
BACK OF THE HOUSE

LIFE IN THE HOTPOT

BY TOBEY NEMETH



I am the chef at Jamie Kennedy Wine Bar – an amazing, dynamic, extremely busy restaurant in the heart of Toronto. I like to imagine it as the jewel in the crown of Jamie’s empire.

Jamie Kennedy has long been the darling of the food scene in Toronto – a strong advocate for the democratization of gastronomy, and for supporting artisan food producers and local growers. I have worked for him for four years. It’s tough sometimes to work for a celebrity chef. Paul Bocuse, the granddaddy of all celebrity chefs, was once asked “Who cooks in your kitchen when you’re away?” He responded, “The same person who cooks when I’m there.”

I sometimes get frustrated with the general public’s notion that Jamie creates all the food in the Wine Bar. People like to imagine that Jamie himself is behind the stoves, writing the

menus, making all the preserves and picking the vegetables. How could one person do all that anyway? Jamie oversees two busy restaurants, a booming catering business, and is currently in the process of developing a vineyard and restaurant in Prince Edward County, where he now lives full time with his family. After a long and successful career, I believe you earn the right to step back and enjoy the fruits of your work. (Despite this, Jamie stills works crazy hours – catering events himself, helping in the kitchen to bone three hundred Cornish hens, fixing the ovens – whatever we need help with.)

Jamie is generally a great boss. I feel very lucky for the relationship I have with him – there is mutual trust and respect, with Jamie knowing that I will always respect and follow the parameters of his style and beliefs.

At the Wine Bar, I write the menus. And I create the food – together with my amazingly gifted sous-chef, Sharon, and our talented, hard-working staff. We produce everything ourselves – from the bacon and the corned beef brisket to the sourdough bread.

We are constantly discussing and debating the merits of various ingredients, techniques and flavours. The intuitive sense of how to pair and combine ingredients and textures comes naturally after years in the kitchen, made easier when faced with the immense array of exquisite goods that comes through our doors. The ingredients are always the stars in the Wine Bar, along with the farmers and artisans who grow the vegetables, raise the animals and make the cheese, vinegars and oils we use.

I grew up in Toronto in a household devoid of processed food, soft drinks and junk food. My mom made granola from scratch for breakfast, and by the age of four I was helping my nana to bread schnitzel, too short to even see the top of the counter. Like many people, the best memories I have are of food: goulash made by Nana, whole fish fresh out of the water and grilled at a beachside restaurant when I lived in Thailand, freshly baked bread slathered with butter and honey. These are the memories I strive to give my customers. I love when they devour a plate, go home to dream about the food and then return, seeking that same feeling all over again.

I cringe a bit when I think back on how I started in this business, how naïve I was. After I graduated from George Brown in 1998, the first restaurant job I had was at the Docks, where we served about nine hundred covers a day. The orders used to snake back in an ominous pile on the floor. We made bruschetta topping and Caesar dressing by the 16-litre pail. It was my first taste of the kitchen, and I was hooked.

Another stop on my path was Avalon, under the rigid, unyielding direction of Chris McDonald (long feared, yet revered as one of the best chefs in the country). I remember my first day there – I can still feel the knots in my stomach! I tried to grasp all the different olive oils, salts, spices and foreign ingredients. No mistakes were tolerated. Chris wrote the menu every day, and Lord help you if you confused which vinegar, herb and oil seasoned the trio of fish tartares.

My second day there, the PacoJet (a very expensive high-tech Italian ice cream machine) broke down while I was using it. Assuming I was to blame (actually, the belt had broken – nothing to do with me), he screamed, “Are you stupid or just lazy?” because I had not read the manual before using it. He was obsessed with china, and had an amazing collection of exqui-

site bone china and porcelain plates. Each dish on the menu would be designed to go on a specific piece, and again, God help you if you made a mistake!

All drama aside, Chris ran the ideal kitchen, and I will always hold it in the highest regard. The level of care, creativity, precision and perfection in that kitchen is something that most chefs only dream of achieving. It was the best learning experience possible.

Many people have an image of a restaurant kitchen in their minds – a whirling tornado of commotion – chefs wielding pans, yelling torrents of abuse, foul language, alcoholism, drug abuse, torrid affairs (I met my partner, Mike, while working in the kitchen). Sometimes this may ring a bit true. A vivid image I carry with me is of a very angry chef whipping a whole bone-in pork shoulder against the back of his stove.

