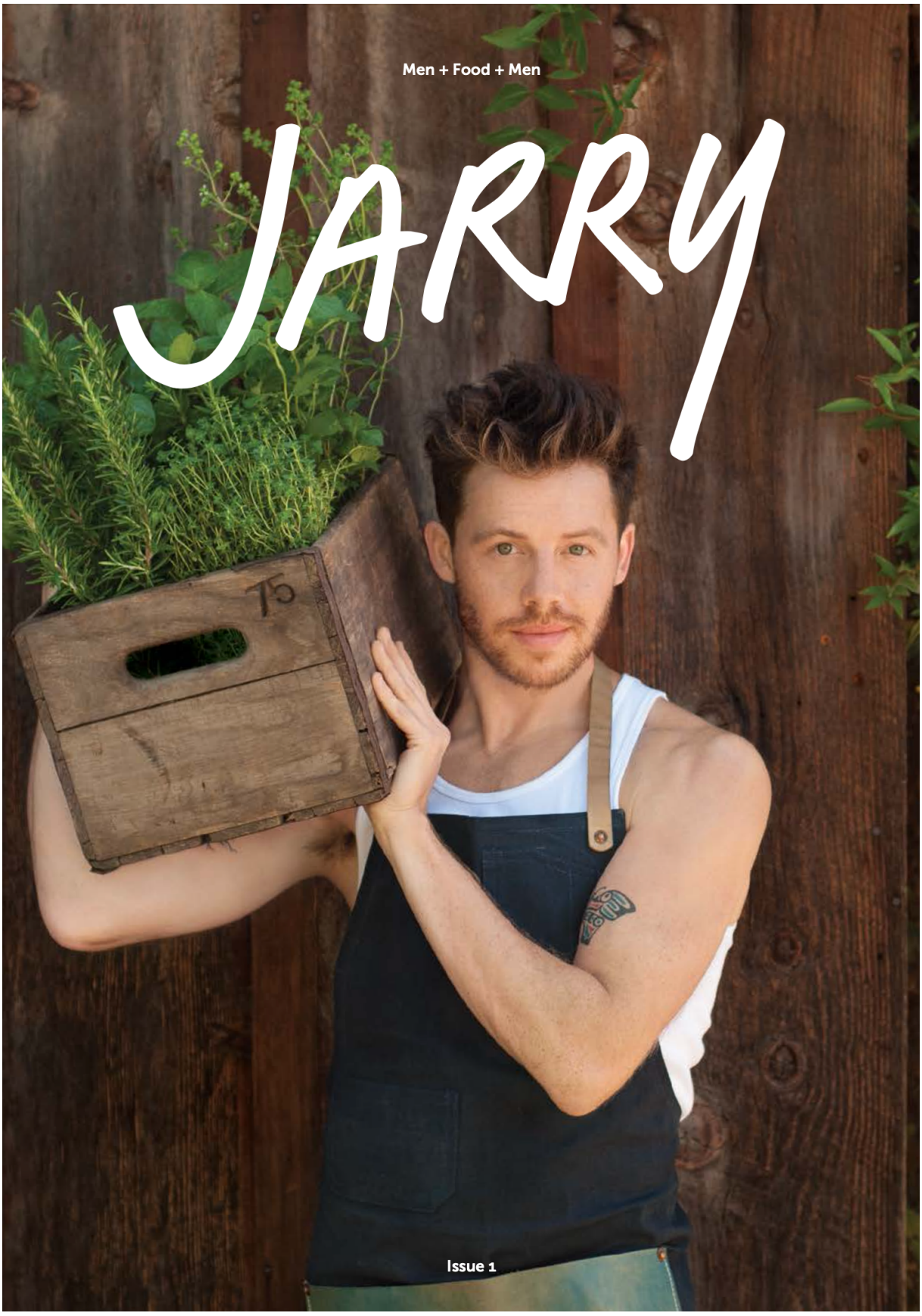
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JARRY
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Straight-Up *Passing*

The State of Queer Chefs in America

This story begins six years ago, as a silence I couldn't stop thinking about.

