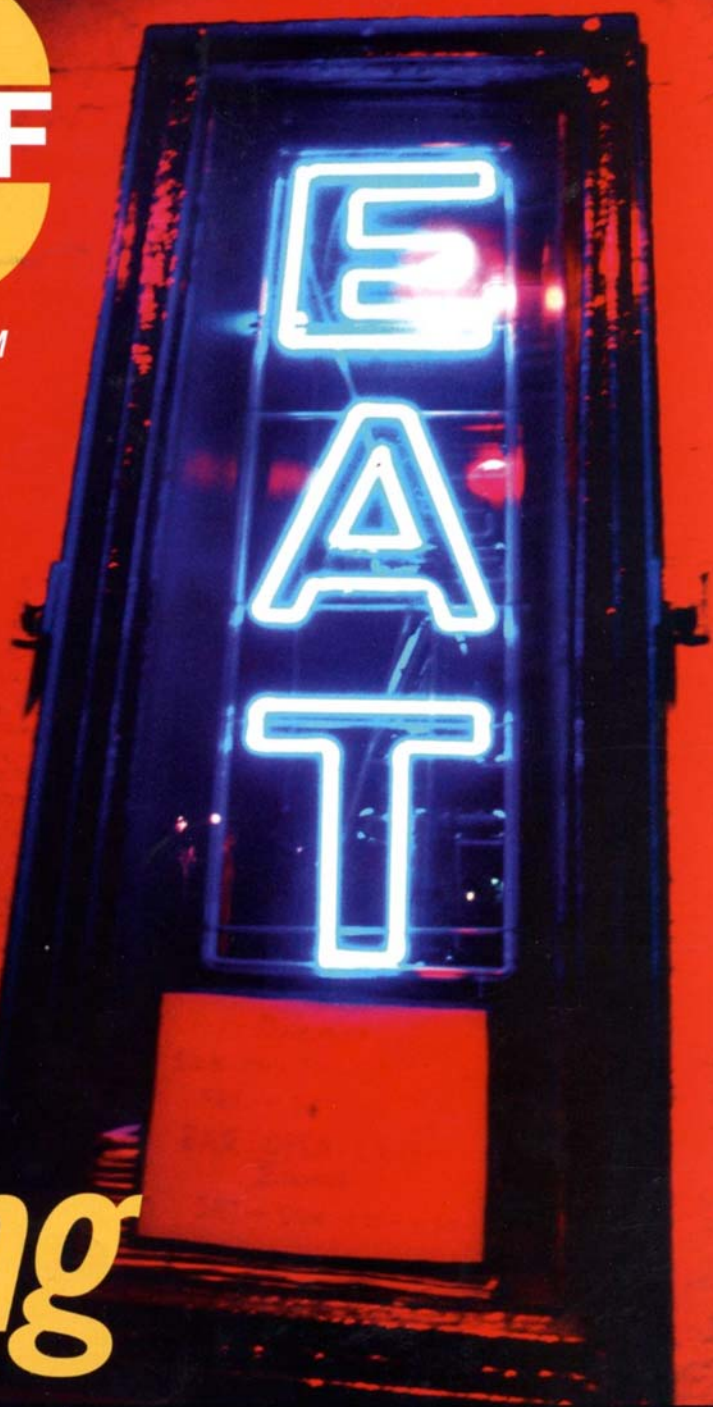


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THE *dining* ISSUE

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desserted

WHY DON'T PASTRY CHEFS GET MORE RESPECT?

BY LOUISA KASDON
PHOTOS BY IAN BARNARD

Think of it: those dazzling, intricate, sinful, crave-able desserts are fashioned from a handful of relatively unglamorous ingredients — sugar, butter, flour, chocolate, cream, some nuts, a bowl or two of fruits and berries, a sprinkle of spice. Not much room to hide. A little imagination meets a cup of sugar. Every single day, in all the restaurants of the world, working in tiny, chilly, quiet spaces, perfectionist pastry chefs are working chemical miracles, methodically measuring cups and teaspoons of boring, unadorned, “stuff.” It’s sweet alchemy — chemistry and creativity melding into a truffle, a ramekin, a tart. Unlike the “serious” part of the meal, dessert is fantasy, reward. The silkiness of the *crème brûlée*, the chocolate on the tip of your tongue, on your breath. But how much do we amateurs know about pastry chefs? Can you name one, or two? Why don’t pastry chefs get more respect?

The one word I heard from every pastry chef interviewed for this article was “perfect.” Perfect is the holy grail of dessert professionals. I interviewed pastry chefs that manage kitchens that bake for multiple restaurants, like Dave Topian at Legal Seafoods and Nicole Coady at Finale; old pros like Tom Ponticelli at Davio’s and Lee Napoli at ChocoLee; foreign-flavor specialists like Maura Kilpatrick at Sofra and Oleana; and sweet young things who turn out sweet jewels for tiny bistros, like Brittany Suhan

at Prezza, and Paola Fioravanti at the new BiNa. They may not realize it, but every one of them used the word “perfect” to describe what they seek in their work. It’s this obsession with perfect that sets pastry chefs apart from other chefs.

