An Interview with Michael Mina

Las Vegas, September 29, 2004

JH: You’ve said that part of your success is that you time things right. What were some of the conditions favorable to you when you opened Aqua in San Francisco? Because San Francisco was already a big food town in 1991…

MM: San Francisco was a big food town. But if you look at the restaurants that were there, Aqua was different. It was a really East Coast restaurant, very New York; it had a New York look, and it was definitely new and fresh for San Francisco. And as much as people thought that when you think of San Francisco you think of seafood, there really wasn’t that sort of high-end fish restaurant anywhere in the city.

JH: So Aqua was one of the first restaurants specializing in fish then?

MM: At that level. There were other restaurants categorized as fish restaurants, but I don’t think anybody had tried to take an upscale restaurant and say, “We’re just going to do fish.”

JH: What were the elements of Aqua that made it so upscale?

MM: Once again, it had more of a New York feel to it. There are a lot of upscale restaurants in New York that are still a pretty good size, like Gotham [Bar and Grill]—they’re expensive, but they have that big, open feel to them; the energy level in them is different than, say, in your typical small, quiet French restaurant.

JH: So it was more the ambiance and design than it was the food?

MM: Well, I think it was a combination. With the really successful restaurants, you have to combine the “big three”: the food, the design, and the service. You have to come up with a concept, and then you have to design the restaurant around the concept, and design the food, and everything has to continue to go back to the core concept of what you’re trying to do.

JH: And what were you trying to do at Aqua?

MM: With a lot of the dishes we did, we were handling the fish like meat, which hadn’t been done, really, in San Francisco yet. I wanted the restaurant to have an upscale feel as far as the food and service, but with no pretentiousness—where people felt relaxed when they came in, because San Francisco is much more relaxed than New York. And so I took all the elements of the style of service and the style of food that I liked in New York but tried to do them in a little bit more of a relaxed environment, where people felt more comfortable.

JH: You were there with your old mentor, weren’t you?

MM: With George [Morrone], yes.

JH: Did you work on the menus together, or was one of you more responsible for…

MM: Well, you know, we always worked on the menus together, and I ran the kitchen from the beginning. We had worked together before that; we moved to San Francisco together from Los Angeles. George was definitely there to begin with; he was the chef and had the name to begin with, but then he moved on. Actually I’ve just promoted Marc LaRusso, who’s my chef here in Las Vegas, to chef de cuisine, and just…made a succession.

JH: Looking at Aqua ten years out, how did it change from the original concept?
MM: When you look at any great restaurant, the philosophy is always the same: you can never look at your restaurant and say it's the same as the day before. It never is. Every day, it’s either better or worse than the day before. There are too many variables for it to be exactly the same. You’re dealing with eighty employees, you’re dealing with product... a million variables. The really great restaurants are the ones that push every day to be better than they were the day before, and I think we did that with Aqua. If you look at Aqua, there was never a point where we settled, where we said “we’ve made it to the top, you know, that’s it, now we just need to maintain it.” In any restaurant I’ve been involved in, the philosophy has never been how good the review is. It’s always been how is this restaurant going to get better the next day? How are you going to continue to push that restaurant to the limit?

JH: But did your food evolve?

MM: Absolutely. I started cooking when I was twenty-two—I hope it’s evolved! What’s so great about our business is that you could live ten lives and still never learn all there is to know about cooking. You’re constantly learning, and constantly taking on new things. So it’s like art—you go through different phases and different trends.

JH: What were your influences at that time, before Aqua became a national phenomenon?

MM: When you look at a restaurant, it’s so important to have that “tagline”—are you a French restaurant, or an Italian restaurant, or California cuisine? The greatest thing I found about being a fish restaurant is that you could do anything. You could use Asian influences, you could use French influences…I think we always stayed true to European cooking techniques, because that’s what I had learned from most of the people I worked under, but we used ingredients from all over the world, and at the end of the day, we didn’t have to be anything other than a fish restaurant. And that was nice.

JH: Who are your heroes, chef-wise?

