The emotions that came over me while cooking at Hamersley’s, an upscale bistro in the South End of Boston, had nothing to do with what I experienced when preparing meals for friends and family in my home. At home I could cook while doing other things: talking, listening, pouring wine, enjoying music. Cooking at home inspired thoughts and bolstered my attachment to others. But at the bistro, all I cared about were speed, accuracy, and repetition—listening and remembering and carrying out the chef’s orders. I cared about how the food tasted and what it looked like on the plate, but more than anything else I had to focus my efforts on getting it right, getting it done, getting it to the wait staff who would get it to the customer. I couldn’t think straight. I couldn’t think of anything except what was in front of me being seared on the grill or sautéed in a hot pan. All the worries and doubts and sadness that preoccupied me when I wasn’t cooking had no meaning when I worked in the restaurant. Nothing occurred to me—no thoughts of tomorrow or yesterday, no ideas great or small. There was simply no time to think at all. The demands on my concentration and attention were nearly insurmountable. I could not keep up with the orders the chef was shouting at me: “Ordering—two veal, three chickens, two tuna, one steak medium rare.”

As instructed, I repeated the order back to him: “Two veal, three chickens, two tuna, one steak medium rare.”

“What are you working on?” he asked.

“I’ve got five chickens, two steaks, and a veal,” I said.

Above: Daniel Boulud at age 14 in the kitchen of a restaurant in Lyon called Nandron, where he did his first apprenticeship.
COURTESY OF DANIEL BOULUD
“Fire them all,” he said.

“Including the veal?” I asked.

The chef looked up from the dupes, the order slips sent in by the wait staff.

“Got it,” I said and returned to work.

It was my job to cook the food and shut up. For a second I wondered if I ought to apologize to the chef for appearing to have questioned his order, but instead I went back to assembling and firing the orders. I was working on sixteen dinners, all of which needed to get to the customers within the next thirty minutes.

I am not used to working fast. Though I pride myself on being efficient, everything I have ever done outside of a restaurant kitchen requires deliberate and relatively slow observation, memory, and the ability to use language to express my ideas—not mindless repetition and physical strength. What was so great about being robotic, about being so tense and focused that all my concerns were erased? Outside of playing sports or having sex (and even there focus is nowhere near as necessary or possible), cooking in a restaurant was the first time in my life that I was forced to achieve a complete state of immediacy. There was no looking back, no looking forward, no chance of distraction—all I had was a mandate to cook and cook and cook and cook. My entire world was reduced to six feet in four directions: the stove, the mise en place, the wait station, and the center of the kitchen where the chef stood expediting orders.

In the restaurant kitchen, the natural confusion, introspection, reminiscences, imagination, and creativity I rely upon daily to see mentally ill patients in my job as a psychologist vanished. And yet, a strange, unfamiliar peace came over me; I transcended anxiety through cooking.

Above: Thomas Keller with Patrice Boely at The Polo restaurant, New York City, 1983. Courtesy of Thomas Keller
My time at Hamersley’s was brief—a few months—but for the cooks and the chef the restaurant was a way of life. Night after night, six days a week, from four in the afternoon until midnight, they were robbed of the typical consciousness possessed by those they fed. After service (a term used to describe the dining period, which to me has religious connotations), most of the cooks headed to clubs for dancing, drinking, and drugging. They were too keyed up, too wired to sleep, talk, or even make love.

Make no mistake: a lot of cooks and chefs are oddballs, misfits, and outcasts. Being a member of a restaurant family wired to sleep, talk, or even make love.

A restaurant kitchen accepts odd behavior without too much fuss. Few bosses outside of restaurant kitchens can afford to be so tolerant. I once complained to the bistro’s owner, chef Gordon Hamersley, about Dave, a line cook who was driving me crazy. Dave spoke so quickly he was impossible to understand. He was impulsive and quick to anger, mercurial in his moods, loose in his associative processes, inattentive, very limited in his insight, and incapable of sustaining relationships with women he loved. Gordon replied, “I know he’s a nut, but he’s our nut.”

Another time, when I asked Andrew Carmellini, chef at Café Boulud, about the strange, paranoid, and vaguely threatening remarks of a line cook from his kitchen, he said, “He doesn’t get out much.”

“A restaurant provides a home for social deviants,” said Hamersley. “It provides structure for those who ordinarily don’t have it—and it’s a very liberal, creative place where people can flourish. We don’t care about the sorts of emotional problems that would matter in other work settings.”

Restaurants have always been a refuge for actors, painters, writers, musicians, and those excluded or victimized by society for being homosexual. The kitchen—and the possibility of sleeping through most of the next day after a night’s service and debauchery—have made the restaurant environment a favorable hideout for the shunned who would otherwise have a hard time functioning in other work and social settings.

