



**O**n a bright, chilly, autumnal afternoon in 2007, I met Michel Richard, a chef and the man who would radically change my life—and the lives of my wife, Jessica Green, and our two-year-old twins—without my quite knowing who he was, and in the confidence that, whoever he might be, he was someone I would never see again.

My wife and I had just celebrated our five-year wedding anniversary, and were at the head of a line in Washington, D.C.'s Union Station, waiting to board a train back to New York. At the last minute, the man I didn't yet know to be Michel Richard appeared off to the side. He was out of breath and sizable, not tall but round, and impossible to miss. He had a modest white beard, a voluminous black shirt, tails untucked, and baggy black trousers. (Baggy *chef* pants, I realize now.) I studied him, wondering: I don't know him, do I?

Of course I knew him! By what algorithm of memory and intelligence could I *not* have recognized him? He had written a book, *Happy in the Kitchen*, that, by a fluke of gift-giving friends, I owned *two* copies of, and, six months before, had won the “double” at the James Beard Foundation Awards in New York City, for Outstanding Wine Service *and* for being the Outstanding Chef of the United States—and I had been in the audience. In fact, at that moment, I had French chefs on my mind (for reasons that I was about to spell out to my wife), and here was one of them, regarded by many as the most delightfully inventive cooking

mind in the Northern Hemisphere. He was, to be fair, looking neither delightful nor inventive and was smelling unmistakably of red wine, and of sweat, too, and I suspected that the black show-no-stains shirt, if you got close to it, would have yielded up an impressively compressed bacterial history. And so, for these and other reasons, I concluded that, no, this man couldn't be the person I couldn't remember and that, whoever he might be, he was definitively a queue jumper, who, casting about for a point of entry, had fixed on a spot in front of my wife. Any moment the gate would open. I waited, wondering if I should be offended. The longer I waited, the more offended I could feel myself becoming, until, finally, the gate did open and I did a mean thing.

As the man made his dash, I stepped into his path and, *smack*, we collided. We collided so powerfully that I lost my balance and flopped awkwardly across his stomach, which somehow kept me from falling, when, without knowing how, I was in his arms. We stared at each other. We were close enough to kiss. His eyes darted between my nose and my lips. Then he laughed. It was an easy, uninhibited laugh. It was more giggle than laugh. It could have been the sound a boy makes on being tickled. I would learn to recognize that laugh—high-pitched and sometimes beyond controlling—and love it. The line surged. He was gone. I spotted him in the distance, padding down a platform.

We proceeded slowly, my wife and I, and I was, for my part, a little stunned. In the last car, we found facing seats, with a table between. I put our suitcases up on the rack and paused. The window, the light, the October slant of it. I had been here before, on this very same day of the calendar.

Five years ago, having celebrated our just-marriedness with an impromptu two-night honeymoon in Little Washington, a village in the Virginia countryside, we were making our way back to New York and boarded this very train. At the time, I was about to suggest to my wife of forty-eight hours that we celebrate our marriage by quitting our jobs. We were both magazine editors. I was at *The New Yorker*. She was at *Harper's Bazaar*. I'd prepared a speech about moving to Italy, the first step in the direction of the rest of our lives. I wanted to be taught by Italians how to make their food and write about it. Couldn't we go together? It wasn't

really a question. Jessica lived for the next chance to pack her bag, and had a mimic's gift for languages which included, conveniently, the one they speak in Italy, which, as it happens, I couldn't speak at all.

We never went back to being editors.

We lived in Tuscany for a year, and, somehow, I went reasonably native and, to my continuing astonishment, when I opened my mouth and uttered a thought, it came out (more or less) in Italian. In the aftermath, I wanted to "do" France. It wasn't next on the list (as in "Then we'll 'do' Japan!"). It was secretly where I had wanted to find myself for most of my adult life: in a French kitchen, somehow holding my own, having been actually "French-trained" (the enduring magic of that phrase). But I could never imagine how that might happen. Our time in Italy showed me that it didn't take much imagining—just get yourself there, and you'll figure it out. Besides, Jessica's gifts for languages included, conveniently, the one they speak in France, which, by another coincidence, I also couldn't speak.

Jessica, no longer in an office job, had also owned up to a lifelong longing involving wine, its history as ancient as food, and she seemed to have a skill, comparable to knowing a foreign language, of being able to translate what she found in her glass. I bought her a gift, a blind tasting session hosted by Jean-Luc Le Dû, a celebrated New York sommelier and wine merchant, which consisted of twelve great wines from his personal cellar, attended by fifteen people, including Jean-Luc's own manager, who had won international awards at blind-tasting competitions. Jessica was the only one who identified all twelve wines. Jean-Luc was baffled, and they were *his* wines. ("Where do you work?" he asked her.) She started a tasting club at home, ten women picked by her, educated New York City professionals who all said that they "love wine but don't know anything about it." She signed up for a course run by the British Wine & Spirit Education Trust, the so-called WSET, with several levels of advancement culminating in a famously challenging "Diploma." By her second class, she discovered that she was pregnant.

It was a wonderful moment. We promised ourselves that our lives would not change.

We will be gypsies, she said. We imagined a worldly infant suspended in a sling contraption.

Four weeks later, she discovered that she was pregnant with twins, boys, the future George and Frederick. This, too, was a wonderful moment, doubly so, but we gave up on the idea of our lives' not changing. In fact, we panicked (a little).

The train pulled out. Baltimore, the first stop, was half an hour away. What we'd planned to discuss, what *Jessica* wanted to discuss, was why, after three years, my French plan hadn't been realized.

It wasn't a mystery, was it? Weren't their names George and Frederick?

It also wasn't so complicated—I needed a kitchen—and I hadn't found one yet. Once in a kitchen, I would pick up the skills.

I had met Dorothy Hamilton at another James Beard event, a charity gala and auction. Hamilton ran what was then called the French Culinary Institute. She was blonde, slim, a youthful sixtyish, indefatigably positive, the corporate executive whom American chefs trusted. When the James Beard Foundation ran into an embarrassing accounting issue (i.e., when its chief executive was systemically skimming the scholarships awarded to young cooks and went to jail), she stepped in to re-establish the institution's integrity. She wasn't paid for it. She implemented the fix in her spare time.

I ran my idea by her: the learning-on-the-job shtick, etc.

"France is not Italy," she said. "You may," she added diplomatically, "want to attend a cooking school." She was so diplomatic that she didn't make the obvious proposal—namely, *her* cooking school, even though it was both the only one in the United States dedicated to *la cuisine française* and walking distance from our home.

I described what I'd done in Italy: i.e., arriving and figuring it out. Then, for intellectual emphasis, I added: "Cooking schools are a modern confection, don't you think? Historically, chefs have always learned on the job."

My approach, I explained to the chief executive of the French Culinary Institute, was to find a venue, make mistakes, be laughed at and debased, and then either surmount or fail. My plan, I elaborated, was to start out in a good French kitchen here in the United States ("But which one?" I mused), and follow that with three months in Paris.

"Three months?" she asked.

“Three months.”

She said nothing, as if pretending to reflect on my plan. She asked, “Do you know Daniel Boulud?”

“Yes.” Boulud is America’s most successful serious French chef. He runs fourteen restaurants, most of them called Daniel, or Boulud, or a variation involving his initials.

“He grew up near Lyon,” Hamilton said.

“Yes, I’d heard that.” I had been to Lyon once, to get a bus at six in the morning. I had no sense of it except that it seemed far away.

“Some say that it is the ‘gastronomical capital of the world.’”

“Yes, I had heard that, too.” She could have been talking to my toddlers.

