

SUGAR BURN:

THE NOT SO HOT SIDE OF THE SWEET KITCHEN

BY

RYAN KURR

Stagiaire (m and f, *plural stagiaires*)

1. Trainee
2. Intern
3. Pharmacist's assistant
4. Common term for a cook or chef working for free in a restaurant

“Stagiaire.” *Wiktionary.org*. 2013. Web. 3 June 2013.

The Truth

If you were to ask me, Stage (pronounced stah-j) derived from the word Stagiaire, is French—for bitch. More specifically, a kitchen bitch, or volunteer, or more eloquently—someone who works for free in the hopes of gaining employment or valuable experience. A stage is often left, the first few times, traumatized or confused from an intense *trial by fire* experience. What is the best way to survive being thrown into a sweltering inferno? Have a nice stranger seasoned to the flames show you how to stop, drop and roll.

The culinary world is a very crazy place to be, and the pastry chefs that occupy it are some of the craziest of them all. Their kitchens can feel like some of the toughest places outside of, I don't know, perhaps prison. Pastry chefs are often obsessive perfectionists with an insane attention to detail. It is exactly that attention to detail that has allowed me to recollect all of my experiences with such vivid accuracy. Before I entered culinary school, I had never heard of the term stage, I had no idea what going on a stage one or being one was. I had willingly entered into a bloody battlefield armed only with a whisk and a heat-proof spatula. The first thing I thought of when I began working in kitchens was, “why didn't someone warn me about this first?” That is the intention of this book, to provide those of you who are unfamiliar with the industry, want to enter it, or are in the industry with support, tools and truths (and hopefully a laugh along the way), because every little bit of prep helps. I don't have all the answers by any means, I don't know everything there is to know about pastry either, but I can tell the truth about what I *do* know about the industry and what it was like working in the kitchens belonging to legendary, esteemed chefs.

When I first decided to write this memoir, I only knew that I wanted to write *something*, but I didn't know exactly what I wanted to say. I wasn't even quite sure how I really felt about my experiences, or what I thought about them, I only knew that they felt substantial. When I sat down and began to write, I found that only then was I able to truly understand what I thought and how I felt about everything I wanted to communicate. The act of writing awakened fresh perspectives, and writing with complete honesty about my experiences and thoughts generated very educational and therapeutic truths—for myself and hopefully for you too.

Where do I begin? Do I start right at the moment I mentioned in the paragraph above, in the middle of the battlefield, alone and unprepared? I believe I should begin when I was filled with ambition and enthusiasm—when I entered culinary school, the place where I received some light training before I was expected to fight single-handedly in professional kitchens.

Culinary School

“If you were to be a chef...I think you’d be a pastry chef!” my manager said to me. She had been watching me pipe chocolate in a zigzag pattern onto the top of some freshly baked vegan, gluten-free, pumpkin-chocolate bars.

I looked up at her, I had been in the piping zone, and I asked, “Really?”

She nodded.

I remember smiling, satisfied and honored. It was that one sentence that rekindled the thought that perhaps I should pursue a career in the culinary world. I was 28, entering what astrologists will refer to as my Saturn Return, one of the most difficult times of my life. I was confused about where I was headed in life, and the frustrating part was that life seemed to be going by faster and faster. I come from a very large blended family, with 3 half-brothers and 2 half-sisters. I was the youngest, by many years, which means no one ever took me seriously. As I got older, the less I was understood by my siblings and the less they knew anything about me. There was a sort of ebb and flow to these relationships, sometimes being closer, sometimes not. It does seem that the older one gets, the less anyone really *gets* you, when you would assume it would be the opposite. There was always a strong search for a place that felt like home, whether it was a new city, friend or lover. Hunting endlessly for this place where I felt satisfied and happy, I forced myself to do things that scared me.

At the silly age of 23, I quit my job, sold all my belongings and flew to another country to try and be with my first love (stupid), a guy I met in a webcam community site, back when webcams were very new. However, once I arrived, professing my fierce love, I then found out, he did not share the same enthusiasm for my plan for us to be together forever—thank god. This

of course, left me penniless and I had to return to the states, beg to be rehired at my old job, and live in a friend's basement, I guess you could say I learned how to define the word humility.

There, in the wood paneled basement, I tried to figure out what the hell I was going to do next.

With 2,000 dollars in the bank, and a car with license plate tags I made out of pink post it notes because I was too cheap to arrange for legal ones, I decided that I would drive out to California and start fresh. I picked San Francisco, it seemed like a youthful city, one that was going to be eye-opening for me, and when all else fails, leave and go somewhere new, right? But more importantly, I wanted to be near the ocean. I've always wanted to be near the ocean, in a place where it isn't 110 degrees and there isn't 100% humidity. The ocean balances and calms me; here in Chicago, Lake Michigan just isn't the same. I still had no idea what I wanted to do, so I took a job as a claims person for an insurance company. I shredded old documents, struggled with a right handed mouse and entered endless amounts of data via a very dated computer program into a database, until I went on salary. After that, I began administering roughly 300 property and liability claims, including all claims for Cal State University. Around that time is when I became aware of a tight chest pain right behind my sternum. I wasn't terribly alarmed, the pain wasn't debilitating, but it was constant. When I arrived at the doctor's office to check it out, the doctor ran an EKG, said he would be back and left the room. I sat on the edge of the examination table, looking around the room. There were no windows, the fluorescent light above was buzzing like a June bug stuck in between a windowpane. I could smell that unnerving scent of sickness and the disinfectants used to clean or mask it. The doctor had left the door to the exam room open, and I could hear him in the hallway talking with someone. It sounded like he was getting affirmation about something, a second opinion regarding my test results. I leaned forward, stretching my neck out, hoping to get a look at what was going on. The doctor then re-

entered the room, his shoes squeaking on the shiny floor, with a seemingly endless scroll of paper that I assumed was my EKG results.