I cooked, for more than a decade and a half, in restaurants. In 2002 I left the kitchen to chase a food-writing career, and at the end of 2008, got my first gig with teeth, as the first full-time editor of *SF Weekly*'s awkwardly titled restaurant blog, SFoodie. I remember driving to work on the Bay Bridge one morning (I lived in Oakland, still do), gaze toggling from the road to the fog dammed up behind the Golden Gate, over to the gray face of the Ferry Building's tower, with heaving angst in my gut. I thought, *Holy shit*.

The responsibility of covering food in San Francisco weighed on my shoulders like a double-lug crate of asparagus. I wanted to report honestly, in stories that told how it felt to eat here, and why so many cooks with talent had come; still come. Even if nobody knew how to pronounce SFoodie, I was determined they'd know they had to read it.

By spring I was working on an idea: to write and edit a series, a sprawling set of stories timed for Pride month. San Francisco swells and buds in June, breaks out everywhere into the queer utopia so many of us ached to find as teenagers, when we tried to cope in tiny, closed-door bedrooms, in the shitty suburban towns that hated us. I needed to capture that.

I called it "Queer Food Capital," got the *Weekly*'s art director to design the series logo (it was pink and crafty, like a T-shirt you'd potato-block print for your first Dyke March), and planned the stories: the story of Genevieve Callahan and Lou Richardson, the lesbian couple who designed *Sunset* magazine's food coverage in the 1920s, and which still endures; a flip through Lou Rand Hogan's heavily coded artifact of mid-sixties camp, *The Gay Cookbook*.

We'd do reviews of queer-friendly restaurants, bars, and cafes. And, I thought, I'd interview every gay and lesbian chef in the city famous for them. San Francisco was the fog-misted queer Elysium where Stars chef Jeremiah Tower ruled the eighties, looking like he didn't give a fuck about being paparazzo'd with some Russian boy dancer from the touring Bolshoi. It's the city where chef

The kitchen is *not the place* where you want to bust out your glittery **gay cheerleader moves.** The kitchen is a place that *sometimes* makes you want to **hide.**

Elka Gilmore ruled the nineties in San Francisco at the genre-smashing Elka's, mentoring a handful of lesbian cooks who'd go on to launch their own kitchens, on their own terms, and with their own style.

San Francisco was the place where you could be out *and* respected, free to cook beyond some cramped, invisible bistro in the gayborhood, unconfined by pink ghettoes and fear. Gary Danko, of the namesake Michelin-starred restaurant; Jardinière chef Traci Des Jardins; Elizabeth Falkner, the pastry chef who demolished the barrier between savory and sweet: I'd unfurl their stories big as the thirty-foot rainbow flag that whips around the wind in Harvey Milk Plaza.

What was I thinking?

One by one, the chefs I reached out to said no or never got back to me. Traci Des Jardins' publicist called me back, brusqueness sweetened with sympathy. "Traci appreciates what you're trying to do, but chooses not to take part at this time."

"But… "

"She chooses not to take part at this time."

Danko's assistant sounded psyched about the interview opp, but then, thinking I should give her a warning, I mentioned Queer Food Capital. I never heard back.

Maybe it was me, my reputation as a writer, or that I was too green for chefs to trust. I ended up writing two profiles: a lesbian sommelier, and the owner of a hospitality PR firm who told me all about his Yorkies, then fretted over sounding too faggy.

Actually, Elizabeth Falkner did call me back. In her answers, I felt scolded. "I think you have the wrong impression of me and my restaurant," she said (Falkner still had Orson). "I don't just cook for gay people, I cook for everybody. This is not," she said, with an emphasis that made me feel like I'd somehow trashed her skills, "a gay restaurant."

"Well yeah, obviously, I know, but…" I surrendered—doubted my series, thought it was stupid, gave up. Embarrassed that I'd reached out to chefs at all, I clipped my original ambitions down to ten short pieces. My grand queer capital of gastronomy ended up looking more like the Castro on Pink Saturday, six short, safe blocks with eggs Benedict for brunch, cocktails with drag-queen names, and thick, chocolate-coated cookies shaped like hefty-headed dicks.

Oh, well.