“The training, the discipline, the *rigor*.” Hamilton drew the word out, slowly, like a nail. “For two years, Daniel cut carrots.”

I nodded. “Carrots,” I said, “are very important.”

Hamilton sighed. “You say you want to work in France for *three months*.” She illustrated the number with her fingers. “And what do you think you will learn?”

I wasn’t about to answer.

“I will tell you what you will learn. Nothing.”

The auction opened and bidding commenced. The lots included a massive white truffle (that is, a massive *Italian* white truffle), which was only marginally smaller than young Frederick’s extraordinarily large head, and which Hamilton secured with a flamboyant oh-let’s-put-an-end-to-this-nonsense bid of \$10,000, whereupon everyone at our table, plus a few friends met en route to the exit, were invited to her apartment on Sunday for lunch.

“I have been thinking about your plan,” Hamilton told me when I showed up, “and I have a gift for you.” She gave me a copy of her school’s textbook, *The Fundamental Techniques of Classic Cuisine*.

I found a chair in the corner. The book was impressively ponderous, 496 big landscape pages of double columns and how-to pictures. I opened it and landed on “Theory: General Information About Fish *Mousseline*.” I flipped. Ten pages were dedicated to making a sauce from an egg. The philosophy of a fricassee got three. My life had been a happy one, not quite knowing what a fricassee was. What person would I have to become to master half of this?

Hamilton sent one of the guests, Dan Barber, over to me. Barber ran two restaurants, both called Blue Hill, one in Manhattan and the other on a farm. I knew him and liked his cooking. It was ferociously local and uncompromisingly flavor-dedicated. I once ate a carrot at a Barber restaurant: by itself, pulled from the earth thirty minutes before, rinsed gently but not skinned, suspended on a carved wood pedestal, and served with several grains of good salt and a drop of perfect Italian olive oil. Barber is thin, with the nervous chest of a long-distance runner, and is wiry, like his hair, and is bookish and articulate. He asked about “my French project,” but before I could answer he interrupted me.

“French training,” he declared. “Nothing more important.”

The statement was unequivocal. It was also refreshing. At the time, the charisma of France was at a low point. People weren’t going there to learn how to cook. They went to extreme outposts of the Iberian peninsula, or isolated valleys in Sweden during the winter.

“Americans think they can do without French training,” Barber said, “but they don’t know what they are missing. I quickly spot cooks who haven’t been to France. Their food is always”—he hesitated, looking for the right word—“well, compromised.” He paused so that I would appreciate the implications.

“You should work for Rostang. Michel Rostang,” he said. The tone was imperious. It was an instruction.

“Rostang?” I knew the name. Paris, one of the fancy guys—linen tablecloths, art on the walls.

“Learn the classics. Rostang.”

I nodded, took out a notebook, and wrote: “*Rostang*.” “But why Rostang?”

“Because”—Barber leaned in close—“he is the one I trained with.”

“You worked in Paris!” This came out as a loud blurt. Barber looked over his shoulder, as if embarrassed. I hadn’t meant to blurt. I was just surprised.

“Yes, I worked in Paris. And in Provence. And . . .” The tone was: Duh? “I am French-trained.”

Barber was remarkably tall, which I hadn’t noticed until now, maybe because he is so thin and uses less space than a normal tall person. I also hadn’t noticed that he was wearing a beret.

“You speak French?” I asked. Blue Hill had been the name of Barber’s grandmother’s farm and was important to how he presented himself: Grandma’s kitchen on Saturdays, the down-to-earth Americana of it all. Barber sits on panels in Washington and knew about the chromosome constitution of Hudson Valley garlic root. The Frenchness was confusing. “Do people know this about you?”

He stepped closer. “You can’t get the skills anywhere else.”

We reached the Chesapeake, its vast brackish sea, America’s largest estuary.

France would be six hours ahead, a Saturday evening, the dinner service about to start. I tried to imagine a bistro in Paris, a bar with stools, a low-ceilinged room with a hearth, a city, a village, and couldn’t. I’d lived in England for twenty years. There it had been easy to imagine France. It was a ferry away. You could drive there. A flight was an hour.

Our train was scattering ducks, their colors blue and orange, when I spotted, on the glass of my window, the reflection of a computer screen, a bright movement. It appeared to be a slide show of French food.

Why did I think it was French? Because the plates looked like paintings? Because they had a sauce? They appeared, one after another, a fade, a new image, very Ken Burns.

I turned to get a closer look and spotted a guy, about thirty. I studied him: short hair, military buzz, skinny, tiny shoulders. French? I couldn’t tell. He didn’t speak. He snarled. He looked European. He looked like a football thug. It was his meanness.

I addressed my wife. “Favor?” I nodded in the direction of the computer.

She twisted in her seat, looked, and sat back down. “God is talking to you.”

“God doesn’t talk to me.”

She had another look, a long one, recomposed herself, folded her hands, and took a breath. “Trust me.”

I peered over her shoulder. Another guy was looking at the screen, his back to me. It was the queue jumper.

I asked my wife, “Should I talk to him?”

“You have to.”

“I think I know him.”

“Talk to him.”

“Unless I am wrong.”

“Talk to him.”

I rose and walked to his table.

“Hello. I am sorry to interrupt.” The queue jumper had two carafes of red wine and was reading a French cookbook (*La Cuisine du soleil*, a worn, out-of-date-looking cover). He looked up. Oh. I *do* know this man. This face: It had *seemed* familiar before because it *was* familiar, the James Beard award ceremony, the photo on the book jacket that I had two copies of.

But the name? It started with “M.”

Michelin?

Mirepoix?

They stared up at me, this now famous-seeming James Beard guy and his hooligan.

I thought: Wow. This is the man I just assaulted.

I said, “Are you a chef?”

I couldn’t bring myself to say: Are you a French chef whose name begins with “M,” which I can’t remember because I can’t remember French names?

I added, “Are you, in fact, a very famous chef . . . by chance?”

The man didn’t move. Maybe he didn’t speak English.

He took a breath. “Yes,” he said, “I am a famous chef. Yes! I am *very* famous.” He was grand—a little ridiculous, but grand people often are. “Allow me to introduce myself.” He extended his hand as though I should kiss it (Panic! Should I?) and declared, “I am Paul Bocuse.”

Paul Bocuse! I’d got it wrong! I’d assaulted Paul Bocuse? Bocuse is *the* most celebrated French chef in the world! Am I meeting Bocuse? Now I was confused. Also, wasn’t Bocuse 115 years old? And didn’t he live in Lyon?

“No, no, no, no,” the man said. “I am only joking.”

(Oh, joke, right, funny.)

“I am not Paul Bocuse.”

(Whew!)

“Paul Bocuse is dead.”

(What?! I *am* being made fun of, *and* Paul Bocuse is dead!)

“Or maybe he’s not dead.”

(He wasn’t.)

“I don’t actually know. I am Michel Richard. The chef and *patron* of Citronelle, Washington, D.C.’s finest restaurant. I repeat. Michel”—he paused in order to give the surname the full operative treatment—“*Reeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee-CHARD!*”

I would spend most of the next eight months in Richard’s company, off and on, not too much at first, and then, by the spring, pretty much full time, when I found a place on the line, cooking at the fish station. Our next meeting was a dinner at Citronelle, at the chef’s table, in the kitchen and with a view of its workings, and involved Jessica and me, Richard and his wife, Laurence, an American born of French parents whom Richard met when he lived in California. (“She never eats in the restaurant, she doesn’t like my food,” he said with a curiously upbeat irony, “but she will want to meet Jessica, and they will speak French.” And they did.)