“Do you know you have sudden death syndrome?” The doctor asked in an inappropriately carefree tone.

My eyes widened and then I frowned in confusion, “Um...no?”

“...Oh!” He exclaimed. “It’s called WPW, which stands for Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome.” Perhaps he should have led with that instead, but that’s just me and my crazy talk. What do I know about bedside manner?

I then found out that I had been born with an extra pathway between the chambers of my heart and there was great risk that the current could get confused and I would suffer cardiac arrest. Apparently, most people are asymptomatic, but for some odd reason, I had symptoms. I believe it was brought on from the stress of the awful insurance job. However, if I didn’t have that job and my insurance coverage, I would not have been able to pay for the \$50,000 dollar surgery that followed my diagnosis. It was a terrifying experience. A few months went by before the actual surgery, and I was calm and cool about it. Even when I arrived at the hospital, things seemed fine. The moment I was handed a robe by the nurse and told to step into the room and change, reality kicked in. *Am I going to die? What if this is the last time I see my parents? Is this the last thing I’m going to do?* The lights in the room were off, and the only illumination was from the daylight coming in through the frosted window. I placed my hands on the door and lowered my head. I couldn’t catch my breath, my heart was pounding and I felt that any second my knees would give out. My throat went dry and I bit my quivering lip, I could taste the salty

sweat that was beginning to drip from my face. I took a few minutes to try and stop my brain from ruminating and then I changed and decided I was ready.

The actual surgery was 5 ½ hours under twilight anesthesia so they could monitor my heart rate and breathing. Twilight means you're half awake, but half under, so you're kind of aware of what is going on, but not really. Every so often, when the drugs began to wear off, I felt the catheters, one in my neck and one in my groin. Then my hearing and vision sharpened, I could hear the nurses talking, I could see the massive machines arched above me, white robotic arms, cords and other things I couldn't identify.

“Can you feel that?” one nurse asked.

I can't recall if I said yes, or if I nodded, but I could feel it, I could feel the device inside my heart buzzing, vibrating like a mini jackhammer as the doctor attempted to burn and freeze the problem tissue.

More drugs came, and then I laughed.

“What are you laughing at, Ryan?” the nurse asked lightheartedly.

“Bridget Jones!” I said before I continued a hysterical laughing fit.

“Oh! I've never seen that movie!”

“It's good.”

In a way, I really *did* leave my heart in San Francisco. I was given one week off of work, which I had to use my vacation and sick days for because I didn't qualify for short term disability. After the surgery and during my recovery, I realized that I had become stressed out

and the corporate environment was not suitable for my wellbeing, or anyone's wellbeing if I know anything at all. I would come home from work, walk up onto the roof of my apartment building, a place that was quiet, but a place that gave me a view of the city and the Bay Bridge, if the fog didn't swallow me whole. So many times I would retreat up there and just reflect, meditate, or try to make sense of where I was going in life. I lived in Twin Peaks, the highest point in the city, so sometimes, when the roof wasn't enough, I would take a little stroll up the hill behind me and walk up to the summit of Twin Peaks. Not the tourist-plagued peak, the other one, the west peak, where no one ever went, and there was a large rock at the summit. There, one could get a whole panoramic view of San Francisco. This view was best at night, when everything twinkled and seemed magical. It was perhaps one of these nights I am referring to that I decided to make a change in my career. During the day, I worked and in the evening I attended massage school, a way out of the corporate world, a career that was creative, chill, more suited to my personality.

The idea to pursue my interest in cooking had passed through my head briefly in 2004 when I was working at the insurance industry. I met with an admissions counselor, took a tour of Le Cordon Bleu and then sat on it. During the tour I peeked into the kitchens and thought *there is no way in hell I can do this! Everyone is so busy, everyone has to know what they're doing, I'm not ready for this, maybe I don't want this.* I called the tenacious, admissions rep and told her that I wasn't going to attend as I had previously told her. In some way, I knew I was right, I wasn't ready. How did I know? I could feel it. I didn't feel passion, a feeling that one must feel if they are to enter into the culinary world. My "passion" at the time felt like a hobby, and I knew it. I didn't want the life of a cook. It seemed ridiculous. Everyone looks stressed out, pissed off, and too busy to do anything about it, even think about it, until it was all over twelve hours later.

So the idea floated away and I continued to host dinner parties for friends, where I could cook at my own pace and make anything I wanted.

I was a very good massage therapist. However, being a male therapist meant that I received about half as many clients as the other equally talented female massage therapists on staff. Frustrating? Yes. Surprising? Not one bit. Many women are self-conscious of their bodies or aren't comfortable. Many straight men become squeamish about another guy touching them, even if it is professionally. Both types of people need to get over it. Male massage therapists are not lusty, predatory prostitutes.