Except it kept haunting me, the question that grazed me when my windstorm of rejections was raging. It was why—in a city where the most powerful restaurant critic, Michael Bauer, is openly gay, and where a martyred Harvey Milk made coming out not only a civic virtue but an act of patriotism—why did chefs, especially ones at high-end restaurants, balk at having "gay" or "lesbian" qualifying their accomplishments? What was so limiting, tarnishing, or possibly terrifying about being tagged queer in the kitchen? Why were some chefs afraid to own that?

And then I thought about Jimmy and me back in Chicago, and remembered the fear. The kitchen is not the place where you want to bust out your glittery gay cheerleader moves. The kitchen is a place that sometimes makes you want to hide.

Eileen was a dentist who moved a lot of coke, they said, and lived with her girlfriend in a walled compound on the Near West Side, back in the nineties when that part of Chicago was cheap. A tweaky thrum of paranoia rattled through the restaurant Eileen owned, and where—for a miserable year of my life, after I moved from San Francisco with my boyfriend—I was the chef.

She'd hired these cooks from Durango in Mexico, guys who scared the shit out of me. I was supposed to be their boss, but I couldn't get them to do anything they didn't already want to do. Hector would chop the same size insert of garlic he chopped every day, even if I told him to do less. I'd schedule Roberto for Sunday brunch and he wouldn't show up. When he came in on Monday he didn't apologize, didn't look at me when I yelled and said I'd fire him, just grabbed a sack of Kennebecs and started cutting the fries like nothing had happened.

When I complained to Eileen about them she'd just shrug, stab out her cigarette, and dip her crazy perm back down over the invoices as she lit another. They were good guys, she'd say (I think they were wrapped up, somehow, in Eileen's dealing), and I needed to figure it out.

I started cooking brunch myself.

The only other gay guy I knew at work was this server, Jimmy. He was blond and fragile, in his twenties, a twink trying to stay one forever. Jimmy was sassy and kinetic, constantly moving, blasting Ace of Base when he came in to start his side work, pausing only to land these Mariah Carey bitch-goddess poses. He made a brutal place more bearable. I loved Jimmy. And I watched him get chewed up, all the time.

One day, tripping down the stairs to the dank, craggy prep basement, I saw Jimmy with Roberto and Hector. Roberto behind, grinding on Jimmy through his pants, like he was fucking him. "You like this, *puta*? You want me to fuck your *culo*, *puta*?" Hector was leaned up against a table, laughing. Roberto threw his arms back, leaned his pelvis in to mock-machine-gun-fuck Jimmy's ass.

"Jimmy likes that shit. You like that *verga*, don't you faggot?"

Roberto and Hector didn't even acknowledge me. I looked at Jimmy's face, twisted to the side, eyes finding mine, but instead of rage or panic I saw a blank, bored-looking kind of acceptance, tongue stuck out in a lackluster mime of passion. And then, slowly, Jimmy raised his hands to frame his face, middle fingers cocked in a fuck-you double salute directed straight at me.

Jimmy's message was clear: *Don't you even judge me, bitch.*

I felt more troubled by what I was seeing than anything else that happened in Eileen's restaurant, and that's saying a lot. But how could I judge Jimmy? Me, I could pass for straight if I had to, but that wasn't an option for Jimmy, even if he wanted to. His way was the way of the queer man, everywhere and forever: playing along, being an accessory to your own powerlessness, acting the little bitch they want you to be.

After that, things weren't so easy for Jimmy and me. In a weird way, I think he judged me for passing. If anybody asked (like Natalie, a lesbian single mom who worked sauté on weekends) I'd talk about my boyfriend—nobody could accuse me of being in the closet. I just wouldn't offer up any signals, not at work. Not around these assholes I was supposed to be supervising.

Jimmy started teasing me about my bland clothes. He wore tight pants, buttoned-up Benetton polos, a pair of long, shrew-nosed Prada loafers he got secondhand. I'd change out of my cook's whites at the end of the night, pass through the pantry, past Eileen and her girlfriend smoking at the bar, and Jimmy'd shade me for dressing like I shopped at the Gap outlet, which I pretty much did.

