



Photographs by EMILY SHOR

Written by LAURIE WINER



cook ~~x~~ **Unstated**

SELF-TAUGHT AND TEMPERAMENTAL, **michael voltaggio** HAD MADE A NAME FOR HIMSELF AS A **MASTER OF MOLECULAR GASTRONOMY** BEFORE WINNING **TOP CHEF** TWO YEARS AGO. WHAT HE LACKED WAS A PLACE OF HIS OWN. WITH VOLTAGGIO'S **FIRST RESTAURANT** DEBUTING THIS SPRING, A SECOND ONE SLATED TO OPEN LATER IN THE YEAR, AND L.A.'S

FOOD WORLD AT THE READY, THE **young toque** STEPS INTO THE FIRE

On a January Day

that we in Los Angeles consider cold, Michael Voltaggio stands in the future dining room of a new restaurant. Ginger blond hair escapes from his black knit cap onto a pale, serious face; a sweatshirt hides the tattoos that run up and down his arms. The 32-year-old chef is at present focused on the concept of authenticity, and he has nonnegotiable ideas about what is real and what is phony. Riding the crest of one kind of success and approaching the precipice of another, he is engaged in the construction not just of this room but of his aesthetic, though he would never put it that way. He distrusts verbiage. Asked why he is obsessed with the *tres leches* cake at the restaurant Animal, for instance, Voltaggio says, "It tastes good." Asked what makes his cooking stand out from the current pack of young chefs, he says, "Salt."

Standing in the restaurant, Voltaggio holds a squirt bottle filled with dark liquid. Looking tentative, he bends forward and squeezes a midnight blue puddle onto the concrete floor. The effect is that of a random stain, a spill, a blot. Assorted colleagues look on; the workmen who have been building the bar put down hammers and watch. There is a sense of occasion in the room. What was Hamasaku, the gleaming white sushi den lately owned by former superagent Michael Ovitz, is being transformed and smudged into a moody artist's lair. Michael Voltaggio's blot is, in effect, the christening of the first restaurant that will be all his own. It will be called Ink.

Voltaggio was already well known in L.A. food circles when he won *Top Chef* in 2009, vanquishing his older brother, Bryan, in the clinch. And while it may have

seemed like good TV for the judges to narrow down the field of 18 to two brothers and another guy, Michael and Bryan were in fact the most fearsome cooks on the show. They paired flavors with almost effortless sophistication and poetry, like when Michael served *dashi*-glazed rockfish with a sweet-and-sour crab salad that he laced with squash and Meyer lemon. Utilizing an impressive range of technique both traditional and progressive, the two men were as at ease with a Cryovac bag and a dehydrator as they were with a blender. Neither appeared all that amiable, but Bryan came off as positively wholesome next to the unsmiling, feral intensity of his brother. Michael was combative—he snarled at Bryan for trying to grab his plastic wrap—and quotable, saying that third placer Kevin Gillespie's cooking was "the kind of food I make on my day off." Many of the bloggers who follow the show found him surly. "When a hockey player fights with another player, no one calls him an asshole," says Voltaggio, nonplussed. "This was a competition. Cooking was the sport."

Confronted with the brothers, the judges of season six seemed a bit less

ules that gush when popped, either by the tongue or the fork. This is a favorite trick in molecular gastronomy, a term nobody especially likes (Colicchio notes that even the act of boiling water involves altering molecules) but one we seem to be stuck with. "Michael wasn't showing off," he says. "His dishes are thoughtful. They make sense. To me, he's trying to make good food, and he uses techniques to that end. His food is new and it's different, but it's not so far away from tradition." After a pause Colicchio adds, "Out of all the cooks that have come through the show, Michael is the most talented—both from a sensibility and technical standpoint. He has the chops to pull off what he's trying to do."

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in 1987, Spanish chef Ferran Adrià attended a conference in Nice, France, that addressed the concept of creativity. He returned to El Bulli, his restaurant on Catalonia's Costa Brava, determined to throw out his cookbooks and reach for something new. Adrià was fascinated with some of the science that corporations were using to manufacture textures

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judge-y. Restaurateur and *Top Chef* producer Tom Colicchio was particularly bowled over by one of Michael's inventions: a tiny Caesar salad that released its dressing onto itself. The salad was a deconstruction—the chef took components of a familiar dish, jumbled them up, and put them back together in another way. "It was also a good application of spherification," says Colicchio, referring to a process in which a chef immerses an ingredient (the Caesar dressing) in baths of calcium chloride and sodium alginate, transforming said ingredient into glob-

and tastes in prefabricated foods. During a six-month winter recess, Adrià rented a workspace near El Bulli. There he, his brother Albert, and chef Oriol Castro developed the methods that would bring molecular gastronomy to the world of fine dining, expanding a vocabulary that had pretty much been set for chefs since the days of Georges Auguste Escoffier a hundred years before. Adrià converted food into pearls, powders, foams, and "air"; he served lasagna in the form of licorice-infused jelly and a pea puree that looked and behaved like an egg yolk. Soon El Bulli

became recognized as the world's most imaginative—and exclusive—restaurant. Last year, before Adrià closed it down, 2 million people tried to book reservations at the restaurant, which seated only 50 a night.

