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I loved the restaurant Chanterelle long before I managed to eat there. In the late ’70s and very early ’80s, a small ground-floor room in a storefront on a then-obscure street on the southern fringe of SoHo was transformed, apparently overnight, into something new and beckoning, as if by tasteful pixies. Before, there had just been another dark, industrial corner, at the intersection of Greene and Grand. Now the place glowed on its corner like a flickering gaslight. There were pale apricot walls (which you could just see as you walked by) below the old high, stamped tin ceiling, and three brass chandeliers above the old cast-iron columns. The exterior window was decorated every day with a menu written in a beautiful, swirling italic hand; the food the hand described, which was apparently available inside, was intriguing in its combination of obvious French materials with something new and more American: seafood sausage and roast squab with garlic, and soft-shell crabs with lime.

It didn’t just look wonderful; it felt, somehow, new. Certain places, restaurants among them, don’t just resonate with the style of their period, but announce a new style coming, and this little corner storefront did: It represented the SoHo art world in its approaching, second, higher period, when new signs of luxury would inflect minimalist austerity. At the time, I was living with my wife just around the corner in a fourth-floor loft, our first real home, and walking by the new place on the corner of Grand and Greene every night, we sensed that this little storefront represented not the old glamorous New York, to which one aspired, but a new New York style just coming into being, a nascent style in which a certain established idea of high-tech simplicity was being inflected with a witty old-world idea of high-minded pleasure, a style held in quotes but offered sincerely. (You see the same thing in, say, David Salle’s paintings of the period, poetic darkness touched by a certain amount of pure black velvet.) We would borrow a friend’s dog, and late at night, contemplate the menu with aplomb, looking, as demurely as we could, inside.

Over time, we came to eat there, and to know the couple, David and Karen Waltuck, whose vision the restaurant represented (and the designer Bill Katz, who had helped them realize it). Not only was the food even better than its embroidery—subtle without being silly and simple without being plain—but we also soon realized that the Waltucks’ lives mirrored our own, as they did those of a generation of young New Yorkers. They were struggling to combine a family and professional life while still remaining possessed of a vision, to which, for all the difficulties and sheer exhaustion of running a daily restaurant in a difficult city, they wanted to be faithful.

That vision, which the following pages annotate and explain, is hard to define, but it involves many things kept in balance, or tension: an idea of luxury reconciled with a hope for familiarity; a distaste for fancy cooking combined with a respect for haute cuisine. Most of all,
and more perhaps than any other dining place I know of, their vision is marked by a desire not to have all the vectors of attention pointing inward, at the plates and what’s on them, but pointing upward, metaphorically, toward that ceiling and its chandeliers—toward the possibility of an elevated evening, something out of the ordinary, a three-hour engineered transcendence of the mundane. I’ve been lucky enough to have had unforgettable meals in many places; but I think I’ve shared more beautiful evenings under their particular stars than any other. Though designed as a stage set, their place feels like a hearth.

It still does. The amazing thing is that David and Karen have continued to produce that kind of experience night after night, in the premises on Harrison Street they went to in the ’80s (following the art world as it moved a little south), without dropping a stitch of sober charm along the way. What was once a period piece has become a classic, and their classicism depends, as it always does, on a daily renewal of energy, to be held under the restraint of an established style. Several books could be written about the life and times of Chanterelle: one an anthropological study of art-world dining habits, another a story about the transformations of French cooking in American hands. But this book is about the central drama, about how the Waltucks and their team managed to make a new kind of place, and how they continue to make it new each night. Turning these pages, I felt the excitement again of those lost rainy nights on the corner of Greene and Grand, staring inside at a new world held in a room. The best kinds of enchantment are enlarged rather than diminished by explanation; we come away as dazzled as ever by the magic, and more eager than ever to go inside.
The Chanterelle Story

Most people who make a living doing something they love can point to the moment when they discovered it, lightning struck, and they exclaimed, if only to themselves, "That's what I'm going to do for the rest of my life!"

My revelation occurred in midtown Manhattan, on a Saturday night in the early 1960s. It was then, long before it had a name or a location, that the first stirrings of what would, in time, become Chanterelle restaurant took hold in my mind.