This is a world where women are still very much in the minority, a world of immense – and necessary – egos, volatile artists, workaholic junkies, relentless competition, and drama. And we are addicts – particularly for the adulation. For anyone who has ever hosted a dinner party, imagine one multiplied by hundreds of guests a night. No one is ever more popular than the cook!

People really have no idea what goes on in restaurant kitchens. I love the open kitchen at the Wine Bar, because it allows people a brief window into the reality of it all. Our customers are often surprised to realize how many people are involved in preparing their meals.

I enjoy telling them about the farmers who work seven days a week for most of the year and who drive hours to make deliveries to our back door. One of our growers, Dianne Kretschmar from Grenville Farms in Muskoka, works her farm with only one other woman to help her. She grows the most amazing let-



Photograph: Laura Berman

tuces, tomatoes (the best I have ever eaten), radishes, turnips and beans. Ruth, her right hand, is in her seventies and makes the 6-hour round-trip delivery run to Toronto every Tuesday. One day in October she told me about how they'd been up all night painstakingly covering up the lettuces with tarps because there had been a frost warning. They wore miners' lamps on their foreheads and for hours lovingly blanketed all the lettuces against the cold – this after an already impossibly long day. It's so important for our customers and for our cooks to feel that connection – how personal, emotional, and meaningful it is to know where and how your food was grown.

The idea of being a cook or a chef has become almost fashionable lately, and I come across many young cooks coming fresh out of chef school with no concept of how difficult kitchen work really is. It takes years of hard, devoted work to get to the point of running your own kitchen, to learn how to respect your ingredients, minimize waste, manage staff, design successful, profitable menus. It's all about slugging it out on the hot line, working 14-hour days without sitting down, taping up bad cuts with duct tape (yes – this is what we do), feeling the incredible rush of adrenalin at the end of a great service.

When I worked at Avalon, a car hit me while I was riding my bike home. I went back to work with my arm immobilized, strapped to my body, painkillers numbing me enough to get through a 12-hour day. I did everything with my right arm (I'm left-handed). At the same time, our grill cook fell while rollerblading and broke her wrist. She was back at work the same day it happened, a cast on her arm and a grim smile on her face. Two of us in that same state in the kitchen! It would never occur to a cook not to work. My partner Mike (the insanely talented and amazing chef at Niagara Street Café) got a bad electrical shock one night in the kitchen. The jolt was forceful enough to throw him against the oven, causing his shoulder to become dislocated. He kept working.

It's hard to capture the reality of the kitchen, but if someone could, it would make the best reality show ever. This may sound crazy to some people, but we are a crazy bunch. People who feed off intensity, pressure, stress, and a constant stream of creativity are drawn to this business. It is certainly not for the faint of heart.

My standard sit-down speech to the dewy-eyed apprenticeship hopefuls who come to JK includes many warnings to have your eyes open. You need to have a thick skin. Many chefs can be pretty harsh when you're starting out, and you have to be ready to take a bit of abuse. You rarely ever stop working either – sitting down is not something that happens until the end of the night when you can finally take your shoes off. The workday can be anywhere from ten to eighteen hours long, and the work week is often longer than five days. It's boiling hot in the summer, so cold in the winter that going into the walk-in fridges is torture. It is not uncommon to go the whole day



without eating. We usually prepare a meal for the wait-staff, but in most fine-dining restaurants there isn't even a spare minute for the cooks to stop and eat.

No time off on holidays, either. The busiest times of the year in the restaurant industry are Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Christmastime and New Year's. Asking for extra days off is frowned upon, as is the idea of sick days. It can make it tough to maintain a relationship or any kind of extracurricular activity.

But we know what we're doing when we sign up for this, and we love every minute of it. Cooking is an act of love – in a restaurant or at home. So next time you go out to eat, check out the kitchen and the maniacs working in it and strike up a conversation. I'm sure they'll have some great stories to tell. □

Several years of good living and excessive eating in Southeast Asia led to a life-changing decision to become a cook. After completing her chef's training at George Brown College, Tobey Nemeth spent several years working her way up the ladder in several superb Toronto restaurants, most notably with the Rubino brothers and Lorenzo Loseto at Zoom, and with Chris McDonald at Avalon. She began working for Jamie Kennedy in February 2004, and has been with him ever since. She is currently the chef de cuisine at Jamie Kennedy Wine Bar.