

FEATURE

Culture of the Kitchen: Ken Oringer

Trial by error, time for surfing, and XO sauce.

BY KEN ORINGER APRIL 22, 2016



When I was a young cook in New York in the '80s, all the chefs were intense: smoking, drinking, overweight, high blood pressure. You'd just put your head down and work as hard as you could. Every kitchen was dirty and hot; there was no such thing as a locker room or an employee bathroom. It was just survival of the fittest. You didn't care about money—you didn't care about anything except getting experience in a great kitchen. That's a cook's mentality, and that's always been my mentality.

If you wanted to learn more about, say, butchering, you'd come in on your day off, or stay late, or come in to work early, to work with the butchers or whoever was doing the things you wanted to learn, because you'd have no time during your normal day to learn everything you wanted to learn.

When I got my first chef job—I moved out to San Francisco in 1992 to be the chef at Silks, in the Mandarin Oriental hotel—being on the West Coast was an eye-opener for me.

I had a New York mentality, screaming at people and expecting everyone to be exactly like I was. People looked at me like I had three heads, and they would ask, “What the fuck are you saying? I want to go surfing after work. I'm *not* coming in two hours early off the clock. I'm *not* gonna do a *brunoise* of vegetables for three hours, and I'm *not* gonna make foie gras terrines after work, because the second I'm done cleaning up my station, I'm out of here.”

It was a shock. It took me some time to understand that I had to deal with people differently. I had a degree in management, so I stepped back and thought about that psychological aspect of things, and what was required to be a strong leader. I had to assess and analyze people for their skills, what made them tick. The hotel paid above union wages. These were the highest-paid cooks in the city. We had *garde manger* cooks, in 1992, making \$16 or \$17 an hour, just making salads. There were plenty of guys who couldn't care less about food but were great on their stations, doing their thing; there was one guy who'd be happy making the same thing all year long, because he made good money, and that's all he cared about.

It's been hard for me to let go of the way I was brought up as a cook. I'm an old-fashioned guy who has had to turn modern. I don't think today's young cooks will necessarily ever have the survival instincts that some of us had from back in the day. I still think it's important that cooks understand what it's like—that your focus is just about the kitchen, being the best you can be, and giving it everything that you possibly can. When I first opened Clio, I had every cook working seven days. I had my dinner cooks working brunch. When I hired people, I'd tell them, “We're open potentially 365 days a year, and you might be expected to work 350 of them. You're here to work, and that's the way it's gonna be. If you don't want to work maybe you should go to another kitchen.” Now, times have changed, and I would never say that in a million years to anybody—but then, it was a matter of surviving.

I don't do the fear-and-loathing thing anymore, but I still think it's vital to push people and let them know that things aren't going to come easy. Now, it's about challenging people to do things out of their comfort zone, which can be humbling. If I have a cocky twenty-year-old cook who thinks he should be a chef even though he doesn't know shit, I like to say, "Here's a whole goat. Process this thing and cook it for me. Let's do the saddle with some gooseberries and some wild herbs. Make some kind of *bocadillo* with the head." It costs us some money, because sometimes they're gonna screw up and not ask for direction. But sometimes they'll say, "I don't really know what I'm doing, can you help me out here?"

We've also had to change our approach to discipline. Recently, some moron wrote a prep item reminder to himself, with a Sharpie, on our brand new sushi case at Uni, and we couldn't get it off. In the past I would have gone crazy—deducted money to replace it out of his paycheck, probably fired him—but just because somebody is a moron is not enough reason to fire them anymore. So he's making dumplings for the next three months.

Taking the time to teach cooks on the job, trying to have them not work much overtime—shift pay is a thing of the past, so we have cooks working eight or ten hours a day instead of twelve or fourteen hours a day—something had to give, so we simplified things in the kitchen. We shrunk our menu by 25 to 30 percent at Toro, and we've been using more ingredients that we know pack a punch, like XO sauce. You know whatever you put it on is gonna be delicious.

So before, if we got a live scallop in, we might have said, "Let's do a brunoise of this, this, this, and this as a garnish for it," some labor-intensive list of things that might have taken a cook five hours to prep. Now we might say, "Soak some dry soybeans for an hour, cook them in a pressure cooker for thirty minutes, grind it up in a food processor, deep-fry it, and serve it with the scallop and some XO sauce." We have twenty, thirty, forty different condiments in our cupboard in each restaurant, which are loaded with flavor and that we know are going to make our food delicious. It's all about organization, communication, and trying to be creative.

As told to Laurie Woolever