"Anybody feel a draft in here?" he might say, scanning me up and down, from my baggy jeans to the plaid collar poked up around the rib-knit margin of my bulky heathered sweater. "Maybe there's a *GAP* in the window. Someone better go close that."

I knew what he was doing. Jimmy was calling me out for trying to pass, keeping

my shit underground, like a coward. Hiding in plain sight. Cloaked in fleece.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

Jeremiah Tower erupts, throwing up his hands like he's physically blocking my question, across the jagged mosaic tabletop in the cool back room of a house that retreats deep, far from the blazing street. "Nah, I'm not getting into that."

It's October 2014. I'm in the Yucatan—at the house in Merida where friends are letting him stay—to interview Tower, the seventy-two-year-old chef who cooked at Chez Panisse in early days, and opened the now almost mythical San Francisco brasserie Stars in 1984.

Tower—tall, still beautiful in a gracefully weathered way, with stately cheekbones and soft, gray eyes—is a man who never seemed to hide his boyfriends. The scene around Chez Panisse in the early 1970s resembled a big bi fuckfest, where you were never very far from drugs, Champagne, and Berkeley-English-major bussers who'd get naked and high and want to quote Anaïs Nin while you blew them. Tower and Alice Waters briefly dated (or whatever you call an intense romantic connection that included sex), then had a major falling out, in part because both were sleeping with the same dude.

At Stars in the 1980s, Tower's public persona achieved operatic status. His taste-making, physical presence, and cultivated aura of old-money refinement, burned onto the cocaine-and-Chardonnay hedonism he personified, made Tower, himself, a star. Along with Wolfgang Puck, he was America's first celebrity chef. And he was publicly gay.

"Could I prove it in a court of law?" Tower asks, across the jagged mosaic, flashing his legendary self-confidence. "Not really, but I'm certain that I was the only famous gay chef in America."

And while Tower made being gay look easy—even elegant—slipping into Zuni Café with his boyfriend (and publicist) Arthur Gallego for late suppers after Stars, it was actually kind of brutal.

The 1980s and early nineties were a time of big public fundraisers, when famous chefs from all over the country would converge on New York City or Santa Monica to cook expensive galas. Tower was a natural, alongside the most famous chefs of the day: Puck, Jonathan Waxman, Larry Forgione, Bradley Ogden. But it wasn't easy.

"When you're out drinking after the event," Tower says, "all the jokes are macho straight jokes," even if (or maybe, in part, because) they know you're gay. Less famous chefs resented him; he knew what they said about him privately.

"There was like, 'How could he be so famous and gay?'" Tower says. "Or, 'What did he do to deserve that? He's gay.'" No matter how famous or accomplished you got, there were still people who considered you a little bitch, like Jimmy. You had to be tougher than your critics. Look like the badass who didn't care, even if you were a badass in an Armani blazer, with a silk pocket poof.

"There were two Jeremiah Towers," he says, "Jeremiah Tower, Inc., and me. That publicity stiff was all business, to get people to come to the restaurant." All that being spotted out, at Zuni, with a mention next day in Herb Caen, the influential columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*—it was calculated. It flattered San Francisco's notion of itself as this glittering, cosmopolitan place, where the most famous chef could be a handsome, well-dressed, white, Harvard-educated homosexual.

A handsome, well-dressed, white, Harvard-educated homosexual without—and this is a critical point—any messy queer political agenda.

Tower's critics in the ranks of San Francisco's queer activists thought he wore his gayness like he wore his famous red-rimmed Ray Bans: a personal accessory, something to flaunt when he felt like it. ACT UP didn't give a fuck about Tower normalizing homosexuality in front of the cameras at Stars with a flute of vintage Veuve in his hand, greeting Mr. International Gay Rodeo at one table and the city's richest and most powerful socialite at the next. They expected Tower to use his celebrity to fight AIDS. *Demanded* that he do it.

