

Dinner with Michael Voltaggio

CONSUMING PASSION

Jonathan Gold begins a series of one-on-ones, starting with a bright new star of the culinary world *portrait by* ALEX HOERNER

Do you want to watch Michael Voltaggio cook? Do you really want to watch Michael Voltaggio cook? Because the cool stuff, the graceful yet intense vivid ballet of foodstuffs you may have seen Voltaggio perform as he dominated *Top Chef* last year is pretty well hidden in the kitchen of this South Pasadena home, as he manipulates a farmers' market of late-summer produce onto a single slab of rock.

It's not like watching Eminem perform onstage; it's like watching Eminem in the recording studio, microscopically adjusting a phrase 200 times until a single troublesome trochee snaps into place. The term *OCD* doesn't begin to describe the scary focus Voltaggio—a 31-year-old who still probably gets carded at 7-Eleven—brings to a lightly cooked baby turnip.

This vegetable plate is like Farmer Brown's garden in miniature, tiny carrots in orange and scarlet, purple-veined sorrel, currants both red and white, blackberries and raspberries, nasturtiums, borage and flowering basil tops, baby turnips, radishes, a single pea pod opened like something out of a Dutch still life, mysterious cylinders

of root vegetable and a sheet of clear tomato water, boiled down until the sugars are concentrated, thickened with a bit of agar, speckled with shreds of dried Japanese seaweed and wrapped like a cigar leaf around a finger of fresh burrata cheese. There is a chewy strip of dehydrated red-pepper puree, perforated every half inch with a schoolkid's hole puncher—it looks like what you used to feed into your cap gun when you were little.

A little terra-cotta pot nestles baby carrots, radishes and turnips poking out of "soil"—essentially a handful of unsweetened coffee-cardamom streusel crumbled to resemble dirt. Before the dish leaves Voltaggio's hands, every pea has been anointed with a tiny drop of oil and a single grain of Maldon salt; the berries are rotated until the grain of the drupelets match; and the basil flowers have been checked three times for fragrance.

To those at the top of the L.A. food chain, Voltaggio's résumé is pretty well known at this point. At an age when most kids are still worrying about their PSATs, he followed his brother Bryan into cooking and left his native





Maryland just after high school to apprentice at the famed Greenbrier resort. He cooked at the Ritz-Carlton in Naples, Florida, was chef de cuisine for Charlie Palmer's restaurant in Healdsburg and chef for José Andrés at the molecular-cuisine showplace Bazaar at the SLS Hotel in Beverly Hills. He left to compete in the sixth season of *Top Chef*—and famously bested his brother to win—then spent a year as chef at the Dining Room at the Langham in Pasadena.

Today's vegetable composition, a cannelloni of burrata, tomato and sea herbs, was inspired by the gargouillou of three-star Michelin chef Michel Bras and David Kinch's Manresa, and it rewards every bit of a chef's obsession.

Each element, even the raw ones, requires a slightly different cooking technique, and what awakens the beauty in a carrot today may not at all be what the same carrot requires next week. If the dish is planned

with proper care, an observant diner should be able to pin the season within a few days and the geographic coordinates of the kitchen within a few miles.

"The composition changes every time I go shopping," Voltaggio says. "There are 30 steps in plating this one dish."

"When Michael made this for me at the Langham," says LudoBites chef Ludovic Lefebvre, "what I remember is that the vegetables were arranged in a perfect, perfect

line on the plate, as if he had aligned them with a laser."

The dish finally completed, snatched out of his hands by the photographer who has been waiting for it for more than an hour, Voltaggio pours himself a small glass of Scotch and walks outside to collapse in a chaise by the pool.

"I didn't go to culinary school," he says, taking a delicate sip. "I couldn't afford it. So I did a long apprenticeship at the Greenbrier resort in West Virginia. In culinary school, you end up filleting one salmon in your time there, and it's easy to hide in the back of the classroom if you think you're going to mess it up. At the Greenbrier at one point, I did nothing but fillet salmon for three days until I never wanted to see another salmon again.

"During hunting season, the hotel butcher took off for two or three weeks to break down deer for hunters. I wanted to know how to handle whole animals, so I spent vacations helping him. We ate our lunches of cornbread and beans off tables we improvised from stacked deer carcasses."

He carefully sets the glass of Scotch down in the gravel.

"My first big job was at the grill room in a Ritz-Carlton in Florida—shrimp cocktail, Caesar salad, chops, all that. The first thing I did was rip out the gas grill and replace it with a wood grill. Every steak I made, I brushed with glaze de viande—superconcentrated stock—before I served it. You've never tasted a steak so meaty. But the chef at the main restaurant had cooked with [Alain] Ducasse and served most of his proteins sous-vide, and I wanted to know how he did it. He knew how to do so many things I'd never even contemplated. So I stepped down from my job and became

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his assistant. The hotel thought I was crazy, but that's where I really learned to cook.

"Now, especially after that crazy *Top Chef* thing, people describe me as a molecular-cuisine chef. To me, molecular gastronomy is about taking a brussels sprout and making it the most like a brussels sprout it can be. Why would you cook a carrot sous-vide? Because when you boil it, all the flavor goes out into the water. When you vacuum-wrap it and cook it at a low temperature, all of the flavor stays in the carrot. Put a little smoked salt on it, and it's phenomenal."

Voltaggio stretches, and the intricate koi tattooed on his forearm flashes and wriggles in the late-afternoon sun.

"When I was a kid," he says, "I hated vegetables. I think a lot of my cooking is about taking something I wouldn't ordinarily eat and transforming it into something I love.

"And I think that philosophy will make its way into my new restaurant. I like the look of hardwood floors, but they're expensive, and I want to see if I can get the effect I want with plywood. The appeal of hardwood isn't its rarity or its beauty, it's the sound high heels make when a beautiful woman walks across it. The guy who puts hardwood floors in his restaurant is the same guy who pays top dollar for prime filet and then just tosses it on the grill. I'll buy veal breast for \$4-\$5 a pound, and I'll smoke you every time."

We'll find out soon enough. Voltaggio plans to open his own restaurant—in an as yet undisclosed location—in Los Angeles before the end of the year.

JONATHAN GOLD, *L.A. Weekly food critic*, is a Pulitzer-winning writer who has contributed to *Gourmet* and *Rolling Stone*, among other national publications.