San Francisco, like other large, popular cities, has a tendency to chew up people and spit them back out. It's expensive and incredibly dense, but unlike any other place I've ever been. When a love/hate relationship developed with the expensive and excessively liberal San Francisco, I applied for a job as a massage therapist at a spa in Iceland, as a joke—sort of. However, they accepted my application and hired me. I traveled abroad to Iceland and worked for a short while in a hotel spa there as a massage therapist, primarily to wet, demanding Icelanders in large hot tubs for hours on end. At the end of the day I was left with a sore lumbar section and shoes that were soaking wet. I left a few months later and returned to the states after essentially being booted from the country by immigration because my employer filled out my immigration paperwork incorrectly. I returned with very little money, without a job or a place to live. I was beginning to understand that when something doesn't go how I planned, or I feel I have made enough humiliating mistakes, the first option that occurs to me is to leave and move away.

I found a job at a small gluten-free bakery in St. Paul, Minnesota to pass the time until I figured out what I wanted to do. I had never worked in a kitchen or a bakery of any kind before that point. The experience changed my life. It wasn't a massive bakery, there wasn't a large staff. The bakery smelled like melted chocolate and evaporated cane juice, something I still wish I could smell every morning. At the bakery, I learned a few fundamentals of the professional kitchen, I learned how to make the best brownies ever, I learned about gluten free flours and binding agents, and I realized it was the best job I had ever had in my entire life. I actually enjoyed my job fully for the first time in my entire life. Granted, I did a lot of customer service and front counter work as well, and I was very much done with that by the time I left, but I made great friends and I realized how passionate I could be about a profession. I loved to write, but I just couldn't manage to find a job without obtaining an expensive degree displayed in an expensive frame to prove that I went through hell and I should be offered a job.

I did try though; I attended college, yet again, for Fiction Writing, this time at Columbia College Chicago, where their motto is "create change," something I was ready for—change. When I first attended college, it was at a small community college in Minnesota. I attempted to complete general courses that were much cheaper than university courses, until I decided what I wanted to do. Only I didn't know what I wanted to do yet, I don't believe many people know exactly what they want to do for the rest of their life by the age of 18. At Columbia, I became a much better writer, faster than I thought was possible. I even learned that I had a knack for writing suspense, something I had never thought about in my entire life. But after two years, I lost interest. Not in writing, but with the writing program. I felt my learning had plateaued and I just wasn't getting what I wanted out of the curriculum. It also became frustrating trying to find my own voice and style with a room full of other people trying to do the very same thing.

Naturally, I left and attended pastry school instead. I thought, *if I'm not going to follow through with writing, I'm going to do this school thing one last time and I'm going to pursue my other hobby*. I don't know how so many people do things they don't love. Although, I suppose if no one did them, a lot wouldn't get done. I just knew I didn't want to be one of them, again. It felt like my last chance. I was pushing 30, still living in an apartment that was meant to be short-term, with a useless massage therapy degree I couldn't use in Chicago due to licensing requirements (San Francisco required 100 hours of education to obtain a license, and Chicago required 500. I was not about to go back to school *again*) and I still had no idea what I really wanted to do, but it was beginning to feel like the only thing I was able to do was not figure out what I wanted to do with my life. Worst of all, I felt like I was the only person on the planet who spent all their money fucking up their life and still had no idea what they were going to do. When I enrolled into pastry school, I repeated over and over in my head, *this has to work, this has to work, this time...this plan needs to work, or I'll be forced to continue to eat condiments out of my fridge and wonder why perpetual misfortune is stapled to my DNA*. Did my plan work? I do not think I am at the end, a place where I could say whether or not I made the right decision, but I am in the middle of my journey, with a very strong drive to reach my goals and dreams, and that plan is still in motion. I do still eat salad dressings and sauces with a spoon, but that's not really the point.

Many years later, when I was working in a French bakery, one of the dishwashers turned prep cook asked, "You seem to know a lot about cooking, huh?"

"Um...yeah, I suppose. I've just spent a lot of time in the kitchen experimenting with stuff. I went to culinary school too, but...I feel like I learned some good basics, but I didn't learn half the stuff I needed to know."

“I was thinking about maybe going to culinary school.”

“You could. Make sure it’s really what you want to do; it’s a lot of money, but school gives you a really good foundation to build on, you get a lot of basics in school. It is really expensive though, so I would only suggest looking into it if you’re really serious about cooking as a profession. Restaurants are always looking for free labor if you’re interested.”

“Really?” He asked.

“I would suggest just calling up some restaurants or responding to some ads looking for a prep cook, which is basically what you’re doing now, and just ask to do a stage.”

“A what?”

“Stage, it’s what they call a trial day, where you come in and work for free to see if you like it and they like you and stuff like that. That’s my advice anyway,” I said.

“Taken.”

I told him to be completely certain he wants to cook professionally before pursuing culinary training for many reasons. I had very high expectations for culinary school. I felt I would learn everything I needed to know to survive in a professional commercial kitchen straight away. I didn’t think I would come out and become Executive Chef somewhere, but I have no doubt that many people do believe that is what will happen. In reality, one spends a great deal of money getting an education that allowed them to dip their fingers in many different areas and make mistakes, only so that they can graduate from school and get a job that pays under ten dollars an hour. Being in the culinary arts is very much like being a singer, some have a natural talent and should pursue it, some shouldn’t. If you want to be a chef, you have to have passion, that can’t be learned or taught, it has to be a part of who you are. You need to have passion to

survive. Chefs work very long hours, odd hours, with little to no breaks, at a consistently fast pace. If you don't have passion, you'll quit the business, and you wouldn't be crazy if you did.