And while Tower did organize a big society AIDS fundraiser in San Francisco, his downfall came, in part, after a wrongful termination lawsuit he lost—a server at Stars who was suffering from AIDS had been fired. Tower said it was because he was a terrible waiter, not because he was sick, but a jury held Stars culpable. Caen's column blasted Tower, and one by one the socialites defected. Tower lost the support of the straight and powerful, even as he'd lost the support of the gay and powerful, and Stars eventually crumbled. People would confront Tower and his boyfriend when they rolled into Zuni.

Tower was both too gay, and not gay enough. Well, San Francisco's politics have always been tortured. No wonder I didn't get any takers for mayor of Queer Food Capital.

"Sexuality for me is not political," Tower says, not long before I click my laptop closed and we leave for lunch. "It's private. Screaming in the street is not my style. Fucking shut up about it."

Tower means the queer activists, but what if he's also talking to me? What if I should just fucking shut up about it? Like I said, this story started with my own desire—my own need, maybe—to find some thread of connection with gay and lesbian cooks, people who survived years of taking shit on the line, the gay slurs and misogyny, of being somebody's Jimmy. But what if chefs refused to fucking shut up about it? Are there queer chefs refusing to shut up about it in their food? Refusing to apologize?

"Sorry, John." David Nayfeld is on the phone from Los Angeles. "The guys did not want me to put their name up for it. This one buddy of mine," Nayfeld says, "was kind of like, 'I don't know if I want to be known as the gay chef.'"

Nayfeld used to be a sous chef at Eleven Madison Park in New York City, and was the opening chef of Fifty Seven in LA. He is not gay. Last year I reached out to see if Nayfeld could scout queer chefs who work in high-end places, guys he knows who might want to talk to me.

Surprise, surprise: He struck out.

There are chefs, of course, who look comfortable being out and open. Susan Feniger. Suvir Saran. Art Smith. But they're established, comfortable in their careers. They've been around. I was hoping Nayfeld could recruit some younger sources, chefs just coming up, working in that most regulated, militaristic, and testosterone-jacked segment of the restaurant industry: fine dining.

> But *what if* chefs **refused** to fucking **shut up** about it? *Are there* **queer chefs** *refusing* to shut up about it in their **food**?

Fancy restaurants run on the engines of a hierarchy welded in the nineteenth century, with a discipline as precise as the one that propelled the armies of the Franco-Prussian War. There's a commander—the chef—whose supremacy is buttressed along the descending flanks of an organizational tower: chef de cuisine, sous chef, chef de partie, etc. You step out of line, voice an opinion when nobody asks, or complain when someone whose rank is above yours called you a cock-sucking faggot and you find yourself in some de facto brig of ostracism and disappearing shifts.

As a green cook you already get enough scars in the kitchen. Why would anybody volunteer for more by pulling out a fucking bullhorn, talk some Harvey Milk bullshit about homophobia in the workplace? You want to get through it, learn what you can, and hope to someday

be the chef of your own brigade, in your own restaurant.

"When you work hard and finally get somewhere," says Jim Christiansen, the openly gay chef at Heyday in Minneapolis, and a *Food & Wine* 2015 Best New Chef who *was* open to talking, "you have that thing like, 'Don't fuck with me.'"

It's the coming up part—the grind to get where Christiansen is—that can be harder when you're gay.

Johnny Maher is the chef and owner of The Rogue Gentlemen, a restaurant in Richmond, Virginia. Maher went to school at Johnson & Wales in Rhode Island, then nailed an internship at The French Laundry in Napa. Being gay at a famously disciplined three-star place wasn't this huge source of trauma for Maher. It just opened another avenue for pressure to come find you.

There were nights after his shift at The French Laundry, unwinding over beers with another gay cook, when Maher wanted to cry. He says it would've been good to have a queer mentor, to help deal with what he calls the stress and the bullshit, the little cuts from casual slurs and micro-aggressions. "More of a public figure," he says. Somebody who wasn't hiding.

Later, when Maher cooked in San Francisco, he looked for a social network of other gay chefs. He didn't find anything—there's a pretty strong informal one for lesbians, but not for queer boys.

"It's really different," Maher says, "the boys' world in the kitchen."

