

a view from the **kitchen**by **Scott Plath**

## mvp in the mv

My friend is a chef. He is also a proud father — email address, ChefDad@ — and still happily married after 12 years, despite having worked most nights, weekends and holidays ... forever. More, perhaps, than either husband or wife cares to contemplate.

Here's the thing. My friend is the real deal, a superstar chef like so few others. Unlike me, or most I've hired over 22 years, he is a complete, award-winning, five-star package; right and left brain strong; creative while also able to rock an alarm clock! As "chef-owner," though I have done it all, admittedly I almost never cook. (One angry, former dime-a-dozen "chef" will read this, crush the magazine in his shaky, yet again unemployed hands and shout at the top of his lungs — his head back like Lucy in a Peanuts cartoon: "THEN YOU ARE NOT A FREAKIN' CHEF!") He has an argument. Of course, he always has an argument.)

Mostly, I hire and inspire. Also: research, develop, train and maintain, coordinate, elevate, schedule, budget, analyze, "watch those fries," cost and price, rotate and negotiate. But in terms of actual hands-on combining of textures and colors — with results that tease the palate and dazzle the eyes — well, a man must know his limitations. Better I see it and they shape it. For a career, I've hired those that excel where I fall short. Painfully, true creative geniuses too often flop like flounder when it comes to the ever-crucial, "everything else." As chronicled previously in this column, they medicate much, are prone to mood swings and generally fail to dot I's and cross T's — occasionally barely knowing the difference.

Not this guy.

Chef Robert Jean made me a tuna tartare at Boston's Mistral many years ago (before everyone and their mother was serving tuna tartare) that elicited the extremely weighty: "Whoa." Years later, after he opened Teatro nearby, I savored my first grilled flatbread topped with lettuce (arugula, actually — not technically a lettuce —but, you know, green leafy stuff on pizza) and I was, like, "Wow." The bouquets of floured and lightly charred dough and fresh mozzarella danced with sweet roasted tomatoes, garlic, sea salt ... a symphony of every ingredient all at once and how gloriously simple.

And so began years of regular nudging, baiting, cajoling and light stalking. Over delicious pastas ("*Holy crap*"), salt cured foie

(*"What the ...*), and at the sublime "Sorellina" while Chef gushed over "world class prosciutto produced in America from mangalitsa pigs that feed on chestnuts..." I thought, I gotta get this guy.

*"Um, not to interrupt, Chef, but ... seriously, when are we going to work together?"*

When he revolutionized Italian dining in 2004 at Sorellina — voted Boston's best many times — my wife and I would insist to friends, "A must," as it fast became our favorite restaurant by far. Forever, I will remember the night she savored — eyes closed — the homemade ravioli stuffed with buttery beet puree and, as Chef Jean visited our table, gestured with her head in my direction and declared (too damn close to serious): "I would leave *him*, for this." (Imagine being ditched for a noodle!)

Robert is from Tyngsborough and has longed for a return to his roots while blowing people away in Boston, scoring stars and "Best of" awards like Brady books trips to the Super Bowl. I have teased at charity events and over late-night tequilas: "*You ready?*" Rob has long been the chef that I have wanted to work with. For his integrity, demeanor and remarkable palate. For his passion for cleanliness and ability to manage others. This guy can call you a dummy and make you feel almost grateful for that kick in the ass. Chef teaches his brigade to be more than just hourly employees.

Ask him what accomplishment he is most proud of and he responds without delay, "Helping to influence and inspire success for younger and aspiring chefs." My chef is a friend. After so many years of dumbfounding celebrities and debutantes at the highest level of urban dining, after being invited to the James Beard House, receiving the highest scores Zagat offers and striding alongside the very best, Chef Jean has returned to the Merrimack Valley and now leaves diners speechless in Chelmsford — at Moonstones.

Finally, I can relax a bit more and continue to preserve my own marriage — for *another 26* years.

And maybe, just to play it safe, learn that damn ravioli recipe!

mvm

“  
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