“Honestly, most chefs don’t get what we do,” says Maura Kilpatrick, as she flicks a speck of chocolate off her jacket. It’s noon, and she’s been working since 4:30 a.m., her usual key-in-lock time to start work at Sofra Bakery and Cafe. The pastry kitchen is in the cool of the basement. Most pastry chefs at small restaurants don’t have that luxury. The kitchen is often the one and only workspace, and pastry chefs have to get their work done before or after the dinner rush. “Here’s the thing: most pastry chefs work alone,” says Kilpatrick. “We can’t be in the kitchen, with the ovens, and the heat, and the other chefs and cooks. You have to be willing to challenge yourself, criticize yourself, because you don’t get the rush of having other people standing next to you on the line.” At Sofra, Kilpatrick aims to have 70 to 80 percent of her work done before 8 a.m. Then she starts on doughs for the next day. Kilpatrick acknowledges it’s a “pretty painstaking” process. She inspects each item in a batch of her Middle Eastern pastries and cookies — baklava and cashew bars, and thinks to herself, “This one’s a nine. This one’s a 10. This one’s an 11!” (She won’t serve anything that rates lower than a



ChocoLee's Lee Napoli

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nine.) With Oleana turning eight, Kilpatrick has had quite a few years to play and experiment with Middle Eastern flavors and has enjoyed the challenge of creating desserts in a foreign-flavor profile. Now, running two shops, she's training the next generation of Middle Eastern—pastry chefs. "We're in the giving business — feeding people, being generous," says Kilpatrick. "Teaching is a kind of generosity." When I ask her if it's easy to spot talent, she answers, "Right away, you can tell who has it and who doesn't."

The stories of how pastry

chefs come to their profession have an almost mystical ring. The sense of a calling is a nearly audible presence in their conversation. Legal Seafoods' Dave Topian recalls the first time he amazed himself by baking desserts for his parents' bed and breakfast. Brittany Suhan remembers sitting on her grandmother's lap, watching Julia Child bake a cake on TV. Her first wedding cake was a transformational moment, says Suhan — "Seeing the look on the bride's face!" Paola Fioravanti studied as her Italian-born father

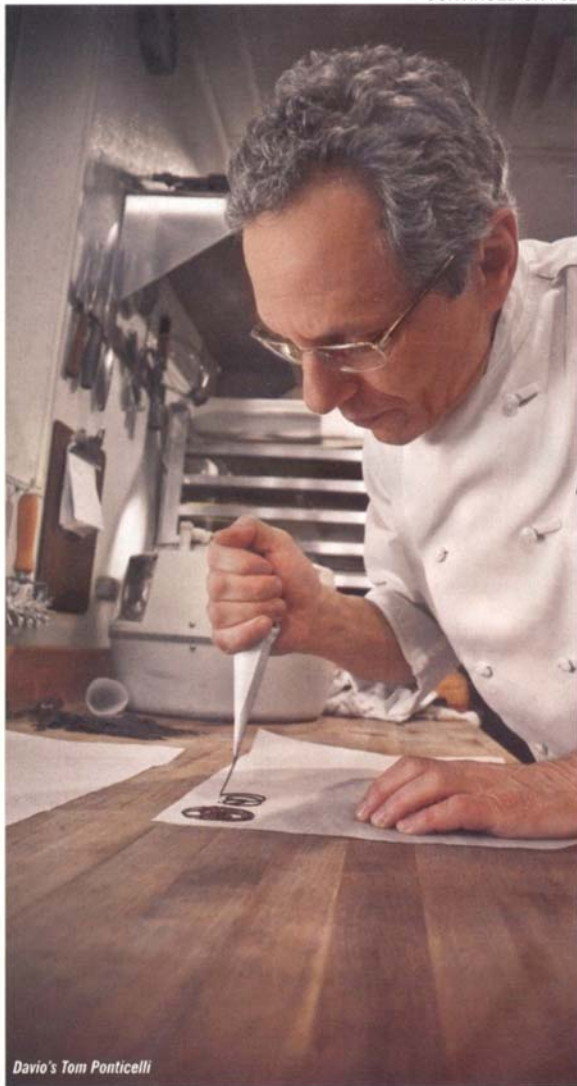
cooked in their Brazilian kitchen. Ultimately, his passion for food led her to cooking school in Italy and on to a job at a Barcelona restaurant called Espai Sucre, which offered a four-course, pairing meal totally composed of desserts! Citrus flavors for the first course, a fruit consommé for the second, and then on to a meaty chocolate in the entrée slot. "Can you imagine?" she asks. Vivid memories combine with an extraordinary devotion to precision and creativity. "You have to be interested in the chemistry to do pastry, be fascinated by what

happens when you make a tiny adjustment — add a little more baking soda, reduce the sugar, play with temperature or time," says Finale's Nicole Coady. She had originally planned to become a biologist. Suhan says, "I realized that I loved the precision of it all, the idea that a slight change, an addition or a subtraction, makes a whole new animal." And true to their kitchen-scientist natures, they can't stop experimenting. "I was just thinking, what if I made a dessert with a lavender flavor?" muses Suhan. "Or, if I used macaroons

