flocked in unison for *Les Grandes Vacances*. Television was a Big Event. At seven o'clock, when the two national stations would come on the air, my Oncle Gustav would solemnly emerge from his room with a key chained to his hip and ceremoniously unlock the cabinet doors that covered the screen.

My brother and I were happier here. There was more to do. The beaches were warm, and closer in climate to what we knew back home, with the