The first course was scrambled eggs with salmon, which it obviously wasn’t going to be and wasn’t (it was raw scallops that had been liquefied in a blender with cream and saffron, and *cooked* like scrambled eggs, French style, admittedly, which is to say slowly, but they were still what they were: shellfish). The next was a cappuccino. (Ditto.) It was actually mushroom soup, except that it wasn’t, not actually, because it had been made without water, or stock, or any other liquid. It also had no mushrooms. (Mushrooms sweat when heated; the “soup”—which calls for fifty kilos of various fungi—was, in effect, nothing but the sweat. It was brilliant, and unheard of, and very concentrated—I would eventually try it at home and spend hours trying to put monstrous dark gobs of leftover mushroom goo to some kind of second use only to give up—it started to harden into a black crust—and, with a thud, threw it into the trash.)

Richard made a salad inspired by Claude Monet’s water lilies.

I thought: really? There are centuries of paintings inspired by food. How many foods inspired by painting?

I wandered into the kitchen to watch its being assembled. Around a white platter, floppy circles of “tube food” were being arranged—they

had been sliced thin on a meat slicer—and included (I was told) tuna, swordfish, red and yellow peppers, beef, venison, and eel. The platter was dressed—frondy-looking herbs, a basil-infused, exaggeratedly green olive oil—and transformed into a swampy, mossy masterpiece. It was very Zen-making to look at, even if such a challenge to think about—I promise, the first thought that occurred to me when eating a thin round white disk was not “Oh, it’s eel!”—that it made you realize how recognizing your food, which we do all the time, was a precondition to our being able to taste it. (And I’m still trying to figure out what I’m meant to learn from *that*.)

Before bed that night, I found myself recalling, with unexpected fondness, Dorothy Hamilton’s *Techniques of Classic Cuisine*.

In January, I began learning Richard’s preparations in earnest, beginning suitably enough with one of the tubes that he had used in the Monet salad—the red pepper one, as it happens.

“Tubes are very important in Michel’s cooking,” David Deshaies said. David was the hooligan on the train. He was the executive chef.

By now, I knew enough to know that “tubes” probably didn’t figure among the classic techniques.

We roasted five dozen red peppers, peeled them, and laid them out, still warm, on long sheets of plastic film, which David then bombed with aggressive clouds of Knox gelatin—quickly before the peppers cooled. Arranged thus, they looked like a thick, undulating red carpet, which he then tried to roll up, peppers squeezing out the sides of the film, and looking like three-foot-long, squishy burritos. There was obviously no tidy way. He kept having to push the red-pepper slop back inside until, finally, he succeeded enough to be able to tie up one end with string. After tying up the other end, he picked up his massive tubular confection and whipped it around his head like a lasso—the image, which was actually rather alarming, was of a cowboy twirling a very long pastrami. But it was beautiful when done: very red, very symmetrical, very shiny, like a primary-colored sausage stuffed to a degree less than bursting.

“Okay,” he said. “Your turn.”

“We” made ten—David made nine, and I made one (it takes a while to lasso with confidence)—whereupon I was told to hang them in the “tube walk-in.”

It was a freezer. Tubes hung from ceiling hooks as though in a butcher shop, except that they were pastel green, Easter yellow, white, pink, a few robust reds, and purples. They could have been frozen party balloons. The longest was five feet. The white one, a three-footer, was the eel.

You have never seen anything like them. No one has seen anything like them, because outside of Richard's kitchens you will find them nowhere. There were tubes for blini batter, uncooked bacon, coconut, beet, various fish, and a dough for club sandwiches. There were really a lot of tubes.

Strangely, it never occurred to me that Richard didn't make sense, that I should do something else. He was in Washington, D.C. I was in New York, an inexperienced father of twin toddlers. What do I do? Leave my family? Also I wanted basics. Richard was obviously "anti-basic." He was also anti-obvious and subversive at every chance. His approach (more accurately described as his "anti-approach") was to surprise the diner at every chance. He was an entertainer. His promise: to leave you delighted and pleased. No, this wasn't what I had in mind, but I couldn't resist him.

He was educated in the classics, and many mornings I would find him at the chef's table reading one, especially Ali Bab's *Gastronomique Pratique*, a work largely unknown in the English-speaking world but a bible for many French chefs in the early twentieth century, published in 1907, 637 pages of detailed, practical explanations of the dishes of the French repertoire. But Richard never made a thing from it. Nothing.

Why do you read it? I asked.

"To be provoked. People think I have such original ideas, but I don't, not really, they start with something I've read."

No, Richard was not the obvious chef to teach a novice French cuisine. But pass this up? Not a chance.

Besides, he knew everyone: He would find a place for me in France.

Citronelle was in the basement of an old hotel, the Latham, a 140-room, not-too-pricey Georgetown property that, despite its condition (it showed an alarming tendency to tilt), had actually seen worse days. (Movie buffs might recognize it as the seedy hideout that shelters young Julia Roberts in *The Pelican Brief*.) Once Mel Davis, Richard's PR per-

son and deputy, negotiated a weekly friends-of-the-family rate for a room, I was resolved: I would come down to Washington, domestic urgencies permitting, on Sunday evening and return on Friday. (Those domestic urgencies weren't always permitting, because any arrangement that resulted in Jessica's being the unprotected parent of twin toddlers would turn out not to be such a happy one.)

**RATATOUILLE.** It was the next preparation that I learned, and I loved making it. It was served cold, with just-fried, hot-to-the-touch soft-shell crab. It seemed so radically basic—and, well, not.

According to David, my instructor, it is the taste of a French summer, because it is made with ingredients that every French household grows in its garden plot: eggplant, peppers, zucchini, onions, and tomatoes (plus garlic), in roughly equal quantities (except the garlic). Each ingredient is cut up chunky. “We once made a nouvelle-cuisine version, with small and perfect cubes,” Richard said, watching us from the chef's table, “but it was too fancy. It's a rustic dish and should always be one.”

The most important lesson: that each ingredient should be cooked separately. The onions are sautéed in olive oil. Then the zucchini (lightly); and finally the eggplants, but quickly and in a nonstick pan (no oil, because eggplant is an olive-oil sponge). The peppers are oven-roasted; then the tomatoes, but, according to the particularly French insistence of needing to remove the skin first. (“The French never eat it, because the skin comes out in your poop,” Richard told me confidently. “Really?” I asked, skeptical. “Really,” he said.)

You remove it by dropping each tomato into a bowl of just-boiled water, transferring it quickly to icy water, and peeling while it is in a state of shock. You then cut the naked tomatoes into quarters, scoop out the liquid and the wet, jellylike seeds, and drop them into a sieve atop a bowl. (This will be for later—for tomato water. By the end of your session, there ought to be a formidably goopy pile drip-dripping into a bright-red pond.) You then arrange the quarters—they look like red flower petals—on a baking sheet, paint with olive oil, sprinkle salt and sugar atop, and cook at a low heat for ninety minutes, until they're plump and swollen. They are the jammiest of the jammy ingredients.