Almost any chef who worked alongside Adrià had attained instant status in the international food community. One of them was José Andrés, the man who brought many of Adrià's methods to America. He practiced them mostly in the D.C. area until he opened the Bazaar at the SLS Hotel on La Cienega in 2008, where Voltaggio became his *chef de cuisine*. In a way, Voltaggio represents the first generation of chefs who grew up with Adrià's techniques already seeped into the culture. He doesn't fetishize his mastery of molecular gastronomy; his additives and his equipment are simply armaments in his arsenal. He sees food science as a convenient means of producing dishes on a more consistent basis. "Time and temperature are so easily controlled in *sous vide*," he notes, invoking the technique in which food is sealed in an airtight bag and cooked in water for a specific time at a specific temperature. "The reason I use it is because it's efficient," says Voltaggio. "You can guarantee the result." If Voltaggio has a creed, it is this: "I want people to ask how I made a dish, not why."

Like many cooks, Voltaggio was drawn to the feeling of working in concert with others, that sense of family a well-run kitchen provides. The boys and their sister, Staci, grew up in the small town of Frederick, Maryland. Their parents divorced when Michael was two. They lived with their mom, Sharon, who would marry twice more. Her clerical jobs didn't pay much, but as Michael said on *Top Chef*, Sharon always got dinner on the table. At 12 Michael was sent to live with his father, a police officer, which didn't help his issues with discipline. Michael got into so many fights that he was thrown out of one high school. "I did everything you don't want your kids to do," he says. At 15 he became a busboy at a restaurant where Bryan was a cook; at 16 he moved into his own apartment—"It just felt like it was necessary," he says.

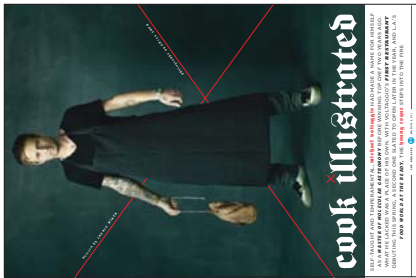
Bryan put himself through the Culinary Institute of [CONTINUED ON PAGE 146]



hot seat

(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) VOLTAGGIO INSIDE HIS RESTAURANT, INK, WHEN IT WAS STILL UNDER CONSTRUCTION; PREPPING DURING *TOP CHEF*; THE TURBOT DISH HE COOKED DURING A STINT AT TEST KITCHEN

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: EMILY SHURE; BRAVO TV; RYAN TANAKA



Michael Voltaggio

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 99] America by delivering pizzas. Michael didn't go to cooking school. When he was 19, he took a two-year apprenticeship at the Greenbrier resort in West Virginia. His first real job was in the grill room at a Ritz-Carlton in Florida, where he learned sous vide and fell in love with cooking under the guidance of chefs Arnaud Berthelier and Sonny Sweetman. Both brothers ended up working for Charlie Palmer (Bryan in New York, Vegas, and D.C.; Michael in Healdsburg, California). But while Bryan wanted to return to his hometown (he now runs Frederick's best restaurant, Volt), Michael kept moving. "Bryan's always been more grounded than me," he says. "I'm a gypsy." Returning to the Greenbrier as chef six years after he had left, Voltaggio married and fathered two girls (he is now separated). When the dining room there was under renovation, he and chef Cole Dickinson went to a back banquet room and set out to tackle molecular cooking, using only a batch of books and some newly purchased equipment. "We didn't have a scientist with us," says Voltaggio. "It was all trial and error. We worked for six months this way, learning everything we could."

