An Interview with Erik Cosselmon
Kokkari, San Francisco

Janet Fletcher: Let’s start with your upbringing in Michigan.

Erik Cosselmon: I was born in Flint, and then we moved out to the country, to Grand Blanc, where I spent a large part of my childhood. We had a small farm. My father was a bit of a hippie, or wanted to be. We raised chickens, ducks, geese, and rabbits, and every year we had a big garden.

JF: What was food like at your family table?

EC: My mother had her schedule of what she cooked. It was all substantial, but nothing stands out. My father was more of a gourmet. He had cookbooks from all over the world, and he would invite people over for Chinese food or bouillabaisse. He taught me how to make omelets and how to use a knife. He used to make goose for Christmas, and one year he put the goose in the oven, went outside to work on his boat, and burned the kitchen down.

JF: Literally? Your mother must have been happy about that.

EC: It was completely destroyed. The whole house was full of smoke.

JF: Do you recall when you made the decision that cooking was what you wanted to do?

EC: I decided when I was nine or ten. When I finished high school, I moved to New York City and stayed with my uncle. I had gone through the restaurant listings in the back of Gourmet magazine and circled the ones I wanted to apply to. Each one sent me to another, until I ended up at Tavern on the Green, which wasn’t the best restaurant in New York, but it was something. The chef said, “Show up tomorrow at 6:00 A.M. and we’ll do a tryout.”

JF: Do you recall the tryout?

EC: Yeah. I’m all excited. I walk in. I’ve got my little chef’s knife. He gets me a cutting board and goes into the walk-in and comes out with this fifty-gallon trash can with a lid on it. He rolls it up to the counter, opens it, and it’s full of onions, big onions. He’s like, okay, dice these. I said, how many? He goes, all of them. That was my first job. I was there for two years.

JF: That was the heyday of Tavern on the Green. They must have done a huge volume.

EC: We would do three- to four thousand brunches on weekends, and upwards of four hundred and fifty just for pre-theater dinner. It was crazy.

JF: Well, the place is gone now so you can speak freely. What was it like back in that kitchen?

EC: It makes anything I do now look easy. We had one guy that just made butter curls and picked parsley all day. The chef helped set up a three-month stage for me at La Bonne Auberge in Moustiers, France. The kitchen staff there was like a family. We would do lunch service, then prep for dinner, then take a break. When we came back to work, we all sat down in the staff room and had an early dinner. The waiters would smoke cigarettes and play cards and drink coffee, and we would clean mushrooms or whatever. Then we’d start dinner service. I miss that here in the States. It’s not such a team. We have to go, go, go.

JF: After France, you got a job at Le Bernardin. How did that experience affect you?

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JF: So then you moved to San Francisco. You worked at Rose Pistola, doing Ligurian food, then as the chef at Cetrella in Half Moon Bay. Now you’re the executive chef at Kokkari in San Francisco and its sister restaurant, Evvia, in Palo Alto. How do you describe Kokkari to people who have never been there before?

EC: My hope when I started was that the experience would remind guests of that time they were in Greece. It turns out that I remind Greeks of the food their grandmother made.

would still be moving. Then he would pour the hot consomme over them, with butter and chives, and that was it. Doing as little as possible to the ingredients was important.

JF: What advice would you give to other young cooking school grads about how to structure those early years of a career?

EC: Don’t get too comfortable. Try on a lot of different cuisines. Work with a lot of chefs. If you work for somebody who really doesn’t care, you need to move on, because it’s all about the passion. If that’s not there, you’re not going to have a good experience.
Of course, mine is never as good, but Kokkari is a very Greek restaurant. Evvia is the same, just a little smaller.

It’s like a party here every night. People will make a reservation for five people, then show up with eight and keep adding. That’s the kind of atmosphere we want to encourage. It’s hard to run a restaurant that way, but that’s part of Greek hospitality. We’re welcoming people into our home, and if they want to bring friends, they bring friends, and you take care of them.

JF: So you took this job at a Greek restaurant. You’re not Greek. You hadn’t done any Greek cooking in your previous jobs. Did you have any confidence issues with that?

EC: There was a learning curve. My second year here, the managers took me to Greece for three weeks. It really changed what I was doing. It helped me understand the Greek ways as opposed to all my French technique, which was interfering. When a Greek cook cuts a potato, he cuts it into random shapes, not perfect shapes.

We had been doing whole lamb on the rotisserie, but after the trip, the preparation became more simple. Now we serve it the way you would get it in Greece: with potatoes cooked with lemon and garlic. We used to sauté our horta [cooked greens] in an Italian style with garlic and olive oil. But in Greece, the horta is boiled.

JF: It takes a certain confidence, wouldn’t you say, to cook so simply?

EC: Yeah. It’s the confidence that you have good ingredients. It took me four years to get good olives. Feta has been even tougher. I’ve only been able to get one feta that I like. There are a lot of good fetas in Greece, but they don’t ship them.

JF: I know that the partners behind Evvia and Kokkari wanted to steer clear of all the Greek restaurant stereotypes.