Only then does Richard mix the ingredients together—in a pot, with shots of red-wine vinegar (an unusual addition, a bright, slightly racy

acidity to balance the dish's summer sweetness)—and heats them gently for a short time. The practice—each vegetable cooked separately—is said to produce a more animated jumble of flavors than if everything had been plopped in at the same time. I didn't think further on it, except to recognize that it had been a long time since I had prepared a ratatouille and that I liked this one so much that I would make it every summer, without fail, thereafter. ("Vegetable jam" is how David describes ratatouille: "My mother made it on Sundays and served it with roast chicken, and we ate it cold for the rest of the week.") It was only on serving the dish to friends (who were excited by the result) that I learned that most people don't bother cooking the ingredients separately, and many didn't know it was a possibility. Even the most recent and generally pretty impressive edition of *Joy of Cooking* tells you to heap all your vegetables into a pot, give it a stir, cover, and cook, which put me in mind of that last ratatouille I'd made ten years before, inspired by the languidly lazy, self-consciously I-am-literary prose of M.F.K. Fisher, who had learned her preparation, in France, from "a large strong woman" who came from "an island off Spain." This, too, was a dump-and-stir preparation that was then stewed for five to six hours. It tasted of mush. (Julia Child's ratatouille is about half onboard and honors the basic practice—"each element is cooked separately"—but then, curiously, does some of the ingredients together.)

The cook-it-separate approach was my first genuinely French cooking lesson. Vignerons, bottling a wine made of different grape varieties, do something similar and either toss everything in a vat together and ferment the lot (like a "field blend"), or vinify each one separately and blend at the end: a more controlled effort in which you can often taste each grape. And many famous French stews turn out, at least in their traditional recipes, to be minimally stewed. Like a *Navarin d'agneau*, the spring-lamb-and-vegetable dish named after the *navet*, turnip, the traditional accompaniment until the advent and acceptance of the potato (circa 1789): The vegetables are cooked while the meat roasts—turnips (if you're a traditionalist), potatoes (if not), or turnips *and* potatoes (if you're both), baby carrots, small onions, and spring peas—and only then combined at the end.

The practice doesn't seem to have a name, which is a curiosity in a culture that I was about to discover has a name for every tiny ridiculous

preparation or tool, or if there is one I haven't found it yet, although I may have come across the first instance of its being described: in Menon's *La Cuisinière bourgeoise* (*The Household Cook*—the *bourgeoise* in the title has its eighteenth-century sense, “of the home”). There are many “*cuisine bourgeoise*” books in France—almost every accomplished chef has written for the layman—but Menon's was the first. (Menon, probably a pseudonym, also wrote the first “nouvelle cuisine.” There are many *nouvelle cuisines* as well.) Menon's *Cuisinière bourgeoise* describes two ways of making duck and turnips: the cheffy approach, with turnips and other ingredients cooked separately while the duck roasts, and the other, more informal one that involves, once again, the plop, the pot, the lid, and leaving until done. “*Voilà la façon de faire le canard aux navets à la Bourgeoise.*” (The recipe is not in the book's first edition, published in 1746, but in the second, in 1759.)

Spoiler alert: Astonishingly, albeit painfully, I would indeed learn to read French and even speak it.

I made breadcrumbs the Richard way, which were not uniform or powdery (he shook out the dust in a sieve) but jagged and uneven and rough to look at, and then toasted in the oven until deliciously noisy. With a dab of mousse, they adhered to Richard's “chicken nuggets,” and then, when fried at maximum heat, emerged highly textured on the outside (they snapped when you bit into them), soft in the middle, with a hint of chicken cream in between, and very surprising in the mouth. (I tried the nuggets on my children. They liked them. They also liked the frozen ones from the supermarket. They were not discriminating. What they really liked was ketchup.)

I made tuna burgers the Richard way (tuna burgers at a high-end restaurant? Why not? They were scrumptious). You start with a thick red slab of the fish, dice it, and then mash the cubes vigorously with the back of a wooden spoon against the sides of a bowl. As the cubes break down, you're effectively whipping them. You add a splash of olive oil. You continue mashing. By now, you're probably starting to sweat (unless you're me, and you're streaming off the tip of your nose). Midway through, you spoon in a vaguely Japanese-y sauce that you've made in advance (ginger, shallots, and chives emulsified in a blender with soy sauce) and mash some more. The goal is to break down the tissue so effectively,

smooshing it, as to render the fish's natural fats. They are the binder, what will hold the shape of the burger. It is then cooked rare, and has zingy freshness, with an unapologetic almost-sushilike gingery rawness, and is served in a bun made with olive oil and wild yeast, something like a Mediterranean version of a brioche.

I enjoyed the burgers so much that I always made an extra one just before we broke down the kitchen and kept it warm on the flattop to eat at the bar upstairs along with my customary glass of Pinot Noir.

I was taught how to make a Richard soufflé that never fails (it uses three different meringues, Italian, Swiss, and French). I prepared savory potato tuiles that have as much snap and texture as a Pringles chip but no fat (they were inserted into Richard's burgers to give them crunch). Both were among the house secrets, kept in a much-guarded recipe bible, and the fact that Richard was prepared to share them with me was proof that, in his eyes, I was utterly harmless. During my tenure, the kitchen wasn't making the "mosaic salmon," regarded by many as Richard's most accomplished dish, a gravity-defying masterpiece covertly held together by transglutaminase (i.e., meat glue) and known to me from how it figured in the story of a former sous-chef, Arnaud Vantourout, a Belgian who confessed to me that, after he left Citronelle for a grand-sounding position at a famous Brussels restaurant that he asked me not to name, he realized that he had been hired only for Richard's recipes. "They made me tell them everything"—the Tube Technology, the soufflé, the tuna burger, Richard's perfectly peeled apples, and the "mosaic salmon." ("They really wanted the mosaic salmon.") Then, after the famous Brussels restaurant that Arnaud asked me not to name had exhausted all the good ideas that he'd learned from Michel, they had no use for him. "They threw me away." (Frankly, I don't understand why the good-hearted Arnaud was so careful to protect an asshole establishment, and even though the late great *New York Times* food critic R. W. Apple, Jr., named it among the top ten dining experiences in the world, I, for one, have vowed never to go there.)

On a Thursday afternoon, just before the dinner service, I learned that none other than Michel Rostang and his *brigade* had arrived from France and would be showing up in the kitchen in the morning. They

would be taking over Citronelle for a weekend of elaborate meals, an annual event, something like a “Paris in D.C.” festival. There was no reason why I should have known about it in advance—I was still finding my way. But the news astonished me: Michel Rostang—*the* Michel Rostang, the very person that Dan Barber had worked for and urged me to train with as well—would be here, with his executive chef, his sous-chef, his line cooks, everyone. It was my chance. I was excited. I was frightened.

I needed to call Jessica.

In one respect, the timing was positively apposite. I had only recently taken on board that our children needed to attend some kind of preschool in the fall. To be honest, until then, I hadn’t considered, in any kind of specific way, that they needed to be educated. Obviously, I knew that they had to be, eventually, but I hadn’t thought through the logistics. It was the first week of March. I had only just begun trailing at the fish station (following a cook who knows the station so that you can learn the routine). Also I was only now starting to realize how little time I had to find a restaurant in France. Between March and September, I was committed to acquiring whatever basics there were to learn in Richard’s kitchen (if any), *and* doing a stint somewhere, venue unknown, in Paris: six months. And then, like that, here was Rostang: my opportunity, my passage, my future, my venue.

In another respect, however, the timing was not so positive. In the arrangement that Jessica and I had established, I needed to be home by Friday evening to take over the care of the children: no matter what. By Friday evening, she would be at one of those I-can’t-do-this-a-second-longer moments. Do I phone and say, well, actually, would you mind doing a few more days—say the weekend and, well, the rest of next week—on your own?

Richard was at the chef’s table, working on a recipe. I hesitated to interrupt him. Besides, I hadn’t explicitly asked him, not yet, if I could count on his help to find me a kitchen in Paris. He then disappeared before I had a chance to speak to him and didn’t return in the evening. (Probably having dinner with his dear friend Michel—the two Michels at a table somewhere.)

On Friday morning, David got a text. “They’re coming!”