To audition for José Andrés in D.C., Voltaggio prepared a few dishes, including beef cheeks with broccoli in every conceivable form: blanched, dried, fried, pureed, braised, charred. It was the trick of a kid who once hated vegetables and who was determined

Shopping Directory

Page 100: Chloé dress at Neiman Marcus, Beverly Hills, 310-550-5900. Giuseppe Zanotti cuff and shoes at Giuseppe Zanotti, Beverly Hills, 310-550-5760. **Pages 102-103:** Calvin Klein Collection dress by special order at Calvin Klein Collection, 212-292-9000. David Yurman bracelets at David Yurman, Beverly Hills, 310-888-8618. Walter Steiger shoes by special order at Walter Steiger, 212-826-7171. Versace dress at Versace, Beverly Hills, 310-205-3921. David Yurman ring at David Yurman, Beverly Hills, 310-888-8618. **Pages 104-105:** Fendi dress at Fendi, Beverly Center, L.A., 310-289-1704. Irene Neuwirth necklace at Barneys New York, Beverly Hills, 310-276-4400. Walter Steiger shoes by special order at Walter Steiger, 212-826-7171. Michael Kors mailot and jacket at Michael Kors, Beverly Hills, 310-777-8862. Ippolita cuffs at ippolita.com. Jimmy Choo shoes at Jimmy Choo, Beverly Hills, 310-860-9854.

to make them a source of pleasure. "I'm not a philosopher. I'm a craftsman," says Voltaggio. "I look at a carrot and ask, 'How can I make that the best carrot it can be?' Maybe I encrust it in salt with a kaffir lime leaf and cook it that way." Andrés hired him a week later to work at the Bazaar, a job he would leave the next year to compete on *Top Chef*. After all the attention that came with winning, Voltaggio liked the idea of being at a remove from Beverly Hills and went to work at the Langham hotel dining room, the Michelin-starred restaurant in Pasadena. "They were all really good to me there," he says, "but it wasn't the exact right situation." With the \$150,000 prize money and his future beckoning, he soon wanted a place of his own. Once he signed the lease for Ink, his first hire was Dickinson—the only chef in Los Angeles with more tattoos—as chef de cuisine.



Dinner service has begun at Animal, one of L.A.'s biggest success stories in recent years, and already the Fairfax restaurant is hopping. Voltaggio's been a regular here since it opened in 2008, when he'd bring his cooks over from the Bazaar to eat. "I thought it was the smartest restaurant in town," he says. "I had to figure it out." Joining him before they have to rush off to the kitchen are the chef-owners, Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo, a fellow member of the tattoo brigade. Shook is impish and ebullient, though he's fresh from dental surgery, so it may be the aftereffects of the drugs. Dotolo, as befitting a man with a wife and children, has a little more gravitas, but just a little. These two like to have fun, and they put out food that is as delicious as it is caloric: barbecued pork belly, foie gras with biscuit and gravy, and the French Canadian glop known as *poutine*—french fries topped with melted cheddar and, in Animal's version, oxtail gravy. Crunchy, well seasoned, deeply flavorful, it's the best stoner food imaginable.

Shook and Dotolo are capable of sophistication—their perfect caper-brown butter sauce or the sweet parsley-scallion oil and aioli they serve with grilled quail comes to mind—but they don't have Voltaggio's technical expertise. Sous vide, which is child's play to Voltaggio, is barely in their lexicon. "I know how to use agar [a gelling agent]," says Dotolo. "But I get thrown off by ratios." Still, it's easy to see why Voltaggio is drawn to them. He is, after all, a young man recently released from the starched shirts and starched service of the Langham. "I hated going out into the dining room there," he says. "It was so quiet, you felt like you had

to whisper. I prefer to feel alive."

Sitting with Shook and Dotolo, Voltaggio hangs back and lets them talk, piping up occasionally. "We're rednecks together," he says. "I'm not shy about calling them and asking how to do shit." Voltaggio recalls how Shook was his date at a *GQ* event last year (the magazine named Voltaggio one of the "100 Best Things in the World"). "We stood awkwardly in the corner and just talked to each other," says Voltaggio. Later, in private, he describes being approached at the party by David Chang, the 33-year-old chef-owner of New York's Momofuku restaurants, hip and yummy places that attract the scruffy young (who line up outside the doors an hour before opening) as well as the tony. Voltaggio was secretly delighted to be recognized by Chang, who challenged him: "Now that you got it, what are you going to do with it?"

Voltaggio and the Animal guys are more than friends; they see themselves as part of an emerging community of young chefs who loathe the corporate culture, stuffy rooms, and exorbitant pricing. They go on eating expeditions in Koreatown, Little Tokyo, and the Asian neighborhoods of the San Gabriel Valley. Dotolo scoffs at New York's certainty about its culinary superiority. ("They think their opinions mean more," he says. "They don't.") To these chefs, Los Angeles is the true international city. "We don't cook modern American cuisine," Voltaggio says. "We cook modern Los Angeles. This city is the melting pot you hear about." Other chefs whom the trio consider part of the authenticity club: Roy Choi, who started the Kogi truck fleet, Jordan Kahn from Red Medicine, and, at 39, elder statesman Ludovic Lefebvre (of the pop-up LudoBites). The main membership requirement is that the chef stays behind the stove. Red O, the nouveau Mexican eatery run by a famous Chicago chef, does not make the cut. "Rick Bayless's name is just on the sign," says Voltaggio.