Living in Chicago, I had a few options as to what school I would attend, none of them were cheap. The French Pastry School was the most expensive of the three I considered, and had a great reputation, but their classes were also 8am-5pm Monday through Friday. I went with my second choice, the Illinois Institute of Art and entered into their professional Baking and Pastry program which would present me with a certificate upon graduating. When I met with the admissions person, who was nice, but obviously worked on commission, it seemed like a very interesting program. She laid out all of the classes I would be taking, things like Sugar and Chocolate work, Artisan Breads, Fundamentals of Classic Technique, European Cakes and Tortes, Specialty Cake Decorating and Showpieces. It seemed like a very well-rounded education. However, it was also a blood sucking business designed to take money from dreamy and ambitious students. I became more and more interested in pursuing pastry and it became more of an interest to me, and I was getting old and decided I needed to fully immerse myself in a career that I loved. The most logical thing that I could think of was to enroll in culinary school, I was in a sense, hungry to meet and work with people who felt the same way as I did about food. I wanted to meet people who were emotional about food, people who could talk about the state of ecstasy a sauce took them to, or the perfect amount of saltiness in puff pastry, or how brown butter elevates nearly everything from baked goods to shellfish. Everything about food intrigues, fascinates and excites me. I love the wide range of different mouthfeels and textures: creamy, grainy, chewy, thick, thin, crisp, chunky, crunchy, smooth, rich, firm, soft, cakey, flakey, gooey, gelatinous and so on. I'm captivated by how versatile an ingredient can be. For example, a carrot can be grated and baked in a cake, or pureed with a mixture of spices and used

as an accompaniment. Vanilla beans can be ground and used in baked goods, or used to infuse a savory sauce for seafood (if you like that sort of thing). Chicken can be roasted, braised, barbequed, poached, or sautéed. Cheese can be melted into a cream sauce, shredded over a salad, baked in bread, or used to fill a cream puff. Nuts can be ground into butters, crushed and used as a crust for meat or fish, or caramelized and rolled in cocoa powder. Avocados can be used to make a thick chocolate pudding, or blended into a creamy salad dressing. Eggs can be added to hot pasta as a sauce, served on a burger or whipped into a meringue. Sugar can be made into syrup, or a crunchy caramel. There are so many things to experiment with and so many things to create. Most of all, I love the feeling that follows from eating food; for me, some foods can erase the memory of a horrible day and make me feel cozy and comfortable. Sometimes a flavor can surprise my tongue and leave me desperate for another taste. Food has the ability to alter my mood and sometimes even transport me to a particular time and place in my life. Perhaps food does this to you too. One thing I love being able to do for others is make them happy by feeding them something great and evoking an emotion.

I have many skills and have been to school for many different things, but finding what I truly was passionate about was by no means simple or easy. I am a certified massage therapist, I am a certified reiki master, I'm a writer with a few unpublished novels under my belt, but I really do feel that working with pastry is where my heart will be satisfied.

I have played in the kitchen for as long as I can remember. My mom worked a lot when I was younger, so I often had to make meals for myself or start things for dinner for when she got home. In the summer when I was out of school, I spent more time in the kitchen baking and cooking than I did anywhere else. Sure, massage therapy was fulfilling and I would say I can write well, but I've never had the reaction towards anything else than I do towards pastry. I am

always trying to learn something new, curious to know the reasons why or how ingredients work, interested in new flavors and flavor combinations. It feels like what I'm supposed to do, it's just a feeling, it's like falling in love, you'll know it when you feel it.

I was unprepared for my first day of culinary school. The admissions rep told me to drop by her office to make sure I had everything I needed and then I could scoot off to my first day. I did as she suggested, and I waited for 45 minutes in the lobby of the admissions office. I met with her for only a few minutes and she told me where I could go and collect my kit (my uniform and tool kit, which included the best knife I've ever owned and is nearly the best thing I got out of culinary school). This seemed to be cutting it a little too close for me; I'm someone who shows up 20 minutes early when I'm meeting someone for lunch. The building was across the river in another part of the Loop, so by the time I picked out my uniform and grabbed my tool kit, I was already 20 minutes late for class. I had to hop on the train and head over to the building where my classes were being held, find the locker room, change, then find the kitchen my class was in. It was stressful.

In my intro classes, other students repeatedly came up to me to answer their questions or to ask my advice. For many weeks I thought it was peculiar. I couldn't seem to figure out why people wanted my advice and my opinion. How do you knead this? Is this right? What did I do wrong? How can I fix this? The interesting thing above all else, is that I seemed to have a theory, and I enjoyed sharing what knowledge I had with them. I began to think things like, "hmm...maybe I'd like to teach later on in life. I know I want to open my own little bakery and café one day, I already have a name for it, but maybe I could hold small cooking classes too, classes where people could learn comfortably, in a nurturing environment, without investing time and money in a full time culinary program." Ahh, dreams. What I truly realized was that I was

committed to learning as much as I could about my craft, I had passion. In my spare time when I'm not in the kitchen, I'm reading cookbooks or food magazines, or browsing through The Flavor Bible.