I grew up in the Bronx, that sprawling, overwhelmingly middle-class, northernmost borough of New York City. Food wasn’t a priority in the Waltuck home, although my two aunts, Gertie and Fanny, who lived in the same apartment building as we did and didn’t have families of their own to nourish, often cooked for my parents, my brother, and me, preparing a hodgepodge of American and Middle European staples: stuffed cabbage, chicken fricassée, roast leg of lamb, braised pot roast, and a repertoire of soups that included matzo ball, mushroom barley, and borscht. The food was satisfying but inelegant: Drab pale green and brown tones ruled the day, and many house favorites were ladled out of gigantic pots or carved on a huge wooden board from the head of the table. Meals were casual affairs, with little emphasis on the rituals of dining: You sat down, you ate, you cleared the table, you went on with your life.

My parents, both New York City social workers, took a serious interest in the arts and were devoted to exposing their young children to some of the city’s legendary culture. And so, occasionally, on Saturday nights, they would usher my brother and me into the car and drive us down into Manhattan for an evening of theater, always preceded by dinner in a restaurant. I was like a tourist in the blur of flashing lights and neon that defined Times Square in those days. As the family car snaked its way down the West Side Highway to 42nd Street, eventually docking in an outdoor lot, I felt a thrilling shiver at being in The City, and this excitement grew as we navigated the sidewalks of the Theater District, its sounds and smells filling my senses to overflowing.

I can’t recall which of the largely interchangeable Hell’s Kitchen French restaurants was the first one we visited, but I will never forget the immediate and lasting impression it made on me. As we passed through the restaurant doors—through the looking glass, it seemed—into a world of lace curtains, tuxedoed waiters, and hushed voices, I was wonder-struck. The restaurant, and the ones that followed on subsequent Saturdays, awakened in me a kind of romance. The reassuring grace of the maitre d’, the timeless elegance of the dining room, the soft, flattering lighting—these things were transporting. By the time we ordered dinner, I had the sensation that I was no longer in New York City, but in some otherworldly place devoted entirely to the comfort and contentment of its guests.

More than anything, I was spellbound by the food. In stark contrast to home, where meals were presented unceremoniously, courses were announced like late-arriving guests as they were set down before us. Each dish had four or five components—a fish or meat, a sauce, a starch, and a vegetable or two—all of them coming together in perfect harmony. And it was all so pretty—potatoes were artfully piped, vegetable purees had been shaped into quenelles, and meat and fish were beautifully portioned and arranged on the plate. The components of these edible compositions seemed to have been transformed, bearing little or no resemblance to the
raw ingredients that went into them. There was magic in every flourish, from tomatoes trimmed to look like roses to leftovers wrapped in aluminum foil molded into the shape of a duck.

For me, these dinners were the main event of our trip into the city. When it was time to push off for the theater, I found myself wondering, “Theater? Who needs theater?”

Young boys are prone to obsessions, so while my friends were busy collecting baseball cards, I began what would become my lifelong love affair with food, at first by endlessly replaying those restaurant meals in my mind. I was especially impressed by the sauces, and I found myself thinking about them in school or while riding the subway. Before long, my appetite for food knowledge was insatiable. I began reading whatever I could get my hands on. In particular, I was drawn to the legendary food writer and culinary Francophile Richard Olney’s *Simple French Food* and the seasonally arranged *French Menu Cookbook*.

I felt an urge welling up in me until it became impossible to ignore: Reading wasn’t enough—I had to cook. I began by baking, because the formula-like recipes seemed inviting and straightforward to me, and I knew that my family would be willing to sample whatever breads and pastries I produced. My first forays were successful, but loaf after loaf of warm bread on the kitchen counter left me curiously unsatisfied. I concluded that baking, at least for me, was more craft than art, and I swiftly shifted to the savory realm that had turned me on in the first place. I started simply, making stocks, to see if I could achieve the gelatinous quality described in books. Tasting my first one, I recognized the sauce it might become. On another Saturday, I put an egg yolk in a bowl, added some mustard and lemon juice, and whisked them together, slowly drizzling olive oil into the mixture, staring with anticipation, then amazement, as it all held together in a creamy emulsion: mayonnaise!

I was hooked. I felt I could cook anything. I was single-minded in my pursuit of this passion, purchasing knives, ring molds, and other tools and equipment to supplement our family’s resources, or making do with what we had, like the time I whipped up a fish mousse in our blender, or took the subway down to Esposito Pork Store on Ninth Avenue in Hell’s Kitchen (it’s still there) to buy some pork skin, bringing it home and using it to make cassoulet.