The emotional security provided by restaurants enables many chefs to express love that would otherwise remain repressed. This love is expressed in the food that they cook. That chefs often cannot function in a nine-to-five setting and do not have ordinary home lives indicates that their ways of expressing and receiving love differ fundamentally from others’. Just what is their relationship to love? Chefs often give in order to receive. They seek validation from those they feed. This need for validation explains, in part, their exceptional and enormous generosity.

“Don’t you know why Todd English’s food is so rich?” asks chef Jody Adams of Rialto restaurant in Cambridge. “It’s because he wants to be loved so badly. We all do.”

The need for validation also accounts for the emptiness in many chefs’ lives. Wanting to be constantly surrounded by food, obsessed with feeding others, not always knowing when to stop putting ingredients in a dish or when a customer has had enough to eat—all these behaviors are symptomatic of a love that goes unfulfilled. Like performers, chefs have a powerful and overwhelming need to be loved. This need results in a tug of war with the customer as a vicarious other self, a representation of their own inner hunger. It is the customer who determines whether or not they are validated, and that is why chefs are as notorious for their anger as for their love. Being dependent on someone else in order to satisfy one’s personal hunger is both frustrating and terrifying.

And yet, chefs rarely sit down to eat a meal. They resist the satisfaction that comes from eating in order to feed others instead. More to the point, the satisfaction they derive from feeding others is as profound as if they themselves were the ones eating. They express and receive love from feeding people—an act that is giving even as it creates a barrier between the chef and food. Fundamentally, the chef’s experience of food is heightened and mitigated by other people eating his or her food.

Who in their right mind would choose to relate to food in these complex, regressed, indirect, filtered, and primitive ways?

When I stood in the open kitchen of Hamersley’s Bistro and watched customers eat the food I had prepared, the mental image I had of myself and my fellow cooks was that we were children cooking for the grown-ups as a favor, as a token of our esteem, to show off our cleverness. What good children we were! The adults were eating food we had cooked for them!

Chefs need the approval of many people, often complete strangers, who tell them that they have done a good job. The cult of celebrity associated with the postmodern chef is kept alive by armies of publicists, but it is rooted in the chef’s psychological yearning to be loved by thousands. It is no longer enough to cook at one restaurant. The world’s top chefs, including Wolfgang Puck, Alain Ducasse, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Daniel Boulud, Thomas Keller,
Charlie Palmer, and Todd English, now have global empires. Without the willingness and desire that chefs feel to exploit their fundamental hunger for love, there would be fewer enterprises attached to their names.

By choosing to distance themselves from the pleasures of dining, chefs also reflect elements of the child who achieves self-sufficiency through his or her ability to acquire food independently of the mother. The chef is the boy or girl who can and must do without the mother. In this action lie the seeds of rage—after all, where is the nurturance from outside?—but this behavior is also sublimating. Thank goodness chefs feel angry, entitled, and so much in need of love! We benefit from their creative adaptation to feeling hungry all the time.

Up until the mid-1970s, when Alice Waters and a few others began promoting fresh, seasonal cuisines, a great divide remained between what people had been eating for generations and what was served in American restaurants. There was little consciousness of the split and no discussion of the implications of eating food that had little connection to the soil or to community.

This division is very different from what takes place in France or Italy. In the United States a compliment paid to a chef goes something like “I couldn’t possibly cook this at home.” But because the food cooked in French and Italian restaurants is linked to family traditions, the compliment is: “This is almost as good as my mother’s.” Men and women in France and Italy who choose to become chefs differ from their North American colleagues by drawing upon family life that, for generations, informed a way of thinking and an appreciation for food. By contrast, food had little relevance in the backgrounds of most North American chefs.

Cooking for French and Italian chefs is a Proustian act, an effort to recall events from the past typically soothing in nature in which loved ones are brought back to life through the flavors and dishes once served in their long-vanished homes. Like the taste of wild strawberries in Bergman’s film, certain past loves can be recalled only through food. Our resistance to loss, our denial of the pain and misery caused by the deaths of those we continue to love all our lives—these absences can remain submerged and outside of daily awareness until we taste something, until we put something in our mouths that reminds us of them. Then we remember the importance of these people and recall how we felt in their presence. Because all of the senses are brought to bear upon the cooking and tasting of a dish, the chef can be the master or magician who restores memories otherwise lost to time.

“One set of my grandparents ran a café-restaurant in Montpelier,” said Christian Delouvier, executive chef at Ducasse in Manhattan. “The other set were cattle traders in Averyon. Later on they sold that business and started a dairy farm—they sold milk with a horse and carriage. Both of my grandmothers were excellent cooks.”

Daniel Boulud, Ariane Daguin, Alain Ducasse—many French chefs were raised in households where not just food but its production and role in society were part of daily life.

“My father and grandparents were butchers,” said Alain Solivérès, chef at Taillevent, the Michelin three-star restaurant in Paris. “I grew up in a family of excellent cooks—my grandmother, an aunt, and, of course, my mother.”