After I was in class for a couple weeks, I noticed something that shocked me. Many of my fellow students lacked passion or a genuine interest in food. Some of them were so closed off to trying new foods and many didn't seem to take their schooling seriously. Some students rarely did more than chop an onion, some rarely even showed up for class. It felt like the majority of my classmates didn't even want to be there, which puzzled me.

In my Fundamentals of Classic Technique class during my first quarter, I had a table partner who was incredibly challenging to work with. I was stunned at some of the things he would say and do, things that would force me to question why he was in the program in the first place.

One day, another student asked my table partner several questions about why he was in culinary school. The conversation was eye-opening.

"So, why are you in culinary school then?" the student asked.

"I like to eat. I have to feed myself and it looked like something easy I could do."

That was the answer, "I like to eat." I was mortified, and more so, disappointed. I wanted to be around people with passion, not people who just liked to eat.

I've had a bumpy path myself, so I didn't want to judge or make assumptions. I just really wanted him to be passionate about his choice for being in a culinary program, because it this career seems to only be fulfilling if you truly are emotional about food, not that you

necessarily want to be in the industry. I really believe people should be passionate about what they want to do so they can have the drive necessary to work towards obtaining it, otherwise, what's the point?

My table partner didn't feel the way I did about food and that saddened me. I realized this the day we were making pot pies. The ovens were on and everyone was in uniform at their station, ready for the lesson. The round chef scanned his syllabus and handed out the recipes for the day.

"First, we are going to make pot pies," the chef informed the class. "I'm not going to have you make puff pastry, because it takes too long and it's pointless to make your own puff pastry when you can buy pre-made puff pastry that is really good quality." He paused. "Plus, pastry is the dark side of the culinary world." Many savory chefs felt this way; the culinary world was split, savory people and pastry people, people who measured and people who didn't, people who hated the challenges and necessary precision of pastry, and people who were intrigued by them.

My table partner looked confused already and we hadn't even started.

"Each of you can make your own pot pie, no need to work in teams. The puff pastry is up here on the prep table. Go ahead and get started!"

The class broke into motion, and raced up to the front, forming a line at the coolers to get their ingredients. I retrieved all of my ingredients, picked up my sheet of puff pastry off the table and returned to my station. There was a part of me that was curious to see what my partner would do next, so I looked up from my celery and carrots on the cutting board in front of me and observed my partner up near the prep table. He was pacing back and forth in front of the prep

table, searching for something. He stopped pacing, stared at something on the counter and then retrieved something with his thick fingers. He held it up high in the air, looked at the chef and asked, “Hey, is this the puff pastry?”

The chef instructor, with a sharp look of fear across his face, replied, “No...that’s *parchment paper.*”

From that point on, I kind of broke off on my own and began working on recipes by myself, because he wouldn’t, couldn’t help me or try to learn. I did believe he would eventually come around, at least a little bit. However, I gave up on him the day we were making eggs benedict and had to make hollandaise sauce.

I stood next to him, vigorously whisking egg yolks over a water bath. I looked over at his station, he hadn’t even started yet.

“Hey, what are we makin’?”

“Hollandaise sauce.”

I saw his mouth try and mimic what I said, and then said, “Holiday sauce?”

“No, Hollandaise,” I said as I pointed to my notebook where I had the word written down.

He eventually started his recipe and after repeated attempts to make the sauce he said, “Man, my holiday sauce doesn’t look right.” It didn’t. It was curdled, separated and broken. He kept calling it holiday sauce no matter how many times I corrected him or wrote it down for him to see.

Near the end of the lesson, when most of the students were about to plate their dish and present it for a grade, the instructor explained the common breakfast dish. “I’m sure many of you have seen this on menus before, or had it, it’s very common and can be done a variety of ways.”

“I’ve never seen this on a menu before!” my partner said, amazed.

“Well...” the instructor said, and then just shrugged his shoulders.

My partner looked at the completed dish the instructor made and asked, “What’s this called again?”

“Eggs Benedict,” the instructor replied impatiently.

“So, we’re making Egg McMuffins?”

“...No,” the instructor answered, completely out of patience.

Eggs Benedict and hollandaise sauce quickly translated to an Egg McMuffin with holiday sauce. Hey, we all have to start somewhere. Not knowing the basics of cooking is like not knowing how to speak your native language. You need to speak and communicate every day; it's a necessary part of life, so you should know how to do it well, so you're able to articulate your needs, wants and thoughts. What would happen if you only knew less than a hundred words? My point is that people should enjoy the food they eat and know just how vast the range of flavor their favorite food can have if they play with different ingredients. The smallest addition of a couple of herbs and spices to your typical meal can drastically enhance how it tastes. The process is simple, but the flavor becomes complex and interesting. Life is too short to eat food that is just—okay. In addition to flavor and enjoyment, food is also about nutrition, and you can’t get all of your nutrition from eating McDonald’s every single day.

Going through culinary school was an adjustment from being a home cook. A person who bakes out of their home kitchen probably uses measuring cups, and a professional would weigh and scale everything out, in ounces or grams, depending on where you trained, where you work, or how exact you want to be. If you're using the metric system, you can rely on your measurements being completely accurate. Weighing in grams and milliliters is far more precise than weighing in ounces and cups because the measurements are much smaller. 1 ounce equals 27 grams, which are two very different measurements. So if you are making a recipe where too much or too little of an ingredient can greatly affect the outcome, which is often the case in pastry, using grams allows much more control in achieving the desired result. This is why many professional kitchens, even in the US, use grams, because it allows for a more consistent product.