My parents thought I was a little nuts, and maybe I was. I lived for Saturdays, when I was allowed to scurry all over town in hot pursuit of hard-to-pronounce ingredients, take over the kitchen, and cook my heart out. Every week I’d try something more challenging—quenelles, aspics, terrines, confit—and it all came naturally to me. Cleaning the sinks and stove at the end of each too-short session, I’d be overcome with pride, grinning from ear to ear, and thinking, “I can do this.”

And then, there was my culinary guardian angel, my mother’s friend Sarah Sameth, whose career as a French teacher conferred upon her an air of sophistication in our circle, one which was furthered by the name she adopted to honor her love of all things French—Josephine. Every so often, Josephine would take me to lunch at Lutèce, one of the great four-star restaurants of the day, where I was treated not only to sublime renditions of the food I was reading about and attempting to make, but also to my first vision of a famous chef. During each visit, André Soltner would emerge from the kitchen in his impeccably starched whites, his toque perfectly centered on his head, and make the rounds of the dining room. Regulars in business suits received a private audience with this papal figure; Josephine and I were happy to settle for a smile and a nod as he breezed by our table. When I nodded back, and we made eye contact, it was thrilling.

By the time I was in high school, I wasn’t just reading recipe books; I had become equally intrigued by all aspects of a chef’s world, such as ingredients and how they’re sourced. I pored over Euell Gibbons’s *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* and *Stalking the Blue-Eyed Scallop*, while, in the kitchen, my experiments grew ever more ambitious. I turned out complete meals on the order of those restaurant dinners that had first compelled me to cook. I was also consumed with the future, with thoughts of where my passion might take me when I could devote more and more time to it, perhaps even my entire life.
For the past three decades, the realization of those food dreams has been Chanterelle, the restaurant that I own and operate with my wife, partner, front-of-the-house goddess, and mistress of details, Karen. I can't tell the Chanterelle story without telling the David and Karen story: We are both creatures of the Bronx who met back in high school but didn't begin dating until the summer of 1977. Despite having a home borough in common, we were a case study in opposites attracting. In sharp contrast to my near-painful shyness, Karen is fearless social and free-spirited. We also had vastly different experiences: To me, a teenage adventure was journeying down to the specialty shop Kalustyan's on Lexington Avenue in search of preserved lemons; to her it was spending a year in France in high school, and one in Rome in college.

Karen worked for a small women's boutique on the East Side and before taking that job had lived and traveled in South America and Europe. She loved her work, which took her on buying trips overseas.

Karen had never been all that interested in food—during her years abroad, she had survived on about fifty dollars per month, and had eaten whatever she could afford at local markets and could figure out how to cook. But as we began a brief courtship carried out largely in the top New York City restaurants of the day, such as Café des Artistes, La Côte Basque, and the site of those midday excursions with Josephine, Lutèce, I was delighted that she quickly developed a fondness for fine dining.

At that time, I was enrolled at the Culinary Institute of America, about an hour and half north of Manhattan, but I didn't care much for school. I had already been cooking for several years and found myself questioning the very things I was being taught. As much as I revered traditional French cuisine, my palate had developed to the point that I was tinkering with some of the basics. A big breakthrough came when I stopped cooking with celery, which I'd always felt had a very distinct, almost peculiar flavor. Many, if not most, stocks, sauces, soups, and stews have carrot, onion, celery, and maybe garlic in their base. Three of the four made sense to me, but I never understood the automatic inclusion of celery, and despite what we did at school it was around that time that I ceased using it at home.

Adding to my dissatisfaction was the alternate universe in New York City that beckoned me: In addition to being a student, I was the brunch cook at the Empire Diner, a place that looked like a truck stop but served surprisingly

Happier, and more tired, than ever early day at Chanterelle.
sophisticated food. The owner gave me free rein to create my own specials, which was an enormous break and confidence booster for a young toque. The freedom was exhilarating in contrast to the textbook cooking I was doing at school.

And, of course, there was Karen. Every Sunday, after driving into the city at the crack of dawn and working my shift, I’d spend the afternoon with the woman who was becoming the love of my life. I stayed later and later each week to be with her as much as possible, and began finding myself almost nodding off on the Taconic State Parkway on my drive back to campus, swerving all over the highway and occasionally explaining myself to a stone-faced state trooper.