Besides, how was I even remotely qualified? I knew how to lasso red-pepper sausages. I could make breadcrumbs and a tuna sandwich. I couldn't speak French.

"They're here!"

I heard them before they appeared: Had they been chanting? They burst through the door in a sprint—I had to jump out of the way—and went straight to their positions. They looked like an occupying army. It was the first time I witnessed what I would learn to describe as "kitchen focus." Each team member looked straight ahead—no small chat, a perfunctory firm-handshake hello—and then they set up their stations. It was exhilarating to witness. It was intimidating. They were so different from the Americans at Citronelle. We seemed pampered, unserious, soft. They seemed like street brawlers. They were—there is no other word—terrifying.

Rostang has two Michelin stars. I had never seen a Michelin kitchen *brigade* before.

They spoke no English, or if they did, they kept it to themselves. It didn't matter because they weren't about to speak to an American anyway. During a break, they fell in with Citronelle's French staff members, the "executives"—David, Mark Courseille (the pastry chef), Cedric Maupillier (a former sous-chef who was now at Richard's Central, his "American" bistro), plus a chef from the French embassy, a former Richard employee.

The Americans retreated, got on with their tasks, rarely looked up, and conveyed, unmistakably, that they were weak, frail, and catastrophically inadequate.

I reflected: What did I have over the American cooks, all of them trained and experienced, who now looked out-skilled and intimidated? I couldn't imagine being a member of the Michelin team. Two stars? Not a chance.

Where was Richard? Were the two Michels now having lunch as well? By the afternoon, I had a train to catch. Jessica and I had our agreement. And I wasn't too unhappy about it. But I did wonder: Had I just missed my chance to work in Paris?

Three weeks later, there was another opportunity. I was on the line one night, at fish, finally learning the station, when David called out from

the pass: “Michel wants you upstairs. There are people he wants you to meet.”

I didn’t move.

“Michel is my boss. You must leave the line.”

Richard didn’t give a flying fig if I cooked or not—I wanted to be cooking, so he indulged me—and since I was basically there at his pleasure, he was fully entitled to summon me at will to be at his side. This was, in itself, a great pleasure, except that the interruptions were often longer than the time I was spending on the line, and I still believed that I would learn to be a French cook there. (Spoiler alert number two: I wouldn’t, although I would learn how to be a cook in Richard’s kitchen, which was not nothing.)

The friends were Antoine Westermann, an acclaimed Alsatian chef, and his wife, Patricia. They were outside on a warm evening—wooden tables and benches, like a pop-up sidewalk café. I joined them. A platter of oysters was produced, a bottle of Chablis. Richard was telling stories of his childhood, his “mom” and her terrible cooking. More food appeared, charcuterie on a tree-bark platter; my glass refilled, another bottle put on ice. I relaxed. Why not? It wasn’t such a hardship not to be in the kitchen.

(Meanwhile, I did, I admit, think about my wife, decisively even if briefly, and wondered what version of hell, at this particular moment, she was going through with the twins.)

Westermann’s first restaurant, when he was twenty-three, had been a converted barn, in the heart of Strasbourg, that combined high technique with his grandmother’s recipes, and, over a twenty-five-year period, earned him three Michelin stars. Then he gave them up for love (“for the beautiful Patricia,” Richard clarified), left his former wife, and signed over his restaurant to his thirty-two-year-old son; Westermann and Patricia moved to Paris, where he bought Drouant, founded in 1880, one of the city’s venerable establishments.

Westermann came to Washington regularly—he had a consulting arrangement with the Sofitel Hotel—and always saw Richard. For many French chefs (like Westermann or Alain Ducasse or Joël Robuchon—i.e., some of the greatest talents of their generation), coming upon Richard in the United States was akin to discovering an unrec-

ognized national treasure—how could someone so accomplished be so unknown in France? They instantly “got” him, came to adore him, and were then lifelong members of the Michel Richard fan club.

Westermann was demonstrative in his affection for Richard. The two chefs were about the same age. Westermann was tall and fit—he did mountain cycling—with perfect posture and round bookish glasses and a manner of vigilant rectitude. In a chef’s coat, and he seemed always to be in a chef’s coat, he had the manner of a scientist, a stiff, slightly formal manner that disappeared when he smiled, and in Richard’s company he smiled easily. Until that evening, the only people I’d met with Richard were employed by him.

“You know, Michel, you really need to exercise.”

“Yes, I will, Antoine, I promise.”

“It doesn’t take much—a little, but every day.” He was concerned about Richard’s health, and there was tenderness in the concern.

Richard had once been a broad-shouldered man. In photos from his Los Angeles days, he conveys power. But now those hefty broad shoulders had lost their heft, and the mass of what remained seemed to have slid down to his middle. He was still a beautiful man—it was in the joy he exuded whenever you were lucky enough to be in his company—but his body was in distress. Three years earlier, he’d had a stroke. “It was here at the restaurant,” he told me. “I wasn’t making sense. I was saying random words.”

“It’s your weight, Michel. You just need to lose it.” Westermann wanted to help.

“Yes, Antoine, *ma petite* Laurence tells me the same. I will start tomorrow.”

Richard loved his pleasures immoderately and was only able to moderate them by avoiding them. His Sunday lunches in Los Angeles were raucously drunken and taught him not to keep wine in the house. Food was more difficult. You can’t live without food. (“Once, Laurence gave me cottage cheese. Have you ever eaten it? I tried it for lunch. I wanted to make Laurence happy. But I couldn’t. It’s terrible.”)

“Look at those cheeses,” he said one night when we were sitting at the chef’s table. “So creamy and fat and luxurious.” The cheeses were for the dinner service. “Laurence told me, No more cheese, please Michel,

promise me, no more. I promised. *Mais regarde!*” He drank a glass of water. He had another glass. Then he succumbed, a large plate prepared for him, no bread, just cheese, and his eyes rolled up into his head in a long protracted “mmmmmmmmmm” of ecstasy. “It is butter’s greatest expression.”

At the end of my evening, I returned to the kitchen to help clean up. I asked David: “What about Westermann? He has a good heart, and knowledge and famous skills.”

David frowned. “An Alsatian in Paris? It is a kitchen unconnected to a place. Paris could be anywhere. Paris could be New York. I’ll speak to Michel. We will find you something.”

Michel Richard was born in Pabu, a farming village in Brittany, the forlorn, far-northwesterly part of France, half an hour from the sea. His parents—André, a member of the Resistance, and Muguette, a young live-in chambermaid at a castle—had met fleetingly toward the end of World War II, as the Nazi army was in retreat. Months later, the war just over, the country a muddy crisscrossing of carts and two-cylinder vehicles, Muguette, now very pregnant, struck out for the village where she remembered that the parents of her Resistance lover came from. She got as far as Rennes, the capital of Brittany, where Richard’s older brother, Alain, was born in May 1945. She resumed her trek, and in Pabu, knocking on doors, found the infant’s father. Richard was born three years later.

The young family lived with André’s parents. Richard’s memories are in images, mainly indoors, mainly wintry, a flickering fireplace darkness. Electricity was conserved like water drawn from the well—no lights after 8:00 p.m. The grandparents didn’t speak French. They spoke Breton, burned peat, had a dirt floor, and didn’t use plates but spooned dinner into rounded indentations, like bowls, carved into a thick wood table. Richard’s father was the village baker. Richard, who would eventually teach me how to create those perfectly spherical bread rolls for the tuna burgers (you knead them with your thumb as you roll them), remembered how his father made them fast, two at a time, against an unwashed apron that he crushed the boy’s face into in sloppy predawn hugs. He smelled of unfiltered cigarettes and wine—the father was an

alcoholic—and was bristly and sweaty in the light of a wood-burning oven.