MM: My biggest hero was Jean-Louis Palladin. I didn’t get to spend as much time with him as a lot of others did, but I never met a person who was more passionate about food.
JH: Where did you work with him?

MM: Mostly just doing events, and spending personal time together. In some sense it was probably better than working with him, because I got to see his approach to food and to life and to the young chefs coming up, and how he treated them—he really was all about the quality of life through food. I think that there are some extraordinary people—Thomas Keller, Jean-Georges [Vongerichten]—there is some extraordinary talent in the United States right now.

JH: How about the young up-and-comers? Is there anyone you particularly like at this point?

MM: Laurent Gras. I think he’s doing something that is really pushing the envelope, and he’s definitely one of the people who is going to be around for a long time, wherever he is. Ron Siegel, who worked for me, and then went to work for Thomas [Keller]; I think he’s really taking his career to another level. He just moved to the Ritz Carlton Dining Room in San Francisco; before that, he was at Masa’s.

JH: Where do you like to eat in New York?

MM: The last time I was there, I went to Jean-Georges’s Spice Market. I always enjoy Jean-Georges’s places, because they inspire me—I do a lot of concepts as well, and I’m inspired by how well his concepts go together. The décor, the service, the food…he gets the whole picture. The big gripe about chefs is that they’re doing more than one restaurant. But I think that as you start doing more restaurants, you evolve; you start to be more impressed by chefs that can do multiple restaurants. When you look at Jean-Georges, he’s doing innovative restaurants; the whole package of the restaurant is more thought out, more conceived.

JH: I agree with you; he is one of the few chefs who have been able to franchise. I think the core of it is that he keeps the food high and then takes his own staff and implants them around that. Have you had the ginger fried rice at Spice Market? It’s an amazing dish. So simple and so good.

MM: Yes, it is. When I go to New York, I also always eat at Daniel’s [Boulud’s] restaurants, because the consistency is unbelievable.

JH: Do you know Andrew Carmellini [at Café Daniel]? I think he’s extremely talented.

MM: Yes, I agree.

JH: So what is your empire like now? What do you have?

MM: Well, my big one is the restaurant I just opened in San Francisco, Michael Mina, in Union Square at the St. Francis. That is my showcase restaurant, without a doubt. When I split up with my ex-partner, I took Las Vegas, he kept San Francisco. And so we waited till I opened this new one in San Francisco before we changed the name of the Las Vegas restaurant from Aqua to Michael Mina. Michael Mina Las Vegas will continue to be a fish restaurant; it will continue to serve all of my classic dishes on the menu, and all sorts of new dishes.

JH: Michael Mina in San Francisco…is that a fish restaurant?

MM: No. That one, we do everything there…meat, game…

JH: At Aqua, what were your signature dishes?

MM: The caviar parfait, the lobster pot pie, the tuna tartare…

JH: What was the caviar parfait?

MM: On the bottom, it’s a crisp shallot-potato cake, and then it’s layers of crème fraîche, smoked salmon, eggs, and caviar on top. Very decadent!

JH: Can’t go wrong with that…

MM: Certainly not. Other specialties: the root beer float, the tuna tartare…

JH: What was in the tartare?

MM: Sesame oil, pine nuts, scotch bonnet peppers, Asian pears.

The root beer float was a signature…sassafras ice cream, root beer sorbet, root beer, really great chocolate chip cookies. I like to take simple things and really make them upscale.

JH: Well, I think your menu at Nob Hill is a brilliant example of that.

MM: I have another restaurant in San Jose called Arcadia where the entire menu is just a play on classic American dishes, like lobster corn dogs.
JH: Tell me about a typical day.

MM: Well, I wake up around seven, take my kids to school, and start working at nine. The majority of the morning involves going through all of the different restaurants. I get logs sent to me from each of the restaurants from the night before, check in with the managers and the chefs, and have a half-hour meeting with each restaurant, with the general manager and the chef, about what went on that day, the day before, and what they expect for the following day. It’s a three-day cycle that we go through every day. I go down to the kitchen at Michael Mina San Francisco and spend usually a couple of hours, seeing all the product that came in and making different things, usually picking one or two projects a day and just going through all of that with the cooks in the restaurant. I have one meeting with my general manager and chef right before service in San Francisco, and then meet with the staff for line up, and do dinner service.