The biggest problem I had when I first began was that nothing would turn out right in class. I couldn't figure out why. Everything I did at home turned out great, but when it came to making a pound cake with scaled ingredients, it didn't work. I was not the only one to experience this either, and the only explanation I have for it is that, baking and pastry is based on precision, and precisely scaled recipes, require precisely scaled ingredients. Eventually, one adapts, one learns. In the end I graduated with honors, but that doesn't mean that I was the best of the best, at all; I just made a lot of mistakes, not countless mistakes. Culinary school is the place to make mistakes, and you really get out what you put in.

I struggled a great deal with the curriculum and scheduling of the courses. There was no one to enforce that I was supposed to take Baking Science along with Intro to Baking, which would have been immensely helpful. It was "supposed" to be taken together, but the woman I met with to schedule my classes, didn't adhere to that policy. Instead, I was placed in two five hour classes back to back, which essentially is a real day in a professional kitchen. The issue

with that was I was the type of person who wanted to know why things were happening, what the science was behind ingredients. All of that information was taught in Baking Science, which I didn't manage to fit into my schedule until the second or third term. I felt unfulfilled and frustrated. I would have preferred to have been taught that a large egg weighs 1.75 ounces, or that baking soda needs an acid to react with in order to activate before I was thrown into a class where I was let loose on ingredients and expected to produce a recipe. I wanted education, a teacher, not more trial and error without explanation why something went wrong.

Eventually, I was able to get into Baking Science, which is where I met one of the most helpful and influential people in my career, my instructor Janine.

Day one, she said, "I don't have all the answers," and rolled her eyes. At the time, I wondered why she said that, but now I know it is because having all the answers is impossible and one never stops really learning. It was in that class that I got all the answers I had been craving for months. I learned the science of food. I learned about milk proteins, gelling agents, vanilla cultivation, hydrogenated oils, invert sugars, functions of sugars, what temperature an egg white coagulates, what temperature an egg yolk coagulates and so on.

Janine forced us to take notes and type all of them up and turn them in at the end of the quarter. Everyone hated that idea, including me. In response to our aggravation she said, "You will be so grateful in the end, you will have an invaluable collection of knowledge to refer back to in the future." She was right, I love that I have all of that knowledge to refer back to, always take notes. It was this practice that allowed me to write this book. After every stage I went on, I either wrote down what I did in great detail and included diagrams of the things I did, or I would write a juicy, comprehensive email to Janine about my experience from beginning to end. Taking

notes allows you to put things into perspective, it provides a way for you to reflect on what you've learned, and it helps you become a better chef. I take notes and make lists all the time, even when I am at home experimenting and creating a new recipe. Taking notes, once only an annoying requirement for class, is now a valuable and helpful habit to have.

Janine was my go-to person for questions outside of class. When I enrolled in Artisan Breads, she was my instructor yet again. We both have a love affair with bread and whenever I had a question that came up outside of class, I emailed her and she responded with answers. In a sense, she became a very personal type of mentor, mainly because I wanted answers, I wanted knowledge. I expected a lot from culinary school and with the exception of the education I received from some of my instructors, I didn't get what I signed up for.

Issues with scheduling and student facilities made things increasingly irritating. Sometime during my third quarter, I did what I do best when something pisses me off, I write a letter of complaint. It is one of my favorite things to do and it usually gets results. For some reason, no one wants to listen to people bitch in person, but when someone writes something down it is taken more seriously. I sat down and wrote the following email to the Dean:

“For the sake of convenience, I am going to email you a specific list of the issues I want to address. I have done this as a courtesy so that you are more prepared for our meeting. I expected my time at AI in the Baking and Pastry program to be a tremendously educational and exciting experience, when in fact my experience has been mostly frustrating and upsetting. This is not to say I have not learned a great deal, I have, I have a great academic record, partially due to my own commitment to the pursuit of excellence, but also due to my spectacular instructors. The instructors I have had the pleasure of dealing with were the greatest part of my whole

experience. They were helpful, they skillfully applied their professional experience, they also were great at constructive criticism in order to encourage improvement. Above all, they inspired me to continue. Chef Valpo has great energy, enthusiasm and a well of knowledge. Chef Kapp demonstrates proper techniques with passion and stresses the importance of sanitation and cleanliness as to prepare us for a job in a commercial kitchen. Chef Lemon is extremely helpful, engaging and holds necessary high expectations for her students. Chef Fischer is approachable and has a keen, critical eye to help guide you to perfection.

Everything I am about to say comes not only from me, but from several of my classmates who agree with many, or all of the things in this email. Many of them have said the very same things themselves. I know a handful of students who have said if this was not their last quarter, they would have either dropped out or transferred to another program somewhere else.

My first issue is the process in which new students are handled in the Baking and Pastry program. Admissions representatives are so quick to check a student into the program, but provide little to no guidance as to how the school works, where to go or what to do. I was late to class my first day because I wasn't able to get my supply kit (and had no idea where to pick it up) until the first day of class. I was unable to make the orientation because I work full time, and it was only offered once. I wasn't even told I needed a student ID until my final quarter, and I only found that out because I had to come in on the weekend for a class and almost wasn't allowed entry into the building. The experience from the beginning was very much trial by fire, and in the interest of keeping students enrolled in the school, one would assume someone would oversee that each student would be fully prepared.