When Shook and Dotolo retreat into the kitchen, Voltaggio and I move to the bar to eat. I point out that the young women in the room have been glancing at him since we entered. "No. I am not that guy," he says flatly, staring down. End of discussion. He'd much rather talk about the baby kale salad. Lightly salted, with grated pecorino, lemon-chili vinaigrette, and croutons, it is about as exciting as a salad is capable of being. "This shows their style," Voltaggio says. "You can only eat raw kale when it is very young. They take what is in season right now, and they make it spectacular." For dessert he advises me to try the tres leches. "I mean, it's just a piece of cake on a plate," he says. "But damn—it's good." Voltaggio, however, can't stay. He has

to catch a plane to Utah, where he's cooking at the Sundance Film Festival. As soon as he's out the door his seat is taken by a handsome radiologist, who is with his fiancée. "Was that Michael Voltaggio?" he asks excitedly. "I am such a huge fan." Not that he has tasted the chef's food yet. Voltaggio is perhaps the first chef to become internationally famous without owning a restaurant.

Almost 3 million viewers watched season six of *Top Chef*, which won the Emmy for Outstanding Reality-Competition Program. "The show was so hard because they put you into situations that you can't control," says Voltaggio, "and the main thing a chef wants is control." The Ink menu will be a long list of dishes not divided into categories. "It will be what I feel like cooking," says Voltaggio, who does not want to be rushed. The preparations will be both simple and complicated. "I will use a lot of different methods," he says. "Some dishes will have no technique. I don't want to be defined by any style of cooking. My goal is to please people. What I want is to have a true emotional attachment to the food. So that there is authenticity behind it." At its eight-seat bar, Ink will also offer an *omakase* kind of experience with no menu. Diners will face a glass case filled with ingredients and watch it empty as their meal is prepared in a semi-open kitchen.

The space on Melrose and King's Road has been vacant for almost two years. The leaseholder, Michael Ovitz, interviewed chefs from around the country and could find no one he wanted to install there after Hamasaku became financially untenable during the recession. He watched Voltaggio on TV after hearing about him from two trusted sources: his assistant and his son. He invited the chef to his house in Benedict Canyon; their meeting lasted two or three hours, Ovitz recalls. "I know a lot of artists," he says. "I collect art. Michael talks about food the way an artist talks about his work. He has that level of passion." Ovitz tells me he has no say over what Voltaggio will do, and he doesn't want any. "I want him to express himself. He is tremendously gifted. I think he's going to influence a lot of young people in the culinary arts."

One mentor who is not lavish with praise is Voltaggio's former boss, José Andrés. "He is a good kid," says the 41-year-old Spanish chef. "He understands how to work in a team. We will see what happens when he opens his restaurant." Prodded for more, Andrés resists. A journalist does Voltaggio no favor, he says, by trying to define his talent or by overpraising him before he opens his first place. "I've seen a lot of chefs take the accolades or the fame to their heads. Then they get lost

and can't find themselves again." As for the celebrity that TV brings, Andrés offers this: "You have to learn to use it and not have it use you. My advice to Michael is to go low on the marketing, go low on the PR."

But on this semicold day in January, Voltaggio does not seem too concerned about pressure. In the brand-new kitchen on Melrose, Dickinson and another chef are at work on dishes not for Ink but for a sandwich place that Voltaggio also plans to open this year. He removes his sweatshirt—his latest tattoo, a starfish on his left elbow, is aching. Life is good at the moment, and he is in a rare expansive mood. "I'm used to pressureful situations," he says. "If I'm not in them, then I end up thinking too much. For me the motto is, 'If you can't take the heat, stay in the kitchen.' That is where I can hide from the world. I have lost track of my life there, in ways both good and bad. I have forgotten to pay my bills."

Voltaggio is rattling off whole sentences, one after the other. "Cooking has always been faithful to me," he says. "Working is the only thing that's been consistent for me." He's been talking about his childhood, and he is clearly feeling the distance he's traveled, both geographically and emotionally. "When I first went into the kitchen," he says, "I took all of that confrontation, all of that childhood anger with me. But cooking taught me what I didn't know. Beyond that rage there is something else there, if you can just get to the other side. It's passion. Passion is the best filter for every strong emotion." ■

Laurie Winer's feature on pitchman Robert Kosberg appeared in the January issue.

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