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Prezza's Brittany Suhan



Davio's Tom Ponticelli

instead of brioche as the crust for the limoncello cheesecake?"

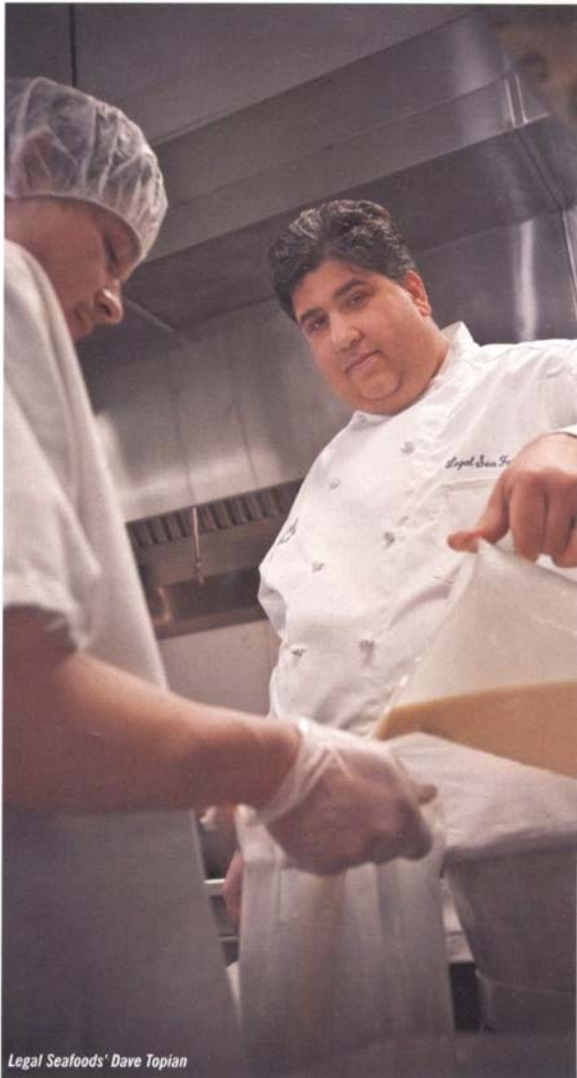
Another obsession almost right up there with perfect that seems to possess pastry professionals is "texture." Many textures on a plate, each component either silky or with the right crunch. One of the reasons for the trend toward dessert plates, with three or four mini-desserts, is that they give the dessert fanatics in the kitchen a chance to employ their rich vocabulary of texture in interesting combinations — the little swash of fruit puree, the chocolate dot, the crunch of

toasted coconut. Davio's Tom Ponticelli, a recognized ice-cream and sorbet master, fusses over the texture in his ice cream. Recently, he likes it better with more milk powder and less egg. Fioravanti is so proud of her French macarons at BiNA — tiny, layered triumphs of crunch, melt, jammy-ness, and sweet, in quarter-size rounds — that she presses several into my hand, each one wrapped like a treasure. Topian almost trills as he describes the textures in a perfect Boston cream pie, while Kilpatrick is obsessed with the perfect texture balance of her

cashew bars — searching for the ideal ratio of nuts to gooeyness. Coady suggests that the next time I buy one of her flourless chocolate cakes at Finale, I put it in the microwave for about five seconds. "It becomes the most perfect texture, somewhere in between a pudding and a cake. Wait, why am I telling you this?"

Why indeed. Because Coady, like all pastry chefs, gets a little wacky talking about dessert. It's the same with Lee Napoli describing her new truffles filled with fresh fig and artisanal goat cheese, and with Suhan and her

fresh figs soaked in port for her almond crostada: Zen moments of bliss talking to dessert freaks. I've started to think of pastry chefs as dessert nerds. Like other nerds, they are obsessive, remembering odd little factoids about baking soda and the amount of fat in each variant of chocolate, endlessly massaging flavor profiles, but they do this while inventing the sweet little nothings that make life worth living. Because, even at the end of the finest meal, overstuffed to the point of embarrassment, who doesn't have room for dessert?



Legal Seafoods' Dave Topian



Solra Bakery and Café's Maura Kilpatrick