There were jobs in the Ardennes—in the east, near Belgium, where factories were being revived. When Richard was six, and his mother pregnant with her fourth, the family moved, exchanging one of the most backward places in France for one of the most undeveloped. The marriage ended a year later, after an act of drunken brutality perpetrated by the father on Muguette, pregnant again, with her fifth. The next morning, she and her children boarded a bus and left.

The mother is the most important and least likely first influence on Richard's culinary calling because she provoked him to cook. She was too busy to make dinner without stress—she worked in a factory—and Richard, aged nine, stepped in to do it. He also stepped in because what she did cook, when she cooked, was inedible. He recalls many dishes, but my favorite is the rabbit cooked in a pot for so long and inattentively that, when it was brought to the table, and the lid lifted, he and his siblings had to stand up and peer over the rim to see if there was anything inside: The rabbit had shriveled to a hard black thing the size of a sparrow. Those same siblings were joyful when Richard took over—an early lesson in the happy love of happy diners.

The mother also introduced Richard to pastry, again indirectly but unequivocally. When he was thirteen, the age when she either kicked her children out or made them go to work (she had already dispatched the elder brother to learn bookkeeping at a trade school while being given room and board), his mother got a job for Richard at a local bronze foundry. He was burned and his hands swelled and he was unable to continue. She talked to friends—he had to do something—and came up with his being an apprentice at a pâtisserie, room and board, plus 50 francs a month (around \$10.00), in Carignan, a hundred kilometers away, no trains or buses in between. A flour supplier picked up the boy early on a summer morning—a blue Renault van, a pink sky, the smell of August flowers. Richard didn't return for three years, not once.

"Recently," Richard told me, "I realized that I have no memory of my mother kissing me."

I asked him about his father: Was he an influence? A pastry chef is not a baker, but they are not so different.

“Absolutely not,” he said. “Pâtisserie is a grand profession.” He was quiet and seemed to be musing. “Well, maybe.”

The father he never had, he said, was Gaston Lenôte, the twentieth century’s most famous French pastry chef. Richard was hired shortly after his twenty-third birthday, in 1971, and shortly before the restaurant review *Gault & Millau* published its famous October 1973 issue proclaiming the arrival of nouvelle cuisine and naming Lenôte among the movement’s swashbuckling practitioners.

Lenôte, the famous Lenôte, regarded Richard as the artist—for Richard that regard was emboldening and liberating—and would come to depend on him as his secret weapon. (Much later, David Bouley, the New York chef, trained with Lenôte. “People were still saying how Michel had created this, and created that, how he created all these other things as well.” This was years *after* Richard had left. “He was very big in Lenôte’s world to have that kind of influence still.”) Because of Lenôte, Richard discovered his own genius. Because of Lenôte, he ended up in America: He accompanied him to open the first Lenôte French pastry shop in New York. Because of Lenôte (even if only indirectly), he discovered California, because Richard went there after Lenôte’s New York operation failed. In Los Angeles, Richard opened an almost incomprehensively successful pastry shop in 1976 (chef Wolfgang Puck recalls being astonished by the lines outside the door—“Longer than I have ever seen”) and, later, Citrus, his first restaurant.

What was Lenôte’s achievement? I had purchased Lenôte’s first book, *Faites votre pâtisserie comme Lenôte (Make Your Desserts like Lenôte)*, a three-hundred-page classic, now out of print. It includes recipes for tarts and éclairs and baba au rhum. How was this meant to be nouvelle cuisine?

“Lenôte didn’t invent new dishes,” Richard said. “He invented new ways of making the old ones. He had a simple rule. You can change anything as long as the result is better than the original.”

The rule, which is among the most succinct descriptions of nouvelle cuisine that I’ve come upon, governed everything Richard did, even if his applications were more anarchic than any of Lenôte’s. There was a fake caviar that Richard invented. We made it at the fish station. It looked and smelled like caviar, and was served in a fake caviar tin with

a “Begula” label [*sic*] printed on the lid. It was pearl pasta soaked in a rich fish stock and dyed with squid ink. It is obviously not strictly a substitute for caviar, but, owing to the precision of its preparation and the little treasures found inside (a perfect sous-vide poached runny egg, a lobster knuckle simmered in butter), it *is* “better” than the original if “better,” in this case, means a “more enjoyable eating experience.” (Ever mischievous, Richard serves real caviar on a bowl of atmosphere, as though it were airborne, a trick of presentation made possible in a darkened, candlelit room, where the caviar sits atop a piece of plastic film stretched across a bowl floatingly.)

One night, Jessica was wakened by the sound of boys’ giggling. She had put them into their cribs two hours before. She peeked past the bedroom door and saw them in the living room, pulling books off the shelves. They had learned how to climb out of their cribs, an unnerving milestone. She called me in Washington. I didn’t hear the ring.

Showing no affect (it is what the experts say to do), she duly picked up each boy as though a kitten—no eye contact, no verbal acknowledgment—and returned them to their cribs, ho hum, and went back to bed. They climbed out. She put them back. They climbed out. After the routine had been repeated fifty times, she phoned me.

No answer.

After another fifty episodes (which seems improbable, but she assures me that she returned them to their cribs more than a hundred times), she tried my phone one more time, gave up, and went to sleep. She later found the boys sitting cross-legged with the fridge and freezer doors opened, white handprints everywhere. On the floor were butter, milk, orange juice, broken eggs, and ice cream, which they were eating from the carton with their hands. Frederick had chocolate syrup in his hair.

I showed up on the Friday evening. Jessica and I spoke in the morning. “This is not working,” she said.

“I understand,” I said, but I was back in Washington on the Monday.

AT THE FISH STATION, I DID PROTEINS. No one on the line—and we were all Americans—ever thought, Hey, I am a French cook. The skate

took more or less the same savvy skill set that you would use to make a cup of tea: i.e., add hot water.

Skate is like mini-stingray with maxi-big bones that, in France, is served with a brown-butter-and-caper sauce: not complicated to make, but not one that David trusted any of his cooks either to know or recognize the taste of. “Their mouths have been ruined by sugar.” So David made the sauce—always. He also boned the fish, then slipped it into a sack, poured in his sauce, vacuum-sealed it, and froze it. When the order came through, the fish went into a water bath for twenty minutes (controlled temperature, nothing to think about) and, when “fired” was removed from its sack. You didn’t have to know what you were doing. You didn’t have to know it was fish.

The striped bass: grilled skin-down until crispy, five minutes, and then finished by a minute on the fleshy side. The exotically oily sablefish: four minutes in a 500-degree oven, boned with a pair of fish pliers, painted with a soy-and-sake glaze, and then (when fired) sizzled in the salamander until it bubbled blackly.

Soft-shell crabs were the exception, arriving daily in a box, alive, with eyes, lined up in rows on a straw bed, each no bigger than a child’s fist, ocean-wet, stirring slightly, and smelling of barnacles and anchors. They were also fun to eat, crustaceans that you could pop into your mouth and munch on in their entirety, claws, shell, everything.

They are a specialty of the Chesapeake Bay, but not a unique breed. What is unique is the breeding. Crabs shed shells and regrow them. They molt. Chesapeake Native Americans discovered that if you pull a mid-molting crab out into the air, the shell never hardens. It is, therefore, delightfully crispy when sautéed. Richard’s were especially crispy, because they were deep-fried, after being filled with a mix of mayonnaise and crabmeat, an unconventional touch, stuffing a baby with the meat of the adult—basically, with what the little soft-shells would have grown up to be had their adolescence not been abbreviated.