Yigit Pura, a pastry chef in San Francisco, owner of Tout Sweet Pâtisserie and the author of *Sweet Alchemy: Dessert Magic*, had to brawl on the battlefield of fancy Manhattan restaurants to protect his right to establish that world. It was ten years ago, when Pura was in the pastry department at Daniel.

"One of the cooks over on the savory side was this big French guy," Pura says. "He'd always say homophobic shit to me, he would pick on my staff all the time.

"I was juicing pure ginger juice—if you've ever tried that you know that if you even drink a tiny bit it burns," Pura says. "I probably had a few quarts in front of me, and I saw this French guy picking on someone on my staff, somebody who's gay. I said, 'Fuck this.' I took some ginger juice and put food coloring in it. I went over and said, 'Stéphane, you have such a great palate, can you taste this saffron infusion for me?' He drank it and was on the floor crying—he gasped for air for like half an hour. Sure enough," Pura says, "he never did that shit in front of me again."

Sometimes, in a system where you pretty much have to fight for yourself on your own, you need to make the assholes cry, the ones who made *you* cry. Send the message: Push a faggot, faggot will push you back.

But look, says Pichet Ong, a gay pastry chef in New York City who got his start in San Francisco in the early 1990s: Queers don't have a lock on taking shit in restaurants. "When you walked into a kitchen with an Asian face back then it was very unusual," Ong says.

"Homophobia, people calling names—it was very common back then. The culinary culture has never been politically correct, or intellectual. It's always been kind of brutal. Making fun of Latinos, Asians, gays, weaker people—it was the norm." That thing about not wanting to bear some stigma of being a queer chef: Ong says nobody in this business wants to be pegged as any kind of outsider, not if they can help it. It might make potential investors nervous.

"It's still easier," says Ong, who's opened several businesses in his career, "for a white, straight, male chef to get investors, and after that straight women, and then gay women." Out, vocal gay men hardly even rate. Maybe, if you can pass for straight—if pretty much only gay people, consumers of LGBT media, know you're gay but you don't make a point of calling it out to a general audience. Maybe it's better, in the end, to pass, if you can. And in the privacy of the back of the house, refuse to be anybody's bitch, but still: Keep things to yourself, like it's nobody's business what you are, or who you clutch at night.

"I think," says Clark Frasier, who in 1988 founded The Arrows restaurant in Ogunquit, Maine, with his co-chef and

life partner Mark Gaier, "if you look at TV, at all the shows that everybody worships, cooking and our industry—our profession—is still an intensely competitive, macho thing." Frasier and Gaier themselves competed as a gay couple, on Season Four of *Top Chef Masters*, which aired in 2012 on queer-friendly Bravo. The experience did nothing to temper Frasier's view of television as a medium that loves to hype straight, fist-bumping chef-bros who walk with ball-hang swagger.

And this, ironically, at a time when upscale American food has never been so expressive.

The same season of *Top Chef Masters* that sent Frasier and Gaier packing in the early rounds ended with San Francisco chef Chris Cosentino cooking love letters to his wife, Tatiana Graf.

"The challenge from the Bravo producers," says Cosentino, who ended up winning, "was to cook four dishes that each represented a letter: a thank you letter, an apology letter, a love letter, and one to ourselves." Cosentino addressed two dishes to Graf, one to say he was sorry, and another to express his love—beef heart tartare with foie gras and puffed tendon.

"I put my heart on the plate," he says.

That's not uncommon these days, when a lot of high-end tasting menus unfold as personal narratives—impressions of landscapes, seasonal mood pieces, even flashes of autobiography. It's how a fine-dining chef like Dominique Crenn of Atelier Crenn in San Francisco thinks.

In the Spring 2012 issue of *Lucky Peach*, writer Karen Leibowitz describes a dinner at Atelier Crenn as an intimate thing, courses resonating like chords from tuning forks, expressing the chef's past (her childhood in Brittany, or a walk in the woods), even her heart. "At Atelier Crenn," Leibowitz writes, "food is offered up as a tactile poem that registers both emotionally and intellectually, though personal expression is primary."

But when I call Crenn, who describes herself as someone who dates women, to ask if she ever thinks about expressing her love for her partner in her cooking, I feel like she's scolding me, like it's absurd to suggest she'd express her sexuality in food.

