Tony Minichiello grew up in Montreal, studied theatre at McGill University, and in 1988 graduated from l’Institut de Tourisme et d’Hôtellerie du Québec. In the early 1990s he moved to Vancouver, where for three years he owned My Place, a busy café and catering business. Since 1997 he has been a cooking instructor in Vancouver. At first he commuted to the Dubrulle French Culinary Institute of Canada from his home in Squamish, a mountain town about an hour north of the city, but in 2003 he moved back to town and opened his own school, the Northwest Culinary Academy of Vancouver, in a former metal fabrication shop. Minichiello bought a forty-dollar bike, and now it takes him three minutes to ride to work.

JL: Now that you live in the city do you eat out much?

TM: People ask me where I eat in Vancouver. It’s a tough question. I don’t eat out much. I’m very selective. At restaurants there’s too much food, too many ingredients, too much butter, too much salt. The chefs think of themselves as stars. Right now food has the status of fashion.

JL: How would you prefer to think about food?

TM: My parents made the same twelve dishes over and over again. They cooked pasta in salty water, and they saved the water. We had the starchy water as a first course, as a soup—sometimes with grated cheese, sometimes with wine and sugar. As kids we loved it. It was sublime, wonderful stuff.

JL: So, can you explain that to your students? I imagine at least a few are aiming for El Bulli.

TM: I tell my students not to try to impress anybody when they cook. Just to cook is a marvel. When I’m a dinner guest my friends try too hard to entertain and impress me. I say, give me the dish that you most love to cook and I’ll love it too. Give me the chicken teriyaki that you made in the 1970s. I’ll love it. I don’t want to be impressed.

JL: But what if your job is to impress? What if you’re a chef?

TM: The word chef should be used with fear. There are too many chefs and not enough cooks. I don’t want to eat food that is clever. I want to eat food from a cook. All day long the students call me Chef Tony, Chef Tony. But I’m scared to call myself a chef. At home I’m a cook. I make kebabs on the grill and slow braises. Once a month we have steak with a salad, and once a week we bake salmon in the oven with olive oil and lemon juice. For myself I make rice. I found a good Basmati rice. I rinse it carefully. I stir it with my hands. The rice nourishes me. I have a fantasy that I
will grow my own rice one day. I’m eating more like Zorba the Greek. I’m definitely not a chef. I’m glad to be a cook.

**JL:** Then are you happiest cooking at home?

**TM:** At home I put on my music and I cook. Bach and John Coltrane. When that music goes on, everyone knows I’m cooking. Our soul food, our quiet food, is spaghetti with tomato sauce. We make the sauce once a month and put it in jars. My wife makes the sauce the same way my mother did. She sweats onions and garlic in olive oil, adds some good tomato paste, then tomatoes, and she cooks it just a bit and then adds basil, olive oil, and salt. That’s it. When we warm it up we add more olive oil, and we grate cheese over the pasta. We have bread on the side. And wine. We eat this at least once a week. It’s our grounding meal. It’s a peaceful meal. We eat quietly and then we talk. My boys love food. It’s what connects them to us. I never read to my children. I tried it once at bedtime and fell asleep before they did. I taught my boys how to eat, how to appreciate food. Food is what allows us to communicate without words. Food can communicate the soul.

**JL:** Did your father teach you anything like that?

**TM:** My parents moved to Australia ten years ago. They live in Coffs Harbour, between Brisbane and Sidney—right by the ocean. They have gardens and every kind of fruit tree in their backyard. When I was a young man I thought that I would never want to be like my dad. He was always rushing around, part of the rat race. He had no private life, no thinking life. He wasn’t a relaxed man, but now he’s the most relaxed man that I know. He wears sandals every day. He was never a patient gardener; he could kill plants just by looking at them. Now he mothers plants just by looking at them. Now he mothers plants like nobody’s business. He’s a beautiful gardener. These years have been gorgeous for my father. He inspires me.

**JL:** So what will you do with the inspiration?

**TM:** When they die, my parents will leave me their house in Australia. I’ll go there with my wife for four months of the year. They have a fig tree. In the morning I’ll go in the back and eat figs, and then I’ll have my coffee. Ask any chefs over fifty about their favorite food experience and they’ll say it’s picking fruit right off of the tree. That will be me—picking fruit off of my own trees. Maybe I’ll have a small charcoal grill for some quail or chicken, and I’ll wear sandals and drink wine from a tumbler. That’s a good life.