“The mayonnaise is for the acidity,” David told me during a lesson on crab prep. He searched for an example I might understand. “Think fish and chips. The English splash them with vinegar. Fat loves acidity.” (David, I have to observe affectionately, had an inexpressibly charming, sweet way of conveying the utter awe he felt in the face of my culinary stupidity.)

To do crabs, you need only a pair of heavy-duty clippers and a metal bowl. With your left hand, you pick up the critter from just behind the claws; with your right, you snip off its head from just behind the eyes, which makes a light plonk when it hits the bowl. The now wide-open carcass is impressively roomy, especially after a little squeeze, which, when you think about it, makes perfect sense. A crab's new shell is like buying a coat for a fast-growing child—you want something the little guy will grow into. Of course Richard would make use of this space! It was as much a feature of a soft-shell's uniqueness as its paper-thin housing. A crab filled with mayonnaise? It was like a fried seafood sandwich. Why hadn't more restaurants stolen the idea?

To fry, you dip the crabs in a batter made of two parts pastry flour (low-protein, fluffy), one part corn flour (for mouth feel), a bottle of sparkling water (the effervescence of which mysteriously survives the frying), and an elusive ingredient called "curry love." The term was used by a line cook, Gervais Achstetter, who shouted, "Chef, the crabs need a little more curry love."

"Gervais, be careful, please," David said. "There is a journalist in the house."

Curry love, once it was finally accepted that the journalist wasn't going away anytime soon, turned out to be food coloring. Its use in savory dishes is universally forbidden, although for no reason that entirely makes sense, since it is tolerated in the pastry kitchen, which, in essential philosophic ways, Richard never left. A lot of Richard's dishes had a little extra love. The bright green of the "basil oil"? Or the ratatouille, its vibrant saffron-red? Or the deep, deep purple-red of the "wine sauce" that went with a steak?

I later asked Richard straight-out—"Do you use food coloring?" We were having lunch. It was mischievous of me. He didn't know that I knew. He paused, trying to read me.

"No," he said. "Never. Beet juice, of course. But not food coloring."

I repeated the exchange years later to Daniel Boulud—the brazen audacity of it—and he said, "Huh."

When I later found myself in Boulud's kitchen, and was on my own, downstairs, among the prep cooks, I fell into admiring the deep, egg-yolky tortellini that the pasta guy was making, and after asking if I

could see the recipe discovered that, oh my, it included yellow food coloring.

Spoiler alert number three: I would end up cooking with Daniel Boulud.

One weekend, flipping through a magazine, Richard had come upon a picture of a flowering plant in a glass vase. The vase made him stop. He closed his eyes and visualized the possibility of a salad that looked like a gift from the florist, with “soil layers” below and leaves and edible flowers on top. By the time he got to the restaurant on Monday morning, he couldn’t wait to get started. He had already grabbed a sheet of paper and was drawing what it might look like: on the bottom, the “dirt” (eggplant, sautéed with shallots in olive oil and finished in the oven to a sweet paste); on top, jellied tomato water; and in between a fluffy yogurt—“Not sweet, Americans always want sweet, but savory, seasoned with cumin” (a low-note heat, North African, earthy)—whipped by a technique that he had learned from Lenôtre.

“Which was?”

Basically yogurt plus gelatin, Richard said.

I was perplexed. Even I knew that you can’t add gelatin to a refrigerated yogurt and expect it to set. Jell-O 101 teaches you that you have to dissolve it in a hot liquid and chill it.

“Ah, *mon ami*, we don’t dissolve the gelatin in the yogurt. We dissolve it in a cup of hot cream and *then* fold it in.”

And for the whipping?

You put your mixing bowl inside a larger bowl of ice. The effect is to heat and chill at once, but more chill than heat. The result is richer than the normal yogurt, owing to the cream, and disjunctively savory, owing to the cumin, and wonderfully textured, pillowy and expansive, like the soft-serve that you get from an ice-cream van. It is also stiff. You can poke salad leaves into it.

But there was a problem with the dirt. “*Merde!*” Richard said. The eggplant looked like shit. Food must never look like *merde*.

He came up with a fix the next morning. He would roast the eggplant as before, but substitute onion (red) for the shallot, and add beets (red),

tomato (red), and vinegar (red)—plus garlic, this time, for intensity. He put everything in a blender and strained it through a sieve, which yielded a bulky, almost dry texture like baby food. It also had an appealingly deep red-brown hue. (I couldn't help myself: Had Richard added food coloring when I wasn't looking?) It looked like a desert at sunset. It was too beautiful to be buried. It would be the topsoil. The weird, wobbly tomato would go to the bottom and be a summery surprise when your spoon reached it.

The weird, wobbly tomato, incidentally, was basically tomato water intensified, what is left over after skinning your tomatoes, having plopped the seeds and skins in a sieve. Richard loved tomato water. I wasn't unfamiliar with it, but found it pretty fussy. Now, transported by Richard's enthusiasm, I regard it as such a rare and essential feature of summer that it deserves its own molecular describer:  $H_2OT_4$ , say. If you put the  $H_2OT_4$  into a pot, reduce it slowly, and poke your finger in to taste, you will discover a liquid so intense that, for no reason you understand, you find yourself thinking of hot, listless afternoons in August. Cool it with gelatin and you have some very weird wobbly. Richard loves the really weird wobbly.

The salad was a miracle to look at, with the come-hither appeal of a dessert, but wholly savory. It was like a ratatouille that had been rendered into a flower. It was sprayed with a vinaigrette.

We were about to taste-test it, Richard and I at the chef's table, when Tyler Florence showed up, in town, no reservation, hoping for a bite to eat. Florence is a restaurateur and Food Network host. We ate the salad together. Florence ate his with a spoon.

"Whoa, Michel. What is the white custard thing? It is unbelievable."

"Yogurt," Richard said.

Florence tasted it again. "This is not yogurt."

"It is. Taste it again."

"Michel. I know what yogurt tastes like."

"No, you just don't know good yogurt." Richard stretched out the word "good." "This is goooooood whole-fat yogurt."

Florence had another bite, and conveyed, unmistakably, that he knew he was being bullshitted and that Richard was an asshole.

I later asked Richard why he didn't tell him.

“And then watch him getting credit for it on his television show, and on his Web site, and his next book? No.”

Chefs do not invent dishes daily. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, the author of *The Physiology of Taste* (1825), the *famous* meditation on eating, compares a new recipe to discovering a star. But here, in Richard’s kitchen, just about every item on the menu was new. And new ones appeared routinely, a bright idea on a Monday morning, a long-term experiment (like his effort to reinvent *pâté-en-croûte*—“Don’t you find the crusts are always soggy?”), or some impromptu innovation done in the spirit of “Why not?”

One afternoon, I overheard Courseille, the pastry chef, mention Marc Veyrat. I knew about Veyrat, the “mountain chef” in the Alps. I had never eaten at his restaurant, though I had tried once when visiting a friend in Geneva, and it was closed.

In Courseille’s description, Veyrat had ghostly transparent skin, wore a black, rimmed Savoyard peasant’s hat even when indoors, a black cape-like shirt, Sgt. Pepper round tinted glasses, had the manner of a seer, and was just awful, utterly terrible to work for. “Rude. Condescending. Treated his cooks like slaves,” Courseille said. “The staff starts at dawn, are given straw baskets and clippers, and told what trails to climb, and what to look for, and then they all go into the mountains—as in the Alps, as in Mont Blanc—and don’t return until their baskets are full. They clean what they gathered. They prep it. *Then* they get ready for the dinner service.”

I thought: He sounds mad. I thought: He sounds perfect.