"Sex is extremely personal," she says. "How would I even do it?" she asks, only I get the feeling she's querying herself as much as to me. "That my food would become political in some way?"

She tells me my question is a terrible one, that I should be writing about how tough it is to be a woman in fine-dining kitchens. "That's the story you should be writing."

David Lebovitz wants to make sure I'm hearing him, despite cell-phone coverage that keeps dissolving into evil static.

"I don't like to be portrayed as a gay chef because that has nothing to do with myself as a cook," Lebovitz says from Paris. He says he cringes when he reads articles about women chefs, ones that call them out specifically as females, that seem to qualify their accomplishments with a gender descriptor, "so I never identify myself as a gay chef because it doesn't matter to me."

Lebovitz started working in the pastry department at Chez Panisse in the 1980s, when Jeremiah Tower was in his prime, across San Francisco Bay at Stars. Since 1999 Lebovitz has authored books (his latest is *My Paris Kitchen*), and a popular food blog, Living the Sweet Life in Paris, where he's developed recipes for two decades.

"You could say, 'Oh, you should fight for visibility,' but I write about my boyfriend on my blog," Lebovitz says, then again so he makes sure I hear him: *It's on my blog*. "I don't hide from it," he says, "it's just a part of my life. It's not a part of my job description."

I hear this over and over, talking to queer chefs: Being gay is a relatively small part of who they are, like having brown eyes or hating *Game of Thrones*. I get it. I don't want to be known as a gay food writer, specifically—to have that stick in the minds of editors who'd maybe peg me for certain assignments only, limit me. I just want to be able to write what I want to, traverse the range of my interests.

But I'm also aware that my experience of being gay has somehow shaped

everything I do. From middle school, when I wrote "I love Ricky Vega" on a piece of paper a dozen times and then burned it in a panic, terrified somebody would find it, to my wedding, a decade before same-sex marriage was legal in America, abandoned by some of the people I loved most. The rejection still stings, the ashes of that crush note to Ricky Vega are scattered through all my work, smudging the margins of every page I write.

For gay and lesbian chefs, coming up in kitchens that despised them, or merely treated them with mild disdain, how much has the experience shaped them, in ways they don't even realize? Anita Lo, chef at Annisa in New York City, first-generation Chinese-American, doesn't feel like being a lesbian consciously influences her work, but acknowledges that it could. "One could argue that me growing up as an outsider on so many levels—mostly cultural—has set the stage for me to look at culture and food outside of the box," she says. "One could argue."

From the outside, David Lebovitz's expat narrative is the quintessential gay story: You unhook yourself from the existence you knew in order to live your life on your own terms, in the service of creating beauty and meaning. You make your own family. Maybe being gay *is* an essential part of Lebovitz's job description, only he's too close to it to see.

And anyway, what if, instead of "gay" or "lesbian" next to a chef's name being a limiting thing, what if the opposite is true? What if it gave us the freedom to be untethered, unafraid to be ourselves? What if it gave cooks who aren't queer a freedom to be more expressive? What if it moved cooking forward? If we were in solidarity with straight chefs like Roy Choi or James Syhabout, finding meaning by digging deep into themselves, their personal histories, no matter how scarred or imperfect they might seem from the outside.

In a piece for *Lucky Peach*, I wrote about the influence three closeted gay food writers had on American food in the mid-twentieth century. James Beard, Craig Claiborne, and Richard Olney freed American cooking from necessity, converted if from the grayscale of blandness, expediency, and soulless thrift into four-color glory.

I remember hearing Armisted Maupin on NPR once, saying that the tragedy of gays and lesbians being shut out of mainstream movie making is the stories we've lost. Even small stories, from voices we'd never heard, grounding us to a familiar humanity in ways we couldn't have predicted and will never know.

I think of food that way—as a galaxy of potential stories, some we get to see, others we'll never be aware of. A piece of food writing I love is "The Imaginary Meal" by James Patterson. A friend of Patterson's—a mentor—has a serious illness, and as the chef realizes she will die, he wonders what he'd cook for her to express the sweep and depth of their connection. "How could I compress fifteen years of emotions into a few small plates of food?" Patterson writes. "How could I say goodbye?"