Bored with my studies, madly in love, and longing to work as much as possible in a real-world kitchen, I left school and went looking for a full-time gig in the city. I became sous chef to Charles Chevillot, the owner of La Petite Ferme, a beloved French restaurant with countryside undertones, which had moved from its original home on 10th Street to larger accommodations on the Upper East Side. Despite my highfalutin’ title, I saw myself essentially as a glorified lunch cook, almost single-handedly turning out the bistro fare dictated by my employer. In an earlier time, this would have been gratifying work, but it was the dawn of a new era in western restaurant cuisine: There was a pioneering movement afoot in France as chef after chef broke the shackles of conformity and forged an individual style. Even in Manhattan, there was unprecedented interest in food, much of it goosed by writers such as New York magazine’s Gael Greene, who was writing not just about the restaurants in Manhattan but also was traveling overseas and submitting dispatches on the gustatory scene in Paris. She and others were describing food with an enthusiasm and vocabulary previously reserved for the performing arts. The zeitgeist was irresistibly named nouvelle cuisine, and I was drawn to its emphasis on composition and presentation, with dishes emerging from the kitchen ready to be served rather than finished tableside by a waiter. Though it made room for lighter, almost spa-like approaches, including portions that many found scandalously small, it also held fast to certain elements of classic French cooking, retaining the focus on rigorous techniques, but breaking away from time-honored dishes in favor of new compositions that reinvented and redefined them. To New Yorkers, a dining public raised on the notion that there were two options for French dining—the “fancy” restaurant with Dover sole and duck à l’orange and the bistro with onion soup and steak frites—the novelty was enticing.

In many ways, I was taken with the idea of nouvelle cuisine, without having tasted much of it. But I could imagine what the food I was reading about tasted like, and I appreciated certain credos that were emerging: the devotion to seasonal, fresh ingredients, which is almost
taken for granted today in restaurants of a certain caliber; the idea of making a personal statement, also now pretty much expected; and the emphasis on smaller portions and more courses, which was tailor-made to my Olney-inspired love of the meal as composition. Everything about it seemed to mirror my own evolution as a cook: I had started with the classics, had broken a few rules to suit my sensibility, and was beginning to have my own ideas.

I wasn’t the only one in our apartment swept up with these seductive goings-on. Karen thought that she might want to join me in opening a restaurant one day. So, we made our first joint trip to France to see the revolution for ourselves, hitting as many two- and three-star Michelin restaurants as we could in the span of about two weeks. Somehow, against all odds, really, the food lived up to our almost ludicrously lofty expectations. I was more excited than ever to get back home and try my own dishes, bringing together the techniques I’d been honing with my ideas, which had by then been shaped by years of reading, tasting, cooking, and daydreaming.

Three restaurants also dazzled us with their brand of hospitality, each of them astonishingly accessible, eschewing in their own ways the precious, overformalized tone set by the vast majority of upscale establishments in France, and in New York City for that matter. One was Taillevent, Paris’s exquisite gastronomic temple. We showed up as the very picture of American tourism, two young lovers of perhaps questionable means. But as we walked through the front door, none of that mattered; the owner, Jean-Claude Vrinat, was so gracious that he gave us the distinct impression he had been waiting for us all his life. At La Pyramide, in the shadow of ancient sycamore trees out in the countryside, we were enchanted by the image of Madame Point, widow of the late, great chef Fernand Point, sitting at a beautiful desk writing menus by hand, and by the sommelier, a man we placed in his eighties, who had an easy way with even the most precious wines, uncorking first-growth 1929 Bordeaux with astounding familiarity. And, at the original Le Bernardin, Karen was captivated by dining room empress Maguy Le Coze, a gazelle in her skintight Azzedine Alaïa, who personified a word we hadn’t associated with the restaurant business: glamour. It became a touchstone.

The flight home was a magic carpet ride. In the dim light of the airplane, with fellow passengers asleep all around us, we cuddled together and whispered our conclusions about everything we’d just taken in, applying our impressions of Taillevent, La Pyramide, and Le Bernardin to the restaurant we were thinking of opening ourselves. It didn’t matter that we were unknown quantities in the restaurant world of New York City; we were so galvanized by our shared experience that there was no stopping us now.

“YOU GUYS SHOULD OPEN A RESTAURANT.”

Back in the United States, I was more driven to cook than I had been since those early days in the Bronx. I had always experimented a bit, but the idea of drawing directly from French classics in a new way really lit me up. I was formulating concepts for dishes that merged old and new, such as a lobster ragoût with a bisque-inspired sauce flavored with Sauternes, lime, and curry (see page 131) and Squab Mousse with Juniper & Green Peppercorns (page 115). This, along with a love of un-shy flavors—less restrained than those found in many French kitchens—reflected the American, or the New Yorker, in me.