JH: How much do you cook these days? Do you find yourself expediting or being a presence in the restaurant?

MM: I work the line. As for expediting, I like to expedite with different things on my station every night. So I’ll choose a dish that I want to refine and set up my kitchen so that I have refrigeration out front. That way I can work on one or two dishes that I plate while I expedite…just because I enjoy doing it.

JH: Do you evolve the dishes as you’re doing that?

MM: Oh, yeah, I do. I’ll take a dish, a new idea, and run it as a special for a week and each day tweak it and tweak it until I get it the way that I want. And when I’ve got it the way I want it, and there’s a good response, then I’ll write it down, and that’s one of the dishes that will go on the menu the next time it changes.

JH: You’ve worked prominently in a lot of different cities—New York, San Francisco, Las Vegas. How do the food cultures differ in these cities?

MM: I think it’s more than just the food cultures; the whole cultures are different. With the food culture, it depends more on the customers than anything else, because the customers dictate what the food is like. If you don’t think that way, you’ll never be successful. There’s a certain amount of education you can provide, but at the end of the day the concept can’t be so far out there that the customer is confused by it.

In San Francisco, the customer is very product-driven, very into natural, organic processes. New York is much more French influenced, so you’ll have a lot more of the procedure, a lot of the detail work. I’ve always said that in San Francisco nobody ever molds anything, whereas in New York the food is a lot more composed. And in Las Vegas, a lot of what sells is show, like a lot of what we do at Nob Hill. You need great substance, but when people are dining in Las Vegas, they’re dining to have fun.

The big difference with New York is that you can get people to wear jackets to your restaurant and still fill your restaurant. People are very serious about dining. In San Francisco, you can get the same clientele—they’re not wearing jackets, but they definitely know about food. In Las Vegas, when people come to your restaurant…nine times out of ten, whether they’re in town for business or for pleasure, by the time nighttime rolls around, they’re there for pleasure, they’re there to have fun, to enjoy themselves. So you have to understand that and try to do things to keep people enjoying themselves throughout the dining experience.

JH: What are the relationships like with restaurants in Las Vegas? Can you tell me about the restaurant culture here?

MM: I think Vegas is different because you have so many chefs here now at different times. What’s funny is the way that a lot of us coordinate our trips. Todd English and I always try to come here at the same time because we’re such good friends. Vegas becomes sort of a meeting place, almost, where you get to see people you barely see during the course of the year.

San Francisco and New York are very different. In San Francisco, all the chefs are friends, often good friends, but it’s not so much the scene where everybody gets together and hangs out after work, probably because the city closes so early. When I was in New York, everybody would meet up after work and have a glass of wine or whatever.

JH: Yeah, in New York, the chef world is such a cult. It’s so intimate, and so incestuous, too. So, what are your favorite places to eat in Las Vegas?

MM: I have a lot of places that I like to go. You know what I actually love is the Nobu here. I think it is one of his [Nobu Matsuhisa’s] very best.

JH: Which of your dishes are currently most popular with your customers at Nob Hill and at Michael Mina Las Vegas and San Francisco?
MM: San Francisco is a lot different because we do things in threes. The whole concept of the restaurant is broken up into seasonal dishes and tableside classics. I do some of my classic dishes, and there are five first courses, five second courses, and five seasonals, and those are all trios. The first course is a lot of hot and colds. I take one main product and do three different variations on it. If it's a scallop, I'll do something like a seared scallop with a warm corn and truffle vinaigrette. At the far end of the plate will be a scallop ceviche with the corn and truffle vinaigrette. The last one will be with warm corn pudding. The other bases for trios will be with tomato and lobster and one with lemon and caviar...so we do things in trios there.

In San Francisco, the lobster salad is very popular now, probably because tomatoes are so much in season. We do three different variations with three different types of heirloom tomatoes. Foie gras is actually still popular, which is good.

