

MICHAEL VOLTAGGIO

Food Comes First at Hollywood Eatery ink.

WRITTEN BY N.P. TRAIN PHOTOGRAPHED BY MICHAEL TIGHE

"IT WAS FUCKING SCARY, DUDE." MICHAEL VOLTAGGIO REPEATS HIMSELF FOR effect, wide-eyed. He's just answered whether running the business side of his first restaurant during its inaugural year was, you know, fun? Suffice to say, working for 18 years in the kitchen, opening a restaurant with internationally renowned culinary innovator José Andrés, and winning Season 6 of Bravo's *Top Chef* all seems like a cakewalk compared to when Voltaggio made himself CEO of his Los Angeles restaurant, ink.

"Everything that could have gone wrong, went wrong," Voltaggio says. From neighbor harassment to accounting issues to tweaking the business plan, Voltaggio admits with earnest candor that his restaurant lost \$30,000 in the first month.

It wasn't as if the restaurant plan was a modest proposal. ink's Hollywood address is nestled in between the storefronts of fashion heavyweights Alexander McQueen, Diane von Furstenberg, and Marc Jacobs. Not only does ink maintain a façade alongside the ultra-fashionable, but, as Voltaggio succinctly describes his rent, "Every month I start \$20,000 behind."

Taking a crash course in business and building your own super-trendy restaurant while losing tens of thousands of dollars might not induce much sympathy these days, but, in Voltaggio's recounting of the last 10 months, you have to appreciate that he isn't cutting himself any slack. Voltaggio mentions that though he has done just about everything to get ink off the ground, including plumbing, he still feels growing pains. "It took me a year just to figure out how to make a restaurant; it'll take me another year to get it right," he quips.

Voltaggio says that business at ink is now stable; he tells me he has finally built a steady base of regulars who love him back. ink's dishes center on ingredients like Berkshire ham, beef tartare, pork belly, halibut, and lamb shoulder; the kind of hearty and solid food a lumberjack might feast upon, yet Voltaggio's obsessively fastidious preparation, pairings, and presentation make the dishes refined enough for a duchess. The egg yolk gnocchi is rich and pillowy, the cuttlefish with green papaya and flowers is arranged so beautifully that it could substitute for the floral centerpieces at a lavish wedding, and the duck rilette with scallion pancakes and cherries could compose the makings of a delicious post-bike ride picnic in the south of France.

These robust dishes have their roots in ink's overriding concepts: Voltaggio, as a rule, strives to make dishes that allude to an idea of permanence and the creation of a memory. Voltaggio calls cooking his "craft," much in the way an actor would describe his vocation. Voltaggio is thrilled to place his legacy within the ranks of what he calls the city's "underground creative culture" of musicians, actors, and entertainers. "We're all struggling artists here," Voltaggio says. "That's the L.A. I love."

And just like that, Voltaggio seamlessly distinguishes the brand of his intense and fastidious cooking-as-art from his life as a celebrity. He only refers to himself as a "celebrity" using air quotes. He shakes his head when he hears about the headlines that call him a "bad boy" chef. He irritably remarks: "I just don't know why it matters." It's the food that's important, not his oft-scrutinized appearance (or behavior).

However, "Michael Voltaggio," the brand, is not shying away from the fray of publicity. Last year, Voltaggio used *The Los Angeles Times* to bristle back at a *New York Times* article asserting that his breed of celebrity chefs have "coasted into culinary fame, less by grueling dues-paying, and more on their telegenic brand." Voltaggio responded: "I'm truly insulted by this; I have mentally and physically given myself to my craft."

Voltaggio isn't obsessing over his image; he just can't help it that he's obsessed with cooking.

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