Inspiration came from a variety of sources, but mostly from reading about food. I’d see a recipe in a book, or a passing reference to a dish in a magazine, and write it down, filling notebooks with list after list of things I wanted to try. Sometimes I’d learn about what another chef was cooking, perhaps in Gault Millau magazine, which I couldn’t wait to get my hands on each month, and treat it like a creative challenge, devising a recipe based on the name. There’s no better example of this than the quintessential Chanterelle signature dish from day one through today, our seafood sausage. In the mid-1970s Gael Greene mentioned that Taillevent
in Paris was serving a boudin des fruits de mer. Intrigued, I made a seafood filling, piped it into a sausage casing, grilled it, and sauced it with a beurre blanc. (Years later, on a trip to France, we dined at Taillevent again, and ordered their sausage. It was much larger and plumper than the one we serve, poached rather than grilled, and less robust, with strained out-shallots in their rendition of a beurre blanc. One of our regular customers was at Taillevent that night and told owner Jean-Claude Vrinat that our sausage was better. Vrinat took it in good humor and for years sent us a Christmas card every December.)

I began road-testing new dishes at home. Charles Chevillot was very generous about letting me special-order rare ingredients, and I’d also visit those same shops on Ninth Avenue that I had trekked to as a little kid, bringing my personal arc full circle. On one of these excursions it occurred to me that I’d been on a steady learning curve, from dinners in French restaurants with my parents, through my solo cooking lessons in the family kitchen, then to cooking school and early jobs, and now an exciting new phase of possibility and innovation.

As I experimented in earnest, I honed my personal style even further. Just as they are today, most of my compositions were based on harmonizing no more than two or three primary flavors with a sauce that pulled them all together. To achieve this, I chiseled away at ingredient lists until arriving at what I thought of as the essence of each dish. I also streamlined many of the building blocks of the kitchen in my ongoing quest to bring as much clarity as possible to every element. It turns out that ditching the celery was just the first of many liberties I would take with traditional recipes before I was through. For example, many chefs use tomato in their veal stock, but I chose not to, wanting to taste only the veal itself. If tomato was called for in a particular dish, I’d add it during the preparation. By the same token, I stopped putting herbs or peppercorns in my chicken stock, because the flavor of individual herbs or the heat of the peppercorns wouldn’t be welcome in every recipe that called for the stock. I questioned everything and operated on sheer instinct, obsessively editing until each dish was a study in ruthless efficiency.

We needed an audience, of course, so, in 1977, in our studio apartment on East 77th Street, Karen and I began throwing monthly dinner parties for six or eight people. The result of all my imaginings, such as Lobster with Cider and Apples (page 132), and Rack of Lamb with Cumin-Salt Crust (page 213) all made their debut there.

For us the planning was a feast in itself: We’d talk about the menu for days, visualizing the meal as it would unfold for our guests, making sure not to repeat flavors or textures, and keeping the palate fresh enough to enjoy the next course. Then we’d get to work: I’d shop for ingredients and do as much advance preparation as possible, making stocks, sauces, and anything else that could be, or had to be, readied ahead of time. Karen, who had never planned on a life in the hospitality biz, was getting a crash course and really enjoying it. Just as I had my own favorite markets and resources, she made a tour of her own beloved purveyors, visiting the florist and trekking crosstown to 67 Wines and Spirits on Columbus Avenue, returning hours later, kicking the front door open with a mixed case underarm.

On the day of the dinner, I’d chain myself to the stove, while Karen would decorate our home with little flower arrangements and, after the style of La Pyramide’s Madame Point, handwrite a menu in what has since become her signature flowing pen strokes.