JH: How do you know when a dish is right?

MM: Mostly by feedback. We always ask, “Did you blow them away?” Was the person blown away when they ate the dish? At this level, you want to strive for every dish on the menu to be one that will blow them away. And that's how you build a menu. You know, every dish isn't going to blow away every customer, just because of certain people’s tastes, but if you have one that's blowing away 80 percent of the people, you're doing well with it.

JH: I'm sure you've had an experience when you know that you've nailed something. Are you surprised when it's not that widely accepted?

MM: Yes. Once I did a skate wing that I thought was just amazing, but it didn't sell, probably because of the skate wing.

JH: What was the preparation?

MM: It was fairly simple, a little bit of a play on bouillabaisse, a bouillabaisse-style sauce with very, very slow-roasted fennel, a little puree underneath it, crispy skate, with like a roux that went on it, just a really incredible flavor, and we served it with langoustines. We just couldn't sell it. It wouldn't sell.

JH: And what are some of the ones that you know you had nailed but they went over like a house on fire?

MM: Probably the lobster pot pie. The caviar parfait, the first time I did that, I knew it was just a home run.

Right now we do this one dish in San Francisco that I know is totally off the hook. We take those really great Amish chickens, stuff them all with truffles, and put them in the refrigerator for two days with a fan on them, so that the skin gets all stretched out and dried like Peking duck, and then we fry them in duck fat to order. It’s a whole fried chicken done to order with truffle macaroni and cheese, and we carve it at the table. And when you eat that chicken, it’s just unbelievable.

JH: So you stuff the truffles under the skin? It sounds like the Bocuse dish.

MM: Yeah, it’s a play on that, but the more important thing is that you're eating a whole fried chicken that's cooked to order. It's just so moist.

JH: What attributes make a good cook?

MM: At the end of the day it’s really mentally challenging. It’s physical, too, and you have to be very mentally strong [to do it]. A lot of times you’ll see people who were really good at sports be really good in the kitchen, because you have to think about a lot of different things at the same time—you have to have really great hand-eye coordination, and you have to be really passionate about it. It has to be something you love. People who love to eat are most often really good cooks.

JH: What is it, do you think, that most home cooks get wrong?

MM: Well, I don’t think it’s just home cooks, but people’s balancing of flavors...people start looking at a recipe and start thinking, oh, I gotta do this, or what happens if I don’t have this ingredient.

For me, cooking breaks down to four elements: acidity, sweetness, spice, and fat content. And that's how I break down every dish. Any dish I ever prepare comes down to how those four ingredients balance out. And you don’t have to use all four ingredients in every dish.

For instance, you have something that’s really fatty, you say to yourself, what's a beurre blanc, what's a vinaigrette. You take the fat, you need to cut it with acid. If you add spice, you can use sweetness, or acid, to counter that. You have to balance your food, and I think that people get too caught up in recipes and forget about balancing. And they also forget to taste, they forget to season properly with salt and pepper.

I tell everybody, taste for those four things, and that's how you’ll nail all your dishes. Just taste. If it’s bland, it
doesn't have enough of something in it. If it's overpoweringly acid, you need to balance it out with more fat.

JH: Coming back to the beginning, I have to ask, why fish?

MM: In the beginning, it was because the city needed it. That was really the driving force. And then it became more than that, because obviously the way the world works is that if it's good in one place, then other people will want it in other places as well. So we started doing more restaurants. And I loved it because as Aqua developed, it became a restaurant where you never had to cook things ahead. We cooked everything to order, every single piece of fish was cooked to order, and it was very fun, very challenging.

With meat, you can have your different cuts. There's Kobe beef, there's prime beef, there's different qualities, but at the end of the day, it's still a cow; there are so many cuts of meat, but a cow is what it is. With fish, it's great because you have so many different varieties and different products you can start working with. And what was really neat is that the clientele came because they didn't know what [the product] was. You see that in Japanese restaurants, different Asian restaurants, where they come in and maybe don't understand the language, so they tell you to just do whatever. And that started happening a lot. And so that became really fun, just getting all kinds of products from all over the world. Also, the act of taking fish and handling it like meat, that was fun, like taking meat sauces, and combining fish and foie gras, things of that nature. It was something that hadn't been done in San Francisco.

