



Horizons

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Chef Oringer reflects on 15 years at Clio

By Christine E. McDermott

He's won a James Beard Award for Best New Chef in the Northeast. He beat Cat Cora on TV's "Iron Chef America." His restaurant, Clio, is consistently rated among Boston's best and just received four AAA diamonds for the 13th year.

By all means, Ken Oringer has earned the right not to be answering phones. Nonetheless, as he sat in Clio on a recent Tuesday afternoon discussing his creative inspiration, he heard the phone ringing while the maitre d' was elsewhere and stood up to take the call.

After a polite conversation with a vendor, he returned to talk of ethnic spices. Down-to-earth, dressed in a plaid shirt and jeans, Oringer spoke to AAA about Clio's new look, chocolate geodes and tomato martinis, and his 3-year-old daughter's adventurous palate.

You recently celebrated Clio's birthday with a renovation. Why now, and what's different?

After almost 15 years, I wanted to have something fresher,

something lighter, something a little funkier, but still with the same soul and creative outlook for everything from Clio to the bar to the entrance to Uni (the adjacent sashimi bar). New digs are something that excite people. I don't care what anybody says, any time you have something newer, it has an emotional effect on the creative process. While I do not think it was necessarily vital at this stage of our restaurant, we were ready for a change. You get tired of walking into the same place for 15 years, day after day.

You also marked Clio's anniversary with a special tasting menu of classics like the tomato water martini and milk chocolate geode. What was it like to put that together?

That was really challenging. I've done tens of thousands of dishes in 15 years. To really pinpoint which ones stand for certain things, which dishes have a lot of meaning to me, I had to go through a lot of notes and a lot of menus.

The chocolate geode was cre-

ated around the time I was on "Iron Chef," so it's something that was a career highlight for me. I thought, "Let's bring that back from the dead."

The tomato water martini (a nonalcoholic amuse-bouche) has been on our menu since Day One. The pure essence of the tomato without any of the color, it's kind of like how they make champagne out of red grapes through a filtration process. I like to surprise people and have that "wow" factor, and I think it's a good way to start the meal with something where people think, "How can this be tomato? It's crystal clear. What is that taste? It's so familiar."

It's great to start a meal with the anticipation where you don't know what's going to come next. I like to keep people on their toes.

What have been some of your most memorable moments from the past 15 years?

Everything from winning a James Beard Award to winning "Iron Chef"; training so many talented cooks who have gone

on to be successful in their own right as chefs and owners; and helping to shape the integrity of Boston as a dining city, which I think we had a pretty nice part in with our timing. Now, it's a much better town for dining in terms of reputation and depth.

What was it like being on "Iron Chef"?

It was an adrenaline rush like no one can describe. It was so exciting. It was nice because I don't think we could have been any more prepared than we were. It's nice when everything clicks on all cylinders. I don't think we could have done any better than we did. I thrive on pressure, so it was right up my alley.

Where do you find your creative inspiration?

Creativity can come from anywhere. We base some dishes on a color. If I see a white-painted brick wall, I'll say, "Let's come up with a dish that's all white." Or, I'll take an ordinary ingredient like an onion and say, "How can we create something extraordinary from something ordinary and be really, really creative with an onion?"

It can come from eating something ethnic, loving spice combinations. It can come from eating a Twinkie and saying, "How can we create a flavor like that, but let's make something more Japanese."

It almost sounds like your kitchen is a science lab.

Definitely. Some dishes take months to bring to fruition; some can happen in a day. Some dishes I get so frustrated with, I say I'm done with this, and then six months later, I bring it back and play with it. I still like to cook very spon-



Andrew Thomas Ryan

Chef Ken Oringer, of Clio restaurant in Boston, has received many accolades.

taneously. I'm old enough in this business to kind of know beforehand what dishes are going to taste like.

With seven restaurants in your portfolio (including AAA four diamond rated KO Prime), how often do you get to cook?

I cook at home every day: Breakfast, lunch and dinner I make for my family. I make sure that they eat well.

Your son is still a baby, but does your 3-year-old eat everything you make?

Three-year-olds are always going to be picky eaters. She used to eat everything from baby octopus to blood sausage. She did just eat her first oysters last week. She still just likes a handful of things on a regular basis: hamburgers, pasta and Bolognese sauce, gnocchi. She likes pasta with pesto; she prefers it to tomato sauce. It's cute.

Visit AAA.com/Horizons to download the recipe for Ken Oringer's cassalette of sea urchin and lobster.