The enrollment procedure was very seductive as students are told there are morning, afternoon and evening classes available. Not everyone is 19, and still living at home, so for one

to hear such flexibility sounds like a dream come true. However, what they don't tell you is that not every class is offered in the mornings, afternoons and evenings every quarter. Some classes were only available during the evening one quarter, and then early mornings the next. Therefore working adult students have to find a way to change their livelihood in order to attend classes or wait until it was offered during the time they needed. A key problem seems to be that there aren't enough kitchens to host the classes that students need during a specific time slot. Equally important, those in charge of registering students do not seem to explain that some classes should be taken first before they should register for another, or that some classes should be taken simultaneously in the same quarter for a better learning experience and to better prepare the student. I wish I would have had Baking Science before I had intro to Baking and Pastry, it would have greatly increased my knowledge and confidence before being thrown into a kitchen with no instruction or direction. I am glad I had Chocolates and Confectionery before European Cakes and Tortes, because tempering chocolate was a necessary skill to already have under your belt for that class. Perhaps the registrars do have an idea of what classes a student should take, and may even suggest it to some students, but there is always the issue that there might be a chance that a student can't take the class they need because of the time it is offered. The program shouldn't exist if it isn't able to accommodate what it is selling. Had I known that I wouldn't be able to always take the classes I needed in the evening, I wouldn't have registered.

My next issue is the lack of communication and disrespect for the student body. Students pay a lot of money to attend AI and they seem to be endlessly disappointed and misinformed. A common issue is that the lockers in the locker rooms have no doors on them. The reason for their removal was made unclear and varies depending on whom one speaks to. So, for a very unacceptable length of time, students are left with no place to securely store their things and are

given no explanation as to why it happened to begin with and no estimation of when they are to be restored. With winter's chill lurking around the corner, it would be wise to provide students with something as basic as a storage locker, especially if they are expected to change into a uniform upon arrival.

Additionally, the staff in the storage room and the way it is run needs immediate improvement. Each quarter, a different member of the store room has directed an attitude towards me, wrapped in a bouquet of condescension and entitlement. This was received nearly every single time I requested something or entered the store room. Students are ill-equipped as to how to handle the store room because the procedures change so often. They change instructor to instructor, quarter to quarter, director to director. Often the instructor asks a student to retrieve something for them, and they are met with abrasive attitudes once they get there. Those working in the store room must be blithely ignorant to the fact that AI has a rotating enrollment and there are people of every skill level and of every level of exposure around them. Without going too far into detail, my most recent encounter was when I went into the store room, to retrieve something the chef had placed in the freezer for me (which was placed there because the freezers are full and the only blast chiller is in the store room.) Upon entering, the woman told me I needed to find out exactly where it is located, and never to come in without asking the chef exactly where it was placed, because she had moved things around. Which, if you are anyone of average intelligence, would mean asking the chef where it was placed was superfluous as she had moved it anyway. I was then ridiculed for something trivial and I was told, "They come down on me for things, so I'm gonna come down on you too." After my harsh lecture that seemed endless, I was asked, "don't you know *anything*?" This behavior is unacceptable, rude and outrageous. This is a school, a place of knowledge and growth, a place to learn the proper way to do something and

the wrong way to do something. If this were a professional kitchen where I was employed, I would take it, but it's not. If there is a protocol for the store room, it needs to be enforced and everyone needs to know about it, and know what to do and what not to do. It's rather simple, either only the chef is allowed to go into the store room and make numerous trips for various things, or the staff can do their job and aid the student body. Half the time, we don't have the ingredients we need on the day we need them so a trip to the store room to check for a supply or an alternative is crucial. Also, equipment is left broken and unfixed for months, even quarters (e.g., the ice cream machine).

Finally, an explanation for cancelling Independent Studies has still never been released. As a result, some classes have nineteen students and some have three. What sense does this make? I have already stated my frustration with this issue and I would appreciate a response.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to discussing these matters further and possibly to completion.”

My intention was to fix the situation for myself and future students who had as many expectations as I did. It seemed unfair, much like the seedy car salesman who finagles you into buying a crappy car. I expected a lot, and for something that cost me 22,000 dollars, I don't think my expectations were unreasonable. I was prepared to work hard and really push myself, and I felt my school was obligated to allow me to do that, or at least meet my halfway. The email sparked some concern among the Dean. I met with the associate Dean to discuss my concerns. The meeting was pointless. She failed to give me a decent answer to any of my concerns. The best and perhaps most infuriating part of that meeting was when she said, “There is some good news, you can register on Monday!” Given the list of concerns I had, one would think I wouldn't be in a huge rush to register. Perhaps more important was the fact she didn't know this was my

last quarter and was utterly shocked when I explained that to her. It was a bit disappointing considering I had mentioned this several times in my email to her directly. I felt like I was not being taken seriously. I kept getting the same response to many of my concerns, such as "this problem doesn't exist in the culinary program," which is irrelevant, because it was a completely different program, was much larger and there were multiple kitchens. Their pastry program was small, and has one kitchen.

I was told at the end of the meeting, "I hope we haven't left a bad taste in your mouth," that was what I was trying to avoid. It did feel like I was the one taking the initiative in preventing the bad taste from happening. After all, having a culinary school leave a *bad taste* in your mouth isn't a good thing at all. My goal was to help bring some of those issues to light from the point of view of a student. Students make the school successful and give their programs longevity. I felt the reputation of the culinary program was at stake and I tried to give an honest, "exit interview."