Most North American chefs grew up seeking things more practical than memories of Sundays spent with parents and grandparents whose love was experienced via the table. True to the twentieth-century idea that movement equals success and happiness, and following Henri Bergson’s philosophy of mobility that influenced assembly-line production in restaurant kitchens, chefs in the United States have regarded cooking primarily as a physical activity.

“I always thought I’d be a professional baseball player,” said Michael Schlow, chef and co-owner of Radius, Via Matta, and Great Bay in Boston. “Cooking has certain similarities to sports. The prep work in a kitchen is like pregame workouts. The teamwork needed on the field is the same as working on the line. If one guy has a bad day, others on the team help out. The fact that we wear uniforms in the kitchen makes me think of uniforms on the field. And as a chef I think back to when I was a pitcher in college: the game doesn’t start until the ball is thrown. The chef is in control.”

Jody Adams said that sports were “never a big part of my life,” but she noted that “it’s a dance” to cook in a restaurant and spoke of “the need to do something physical” as part of her vocation. She joins chefs Michelle Bernstein and Claudia Fleming in her regard for dance: Bernstein had a career in dance and performed with the Alvin Ailey Dance Company before working as chef at Miami’s Azul (which she recently left), while Fleming attended the Hartford Ballet Company conservatory before getting a job as pastry chef at Gramercy Tavern in New York.

“I cleaned houses in high school in Providence, Rhode Island,” Jody Adams explained. “That’s how I got into cooking—Madeline Kamman was running cooking classes at her house, and I washed dishes for the class. There’s something very meditative about being in a kitchen.”

Washing dishes as a means of establishing focus also resonates for Thomas Keller, chef and co-owner of The French
Laundry and Per Se. “My mother ran restaurants,” he said, “and I loved washing dishes in them when I was in high school. I found it fascinating and gratifying. I loved the fact that things could get instantly clean.”

The chefs’ desire to establish control in a place where things are functional is reminiscent of Frank Conroy’s observation in his memoir, *Stop-Time*, of the pleasures he associated with mastering the yo-yo: “I was…finally free, in one small area at least, of the paralyzing sloppiness of life in general.” Few occupations provide results as concrete and experiential as cooking and cleaning up. Unlike a dance where it is not always clear what, if anything, has been achieved or whether or not anyone cares, cooking a dish and cleaning up show a chef and his customers that he or she has done a good job.

The frequent inability of chefs to differentiate between Self and surroundings (an inability that is one definition of narcissism) means that restaurants literally embody their personalities. For chefs restaurants are an extension of Self. As Thomas Keller said, “I don’t have children. My restaurants are my children. They will be my legacy.”

Françoise Wicki, a thirtyish chef based at Jasper, a top restaurant in Luzern, Switzerland, has an equally intimate explanation: “I like people when they’re not so close,” she said. “When they come into my restaurant, it’s my world. And if I can manage with my food to have people no longer wear their masks, to help them to feel safe through my food,
then they can become more open emotionally. In many other jobs you can be a phony, but not when you’re cooking.”

Control of intimacy—controlling what people put into their bodies and how long they remain near you—is essential to running a restaurant kitchen. As Wicki notes, the experience of the intimacy is indisputably authentic. If the food fails, the intimacy is also a failure. One reason why chefs are held in awe is that, unlike most people, they put their egos on the line in their work, day after day. If you don’t like their food, you don’t like them.

The narcissistic impulse and strategy of using food as an extension of Self is tied to the simplest of maternal acts, but unlike mothers whose babies survive on a diet of milk and then for years on foods nearly as bland, chefs must use ingredients to help customers recall memories or find excitement. Restaurant cooking elevates early psychological experiences of nurturance. As a result, the passion of chefs finds its way into what they cook. The chef has a relationship to the food and to the customer.

“As a chef, I love food so much I communicate with it,” said Christian Delouvier. “Ducasse has this passion and vision as well—the ability to communicate through cooking.”

“To be a chef you have to get inside the dish,” said Paolo Bindini, the executive chef of Accademia Barilla, a cooking school that opened in 2004 to teach chefs and gourmands the “true” Italian cuisines. “You have to talk to the ingredients.”

Food as a means of expression rather than merely as necessary nutrients, flavors, colors, and textures that satisfy our senses is a province understood and inhabited best by two groups of people: chefs and mothers. Yet mothers don’t choose, per se, to communicate with their babies through food—that’s a function of biology. Chefs are the only ones who decide that the best way they can make contact with others, including complete strangers, is through food. Chefs reenact this communication with their customers night after night. By becoming maternal, chefs remind us of our mothers and help us remember a past that would otherwise be lost. And by demonstrating that maternity can be a choice, chefs suggest that nurturance is a possibility for anyone who seeks it.

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