She dies before Patterson can even try. What happens to the dinners we never get to cook? The stories we never get to tell?

Preeti Mistry sets her empty pint glass down on the table in her restaurant that, so far tonight, has no customers. Well, it's early, still light enough to see the lush pink paisley of Juhu Beach Club's wallpaper frame Mistry's tight black fauxhawk.

Mistry grew up in London and Ohio, daughter of parents born in India, and

What happens **to the dinners we never get to cook? The *stories* we never get to tell?**

went back to England for chef school before coming to San Francisco. Two years ago, she and her wife Ann opened Juhu in my neighborhood in north Oakland (which is also where they live). She's become a friend.

Over beers, I tell her about the story I'm writing, mentioning the chefs I've talked to, searching for an ending. "See," she says, "most of the people you just talked about are white, and every one is passing." She doesn't mean passing in the active sense, but straight-seeming enough—like me—to live with the general assumption we're straight.

"Unless you're in the know," Mistry says, "or have some level of gaydar, how would you know that they're even queer?"

There's no risk of this with Mistry. "Last week there was this table of Indians here from London," she says. "They asked to talk with the chef, and when I came out they were, 'Where's this Chef Preeti Mistry listed here on the menu?' I was wearing a pretty tight T-shirt, and they were, 'Oh, you're a woman?' They would rather think I'm a young man with moobs than an Indian woman with a mohawk and tattoos."

For Mistry, being a lesbian isn't some sentence—a fun fact—in the "Personal Life" section of her Wiki-bio. Being a brown-skinned, punked-out, tight T-shirted Indian-American who cooks *chaat*—Indian street food—in a modern vernacular is intrinsic to her identity. No downplaying, no minimizing. No hiding in plain sight.

"Maybe for some chefs it doesn't matter, they can choose, but I can't. Look at me," she says. "I don't have a choice and I've never had one, so I'm just gonna own that.

"There is clearly a hierarchy, a system, in this industry," Mistry says. "When you talk about the James Beard Awards and Michelin—I don't subscribe to that. I don't look for validation in those things. I wasn't so successful in the traditional restaurant environment. My time in those kinds of restaurants was so short because I was like, 'I can't fucking stand this,' fine dining—it wasn't an environment that motivated me, because it's not an environment that ever supported me. It's like the military."

Just like Clark Frasier and Mark Gaier in Maine, Mistry's solution included taking a drive down the road of self-exile, to a place where nobody can call you a dyke or a faggot.

Of course, not everybody needs to take that trip. I think about Jim Christiansen in Minneapolis, saying it's not that big of a deal to be gay, to have his husband come to the restaurant and hang out. Then I think of all the other gay and lesbian chefs who didn't even respond to my calls and emails about being interviewed for this story.

If the culture of the kitchen won't change to make you feel cool about being there, it might be on you to change things, in your own place, with a mohawk and tattoos. And not hiding, banishing fear from the place you work has a way of affecting everything.

"The people who took a chance on me saw past what I looked like," Mistry says, "so it's important to me that people who wouldn't succeed in the traditional restaurant get a chance here. LGBT, hue, safe space: If that's where you fall, this is where you can get a job and not get harassed."

She points her chin to the cooking line, where a Latino guy in a ball cap is setting up the sauté station. She says when he started, he'd make the noises a lot of macho guys who cook in restaurants make, scoping out hot women, making comments.

"He would be staring at a customer," Mistry says, "and I'd be like, 'Dude, you're creepy.' After a while he stopped. Being here, cooking with mostly women, he's just a sweet fucking kid who's twenty-six and has two kids and used to be in a gang. Now he wants to talk to me about how sad it is because of the earthquake in Nepal."

You can use transparency—visibility—to change the culture of the kitchen, even a forty-five-seat modern Indian place like Mistry's, sharing a strip-mall lot with a check-cashing place and a shitty taqueria, near the freeway in north Oakland. Not exactly the grandeur of the queer food capital I'd imagined, but it feels like home. ///