On the appointed evening, always a Sunday, we’d hurriedly clean up the apartment and set the table. Around sunset, give or take an hour, our good friends and occasional family members would arrive. The dinners were intoxicating, in every sense of the word. Hour after hour ticked by as we ate, drank, laughed, argued, and occasionally sang the night away until we were in a state of communal bliss. At some point, our apartment no longer felt like an Upper East Side studio; I had that same sense I’d had as a child, that I was in an otherworldly place devoted entirely to the comfort and contentment of its guests, achieved through the dispensing of food and hospitality. Only it was my food and Karen’s hospitality. In those moments I saw myself through the eyes of the kid I used to be, and he was, once again, grinning ear to ear and thinking, “I can do this.”
The passion lives on: in the Chanterelle kitchen in our current home on Harrison Street.
My feelings were reflected by our guests, all of whom told us the same thing: “You guys should open a restaurant.” They believed we were on to something, not just with my food, which seemed to find a definable style rather quickly, but also with Karen’s unique, heartfelt, and unassuming charms as a hostess. While I always knew that I would open my own place, I had never imagined doing it so quickly. I thought that I would cook under the tutelage of others for years, but it was dawning on me that all those Saturday sessions in my family’s kitchen had laid a better foundation than I realized. I was becoming comfortable and confident, starting to believe I could please a dining room full of hungry and demanding New Yorkers. And, of course, there was Karen, the embodiment of everything I wanted our restaurant to be: cultured, earthy, and with an unpretentious manner and innate sense of style.

Opening a restaurant in the 1970s was a much less weighty proposition than it is now. We believed we could get our doors open for as little as $35,000, though when all was said and done, we ended up spending just over $100,000, still a far cry from the multimillion-dollar investments people make today.

We were also emboldened by the fact that two American couples had already cleared a path into the world of fine dining in New York City: Barry Wine, who owned the Quilted Giraffe with his wife, Susan, hadn’t cooked anywhere other than their restaurant, nor had Karen Hubert and Len Allison of Hubert’s. Not only were there Americans in the kitchen, but there was English on the awning: it was significant that these establishments served French, or French-leaning, food under a non-French moniker. That’s why, when Bill Katz, our good friend, mentor, and personal Diaghilev, who would go on to design the restaurant, suggested the name Chanterelle, we decided to let it stand alone, without affixing a “Le” or “La” to it. This wouldn’t be noteworthy today, but at the time it was audacious.
antechamber; as soon as you stepped through the front door, you were in our dining room.

The realization of our shared dream was so close we could taste it, but while we were full of enthusiasm, we were out of money. One night, we found ourselves sitting in our lovely dining room at one in the morning, wondering what in the world we were going to do. Just then, a young couple on roller skates wheeled up to our door and stuck their heads in. It turned out they were Susan and Louis Meisel, owners of a gallery on Prince Street, on their way home from a late night skating at the Roxy. We were at such a low point that we let it all spill out, telling these two strangers our entire story, right up to our current moment of professional destitution. Louis smiled at us and said, “Don’t worry about it,” and the two of them glided off into the night.

They contacted us a few days later, and we arranged a dinner in the nearly finished restaurant for the two of them and a number of potential investors they had lined up. The dinner was a smashing success, and by the end of the night we had raised the remaining monies we needed to get our doors open. We were once again on our way.

Down the home stretch, as many decisions as possible were made to ensure our vision of the restaurant as a surrogate home: Instead of overhead lights, we had chandeliers. Instead of a podium at the door, we moved in an antique wooden desk that once belonged to Karen’s grandmother Clara. Instead of a coat closet, we placed an antique American armoire purchased from a nearby antiques shop next to the desk. We were unmistakably a restaurant—there were, after all, ten tables—but these touches set a personal tone. To heighten the effect, we also decided to forgo any signs of commerce: there would be no register, no bar, no bottles on display, and no window into the kitchen.

Bill’s design was as spare as it was elegant. In time, one perceptive critic would observe that just as his sets for ballets made brilliant use of space, providing a compelling stage for the dancers, the dining room he created for us didn’t call undue attention to itself. It was a home for the food and the service—an apt reflection of the paring down I had been doing in the kitchen. In keeping with
our desire to not distract our guests from each other or the food, we decided not to hang any art on the walls. But one of our new investors, a legendary New York City gallery owner, kept trying to convince us that he had just the right painting for our dining room. The ongoing dialogue inspired Bill to suggest that we feature art on our menu cover, an inspired suggestion that led to one of our most treasured traditions (see page 16).

Since our dinner-party days, we had given a lot of thought to what we wanted a meal at Chanterelle to be, and as the opening approached, we came to the conclusion that we would serve formal food in an informal setting—not informal; what we sought was not a lack of formality, but a toned-down formality. We wanted people to feel like they were coming to a dinner party in a fantastic, idealized dining room, unself-conscious but well thought out—a place that seemed like it had always been there, but was fresh. There would be no captain in a tuxedo, but service on the same level as the places that stood on such ceremony. Karen wanted the experience to be nothing less than perfect, but without the condescension and obsequiousness that often came with it.