All schools have their problems, even Hogwarts wasn't perfect, or safe for that matter. Trade schools and colleges are as much a business as they are a place to obtain an education, and therefor they have to be concerned with the bottom line too. It was my last quarter when I had that meeting and they were in the middle of changing the curriculum. If the grapevine told me the truth, that particular Associate Dean was let go shortly after I graduated. I don't think it was my fault, but it still felt like justice. It felt like the time in the 9th grade when I did a spell on my English teacher because he gave every paper I turned in a D with the words "redo" in red pen on the front. It was a Sunday when the spell was cast (it was 1996 and The Craft was very popular, okay?) and he was curiously out sick until Thursday of that week. That also felt like justice. In

both circumstances I felt that I wasn't being heard, helped or understood no matter what I did. So when the Associate Dean was let go and my English teacher fell ill, I didn't feel bad.

Now that it is all over, I've worked in commercial kitchens and I have re-read my first email, something troubles me. At one point I described being yelled at by a member of the store room and I wrote, "This is a school, a place of knowledge and growth, a place to learn the proper way to do something and the wrong way to do something. If this were a professional kitchen I was employed at, I would take it, but it's not." I disagree with that statement now, no one should have to take being treated unfairly, but so many cooks do. If we didn't have to worry about getting a paycheck and financial income or losing our job and burning bridges, would anyone put up with all of this shit? If you didn't have to worry about bills, would you stay at a job where you were verbally abused or humiliated, even if it was a good opportunity? Would you, really? Perhaps the question ought to be, *should you have to?*

I keep in contact with only a few people I went to culinary school with, only one of them is actually working in the industry. Many of the other pastry graduates tried the industry and hated it or went broke trying to make it work. Many of them never even entered into the industry after graduating from the program. One classmate who was around my age and had also left a high-paying corporate job to pursue pastry is still determined to make it work, because she loves pastry. Her first job nearly killed her with excessive hours, physical and mental stress and even a bit of sexual harassment. She had to work 12 hours a day, plating on the line and doing production simultaneously, while receiving abuse from the chef about not being able to successfully do both. Soon, she embarks on her next journey, working in the pastry kitchen in a large hotel in Dubai. Gutsy and dramatic, but it is this determination and passion that is required to really make it. One doesn't have to move out of the country, or even out of state necessarily,

but you have to be willing to take risks and fight, if you really want it. There is always something you can gain from the experience or the chef, even if the best thing is having a name or place on your resume. Everyone has to start somewhere, and every little bit helps. A brief stint at a bakery here, 6 months at a restaurant there, 3 months at a fine dining place there. There are some people who are of the opinion that it looks bad if an employer looks at your resume and sees that you jump around a lot, that it suggests you can't commit and are irresponsible and unreliable. There is only so much one can learn in one place and whether your time in that place is a month or 3 years, what you are able to take from it, is up to you. Some Chefs will say that if you leave a job abruptly, or walk out, you can't put that place on your resume. I disagree. I have walked out on a job, the job I thought was the best I could ever get, and I still have it on my resume. I am confident about my decisions and I am able to justify why I left. It doesn't mean I was irresponsible or was unable to commit, it just wasn't the right fit. If you aren't happy somewhere, there is no reason why you should stay. To me, it is a very ignorant and old-fashioned mindset to believe a person in the food industry is unreliable because of short lengths of time when people leave all the time due to horrible working conditions and low pay. The culinary industry in a way is very similar to massage therapy in the sense that the turnover is quite high.

Massage therapists tend to be very transient, and they leave jobs at random or move out of state on a whim because they can take their skill anywhere they go. If something becomes unsatisfying, they leave. It is the same way in the culinary world. Cooks come and go, Chefs breeze in and fly out. Not everyone accepts a job and stays there for the next 8 years, especially when you are very young in your career. There are many places to work, many different styles and cuisines to learn. My advice is to do what you feel is right for you, and like Thomas Henry Huxley once said, "Try to learn something about everything and everything about something."

Try as many things as you can, even things you don't think you are interested in, you can always learn something. I've gone on stages simply for the fact of seeing what other kitchens are like, learning new techniques, experiencing new ingredients, putting that experience on my resume. If an opportunity arises that you want or you believe will help you in the long run, I suggest you take it or find a way to make it work. Building experience on your resume is important for your career as much as it is for your own personal goals. There are many people who come right out of culinary school who believe they have all the information and all the skills they need to open their own restaurant. This is not the case, but is unfortunately the idea that many culinary schools try to sell to prospective students. I can guarantee that if I had somehow opened my dream bakery the moment after I graduated from pastry school, it would have failed. The amount of knowledge that I have learned from every place I have been has been sensationally useful. The long days of working someone else's menu prepare you for doing the same when it is your turn to run the show. My skill has improved greatly from when I began, I have a real sense of how the business aspect of the pastry industry operates and I have begun learning what my true style is, which really does take some time to fully develop and understand. Style is always in flux, style is expressed through a chef's food, it is their personality, and personality is not something that is developed in one day, it ripens and matures over time, it grows from experience. I also believe that there is rarely ever a true original idea. Yes, chefs like Ferran Adrià, considered one of the best chefs in the world, have innovative ideas constantly, but those ideas can often be broken down into components, or techniques that are inspired by or a result of another preexisting process. It's what you do with what you know and how you do it.