JH: What's your approach to vegetables? Do you have an approach, or do you do it like a vegetarian tasting?

MM: I love working with vegetables; I think they are such an important part of the meal. My approach to fruits and vegetables is the same as with all of cooking—I use them to balance food. And they have to be the best; they have to be ripe, in season; you need to be using the best farmers, and everything else. But after all that's done, what I'm tasting for with the vegetable is, how does it balance with the meat or the fish? Is it creamy? What does it do to the dish? This is why people love potatoes. You can do a million things with a potato.

JH: Do you have a favorite ingredient? Fish, fowl, vegetable?

MM: I don't really know if I have a favorite. The thing that I say a lot is that the best ingredient is the one you leave off. Like when you've got the dish done and you're looking at it and you think, hmm, well, maybe it needs that one ingredient, and you just don't put it in there.

JH: I think that's so true. A lot of chefs fall into that trap—"just one more thing and it'll look better on the menu." What's your take on the whole celebrity chef thing and the way that food in our culture has become more fashion than substance?

MM: I think it's great. It's helping our industry and the way that people think about food. The United States was behind Europe in terms of knowledgeable customers, who make the chefs have to be more knowledgeable, and the cooks in turn. It makes everything more competitive. Do I agree with being a celebrity chef who's doing it but who's selling something that isn't true to who he is? No. I think Mario [Batali] and Emeril [Lagasse] are great. They're doing it the way that they are. I know Mario is doing it from his heart; I know him well, and I see him cooking on TV just the way that he is. And I think that Emeril, when you know him, he's just being the way that he is.

JH: So what do you see as your career trajectory? What is it that you'd like to do? What is there left to accomplish?

MM: Oh, there's a lot left to accomplish. I don't think that with this business you set a certain goal. I don't set goals, say I want to have ten more restaurants, to have more of this or more of that. I think that I could do nothing else besides these restaurants and be satisfied every day, because I'd be coming to work every day and have so much to do for the rest of my career.

JH: Do you have a life outside of your career?

MM: Of course I do. I have an unbelievable wife and the two most special boys in the world, and that's my life outside of work.

JH: How often do you get to see them?

MM: I see them a lot. My one boy, Sammy, the seven-year-old, has been coming to the kitchen with me since he was four. My other son, who's three, will start coming with me next year. Sammy works with me in the kitchen two nights a week. We cook together a lot at home.
The one tv show project that I did work on, which I haven’t had the time to finish, is a show about cooking with my children, to teach people how to cook with their kids. I set my whole home kitchen up to cook with my kids. There’s a lot of things you don’t think about, but if you set it up right, then your kids don’t become a nuisance in the kitchen, and you can end up having some of the best times imaginable cooking with them.

JH: What do you do for kicks?

MM: Sports. Big into sports. I go to all the 49ers games, go to all the tailgate parties. I play a lot of basketball. Majorly into sports. I’ve become an enormous tennis fan, with watching Andre [Agassi, his friend and business partner] play. It’s the single thing that I spend the most time on outside of work.

JH: What would you do if you weren’t cooking or didn’t have the restaurants?

MM: The thing I was gonna do, and what I probably would have ended up doing, was advertising. I love the creative part of it, when I see a great commercial and conceptualize how it was done. I sometimes look at a product and think of a way that it should be marketed. That’s probably what I would have done.

JH: What do you think you’ll be doing when you retire?

MM: I don’t know…I always tell my wife that the last restaurant I want to do is in Hawaii, because that’s where I want to retire. And I want to do it on the beach, with no ovens. It’s all gonna be raw. Raw fish, raw vegetables, and really good vinaigrettes.

JH: Do you really like the raw movement?

MM: No, I just want to do a kitchen without an oven in it.