I also thought: This was the virtue of being in Richard’s kitchen. For the gossip, and the talk, and the visitors. This was how I was going to find where to work in France. In fact, maybe I had just found it.

“Almost no one in the United States knows him,” Courseille continued, “except Jean-Georges”—Jean-Georges Vongerichten, in New York City. “Veyrat came to see him once in New York. They went foraging in Central Park.”

I called Jean-Georges.

“I love Marc,” he said. “He is my spiritual cousin.”

Could he help me reach him?

He wrote an introduction and gave me an e-mail address and a phone number. I was surprised how easy it now seemed: You learn about a figure, you get an introduction. Jessica, my French ventriloquist, wrote a masterpiece letter (I would never again sound so good), respectfully expressing the hope that I might work with him, and off it went.

No reply.

She sent it three times. We phoned. Nothing. I asked Jean-Georges for advice.

“Marc is an unusual man.”

The next day we got an e-mail from an assistant. (Had Jean-Georges intervened?) Marc Veyrat and his *brigade* were looking forward to welcoming me. *Nous vous accueillerons*. The verb, Jessica said, *accueillir*, is important. It is not used casually. It means to welcome you in one’s home. I stared at it. I didn’t try to pronounce it. Did this amount to my having a plan?

I mentioned it to David.

“What a terrible idea.” David once applied for a job there and spent a weekend trailing in the kitchen. “His executive chef cheats at soccer.” Here David paused, giving me the chance to take in the enormity of the claim.

“Wow,” I said.

“Exactly.”

“We’ll think of something,” David said. “I’ll speak to Michel.”

I didn’t dismiss the prospect.

A proposal came soon enough.

Cedric, the chef at Richard’s Central, and David were an unlikely pair. They regularly finished their evenings together in the Citronelle kitchen, drinking a bottle of wine, sometimes until two in the morning (by which time I was the guy drooling with his head on the chef’s table). Cedric was forceful, strong, a large neck, a big chest, a rugby player to David’s quick-twitch soccer hooligan. Also in their relations with Richard: David worked to realize Richard’s will; Cedric fought it. (“Doesn’t Cedric understand I own the restaurant?” Richard asked me once. “Doesn’t Michel understand that these are my *grandmother’s* recipes?” Cedric asked) One night, Cedric and David were telling

me how they met. They had both worked together in northern Burgundy—at La Côte Saint-Jacques, a two-Michelin-star restaurant in the Yonne. It was, in their description, family-run, second-generation, situated on a famous river, with plenty of fish, and on the edge of a forest, with plenty of game, and near legendary vineyards.

I couldn't quite picture where it was, and they tried to locate it for me, in the north of France, and not far from Lyon—

“An hour,” Cedric said.

“No, not an hour. More like three hours,” David said. They stopped. They had the same thought.

“Lyon,” David said.

“Lyon,” Cedric said. “Americans don't get it.”

“It's the gastronomic capital. I'm going to talk to Michel. I am sure he has a friend there, someone.”

Lyon. I hadn't been, except for that one-off bus transfer at dawn, but for the longest time I had wanted to learn about it. In Chianti, when I was at the butcher shop, it was mentioned regularly. It had been a city that Tuscans, at the height of the Italian Renaissance, had virtually appropriated: settling there, selling Italian goods at the city's famous fairs (*les foires*), building themselves mansions. It was also the city where Italians, at least according to Italians, first taught the French how to cook.

The first time I heard this—that French cuisine originated in Italian Renaissance kitchens—I had been in the butcher shop, and it wasn't someone's throwaway provocation, but a chorus of Tuscans, loud, declamatory, and theatrical. I made the mistake of asking them to repeat it—it was too ridiculous. They repeated it, even more loudly, with even more gesticulation.

In practice, the idea wasn't without merit: Namely, in Italy (or the peninsula we now call Italy), from the late 1300s to the early 1600s, grand meals were treated like works of art, orchestrated productions, with many plates and much showing off of the kitchen, a *fiesta*. At the time, the French did not eat this way. But in its telling, the idea could seem pretty cartoonish: that the changes in what we now think of as French cuisine were the doing of the princesslike daughter of the famous Florentine Medici family, Caterina, who, in 1533, at the

age of fourteen, traveled from Tuscany to marry a prince who would become the king of France, whereupon she introduced Italian ingredients and culinary secrets to her subjects. Today people refer to this as the “Catherine de’ Medici myth,” which they cite with much hilarity.

I researched the idea. Not much was written in support of the thesis. Considerably more, however, was written against it. But it wasn’t always persuasive. Some critics didn’t appear to read Italian. Some rarely (or never) alluded to the Italian Renaissance. Many, in my humble opinion, sound more Franco-chauvinistic than scholarly. In any case, the implications were intriguing to consider: that at one point French cuisine did *not* exist, or at least not in a form that we would recognize today; and that then, at another point, it *did*, and that the Italians may have had something to do with its coming into being.

And then, I don’t know, maybe it was farfetched after all, and, besides, I wasn’t sure I had the scholarly equipment—I certainly didn’t have the French—and I abandoned my research. And then, now, here I was: contemplating Lyon.

I called Jean-Georges.

“Lyon is a wonderful city. I cooked there.” He had been a saucier—the person who made the sauces—for Paul Bocuse.

“Lyon is the Ville des Mères, the city of the mothers, the *mère* chefs,” he said. “You don’t know? Since I don’t know how long, a long time, they’ve done the cooking. It is where it all started,” he said. “You really should go to Lyon.”

When I next saw Richard, he was waiting for me at the chef’s table.

“Lyon is perfect,” he said.

Richard went to Lyon often and had a close friend, Jean-Paul Lacombe, another chef who had made the trek to the United States and regarded Richard as an unrecognized deity. “Jean-Paul runs Léon de Lyon. It is a Lyonnais institution. I will get Mel to write him a letter. You have found your restaurant.”

Amid all this, Jessica, a sympathetic soul, who believed what her husband told her, had been planning her family’s future based on two

assumptions—that we would be spending the summer in Paris and that our children would be back by the fall enrolled in some kind of educational institution: i.e., preschool.

Getting your New York offspring into one turned out to be a competitive urban sport, and my wife was a proven competitor. She attended twelve admissions meetings. One was held in a gym with bleachers not large enough to accommodate the applicants, who sat on the floor of a basketball court: The crowd, estimated to be eight hundred, was told that there were fifty-two places. She got our boys not only into that school, but into every other one she applied to (it was very throw-down stuff), and finally settled on an establishment called Jack & Jill, her first choice. She texted me: Could she go ahead and pay the tuition?

Yes, I said. I understood the implications. I was committed to finishing my French training by the fall.

The next morning, Jessica phoned. “Jack & Jill starts on September 16. But the teachers want to meet the boys first, at *our* home, at nine a.m. on the tenth. Will we be back by then?”

“Yes,” I said.

Jessica had been monitoring flights. It was already June. Fares, which had once been reasonable, were now very high. “May I buy us tickets?”

I told her to wait. I had a new plan.

That weekend, we sat on a bench against a wall.

My plan, I said, involves our going to France “as a family” until September and my then staying on afterward “on my own.”

There was a long silence: that is, a really, really long silence.

“You stay on in Paris on your own?” she confirmed finally.

“No.”

“No?”

“I didn’t say Paris.”

“Or wherever, you go to France . . .”

“Lyon. I was thinking that I should go to Lyon. . . .”

“I don’t care where you want to go. You are not going off on your own while I stay behind and put the boys through their first semester of school by myself.”

“I’m not?” I braced myself. She’d had a brutal time with the toddlers.

“No.” She paused. “We’re going together.”