EC: Yeah, the iced fish display is forbidden here. And saganaki has been a struggle. At first, we didn’t serve saganaki at either restaurant. Saganaki is in every Greek taverna, and Kokkari is not a taverna. But with people asking for it night after night, we decided to do it, but we won’t flame it. They don’t flame it in Greece.

JF: How else have you addressed that difference between Greek custom and American taste?

EC: In Greece, very few dishes come dressed. But the Greeks know that the grilled fish needs olive oil and lemon, so they dress it at the table. Americans don’t know that, so we do it in the kitchen.

JF: What’s in your dressing?

EC: Lemon, olive oil, garlic, and oregano. Plus shallots, capers, fresh oregano, and parsley.

JF: So it’s a way of making sure that the diner gets this balanced collection of Greek flavors.

EC: Right. The same thing with the Greek salad. In Greece, a Greek salad comes out in a bowl. They put it in the middle of the table. All of the ingredients are layered, but there is no dressing. There’s olive oil and vinegar on the table, and you dress the salad however you want. We talked about doing that here. Do our customers know how it’s supposed to be, or do we want to show them? We opted to show them.

JF: So you have to engineer the experience a little bit for them. Can you talk about other challenges that you’ve faced in channeling that Greek spirit at Kokkari?

EC: Bones are an issue. Always. Everything we serve has a bone in it except for the meatballs. The fish, the lamb chops, the steak, the chicken…everything. Some people don’t want to see any bones, and we do our best to accommodate them.

JF: Kokkari is one of the few Bay Area restaurants that do rotisserie cooking. Your spit-roasted whole lamb is a huge draw. Why do you think more restaurants don’t install a rotisserie?

EC: Kokkari never used its rotisserie during the seven years before I started here. Everybody said it was just too hard. It’s not in the kitchen. It’s in the dining room fireplace. You have to put wood in it all day. You have to watch the lamb and baste it and make sure it’s ready in time. Plus, once you take the lamb off, it looks like you’re not cooking in the fireplace. But you have a whole lamb you need to sell. I wouldn’t be able to sell it if it weren’t for my regular guests or people who have heard that you have to have Kokkari’s rotisserie lamb.

JF: Kokkari is not the kind of restaurant that’s doing a new menu every day. I suspect that your guests like that consistency.
They come to Kokkari for an experience that was as good as the one they had before. So I wonder how you keep yourself and your cooks motivated, since you’re doing the same thing every day.

EC: There’s the challenge of consistency, which is a big challenge with the number of covers that we do. Like you said, my job as chef is to make sure the lamb shank is as good as it was yesterday. And that’s part of what makes Kokkari so popular.

When cooks come here to look for work, I usually ask, “Are you sure this is what you want to do?” It’s really simple food. It’s all about how fresh the fish is. Yet I still think it’s challenging. At how many places are you going to learn how to cook a whole lamb? Or to break down a two-hundred-pound pig and use the whole thing within the week?

JF: Let’s talk about your new cookbook, Kokkari: Contemporary Greek Flavors. You’re the rare chef who is willing to measure and weigh.

EC: I knew I would have to measure everything. I read cookbooks. But my favorite type is the one that just says, “Here are the ingredients, make what you want with it.” And there are not too many of those.

JF: Are there things that a recipe just can’t communicate?

EC: A lot of things. Like with the rotisserie, it’s hard to communicate how hot the fire should be. Hardwood chunks or briquettes? What’s the weather like? Is it windy or not? You can’t relay all that information in a cookbook. It would be boring for the casual reader.

I don’t cook at home a lot. But when I do, I find that everything comes out a little different than it does at the restaurant. The same dish made at home needs different pots and different timing.

JF: You also had the experience with this book of working with two accomplished home cooks, Angie Frangadakis and Judy Marcus, who are partners in the two restaurants with their husbands. What did you learn from them that you didn’t know about Greek foodways?

EC: It’s always fun to cook with somebody who is cooking dishes they learned from their grandmother. My technique is more refined, but I still learn from them. Angie’s avgolemono is a good example. The way she made it is not the way a trained chef would do it. She whipped everything up with a little hand mixer and then dumped it into the hot soup and swirled it and it was done. A chef would probably whip the whites separate from the yolks, temper the yolks, then bring everything together. But hers works and it’s delicious. She and Judy approach cooking like, this is how you make it. Don’t mess with it. And as a chef, I want to pick it apart.

JF: Are there cookbook authors or experts who have been your mentors in Greek food?

EC: I like Vefa [Alexiadou]. The recipes in her books are bare bones, but they work. And I like to watch [Elias] Mamalakis on YouTube. He’s kind of a food historian, and he does these short videos on Greek tv. It’s in Greek, but it’s cooking, so I understand. And if I have questions, I ask one of the Greeks at the restaurant. There’s Angie, Dimitri, Panos. When I ask Panos, he calls his mother, so we get it from the horse’s mouth.

JF: So there are plenty of Greeks looking over your shoulder.

EC: Yes. Which is good. It keeps me in line.