As for the food, I wanted diners to have the feeling that I’d had as a kid in those French restaurants. I wanted them to find everything beautiful to look at and intense and unforgettable to eat. I focused on sauces, on proudly old-fashioned terrines, quenelles, aspics, and consommés, and on ingredients that were beyond the reach of the average person in those days, such as wild mushrooms, oysters, truffles, and sea urchins. We were a small, intimate restaurant, but we wanted the effect to be big—indelible flavors and warm service—our idiosyncratic take on a three-star French restaurant, such as could only exist below Houston Street in 1970s New York.

Serving such meals was more challenging than it might sound: For all of the growing excitement about food, purveyors of fine ingredients were hard to come by. We found our sources as we went along, like the young New Jersey couple who noticed our mushroom-themed name and pulled up in their car to introduce themselves and sell us a variety of wild mushrooms they had foraged, or the Oregon farmer from whom we purchased others. On another day, a voluble and enthusiastic guy named George Faison pulled up in his station wagon, introduced himself, and told me about the new business he and his partner were starting, to sell foie gras in America: D’Artagnan.

Despite our proudly American name, and the decision we had made (also nearly scandalous at the time) to write our menu in English, we were always going to adhere to certain European traditions—we offered a rich and varied cheese board from the day we opened, and we always waited until after dessert to offer coffee, accompanied by petits fours, unless the customer asked for it earlier.

Karen also made a bold decision about the dining room staff, forgoing the usual hierarchy of captains, waiters, and busboys. Breaking the hiring mold in “fancy” restaurants of the day, she was open to all looks and types and didn’t exclude women or people without prior restaurant experience. “You can teach technique,” she likes to say, “but you can’t teach smart.” Her number-one priority was finding people who were engaging, focused, natural, and sincere. The result was that guests would have the feeling that they had stumbled upon a co-ed troupe of conspicuously young, unconventionally groomed butlers.

The atmosphere at Chanterelle has always been creative. Not unlike our clientele, many of our staff members were, and are, in the arts themselves, like the four dancers who once worked at the restaurant and shared a loft around the corner.

We also made a decision not to enforce a dress code, something that is all but extinct in Manhattan today, but back then, if you arrived in shirtsleeves at an upscale restaurant, you’d be loaned a jacket and tie. Not only did we want our guests to be comfortable, but the idea that uptown people in tuxedoes would be seated side by side with artists in blue jeans and woolly sweaters was also, to our way of thinking, quintessentially New York. Karen was fast developing the philosophy that each couple or group who entered the restaurant would have its own idea of what a meal at Chanterelle should be, and that we should tailor the experience accordingly. Ten tables, ten worlds.
Vegetables & Shellfish à la Grecque

À la grecque is French for “in the Greek style” and refers to vegetables, most famously artichokes, cooked in olive oil and lemon juice. My version is a shellfish dish that takes the à la grecque preparation as its starting point, adding coriander, shallots, white wine, tomato, saffron, and oregano for a lovely, aromatic, arrestingly rust-tinted broth that is then emulsified with olive oil—if you know a good, smooth one (as opposed to a harsh or aggressive one), use it. The result is a creamy sauce that coats the shellfish and vegetables. This is a perfect example of a starter that can double as a light lunch. It’s very satisfying and complete.

You can add vegetables, or substitute some. Possibilities include pearl onions, button mushrooms, and yellow squash.

Put the shallots, garlic, coriander, water, wine, tomato paste, saffron, bay leaves, peppercorns, and oregano in a very large heavy-bottomed pot over medium-high heat and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer for 20 minutes. Strain through a fine-mesh strainer set over a bowl. (At this point, you can let it cool completely, then cover and refrigerate for up to 3 days or freeze for 2 weeks.)

When ready to proceed, pour the broth into a large heavy-bottomed saucepan and bring to a boil.

Meanwhile, use a sharp paring knife to “turn” the artichokes, cutting them down to their bottoms, but leaving some of the peeled stem. Carefully place the artichokes in the boiling broth and cook until tender but not too soft, about 25 minutes. Use a slotted spoon to transfer them to a plate and let cool.

Carefully drop the shrimp into the hot liquid and cook for 1 minute. Use the slotted spoon to transfer them to a bowl to cool. Put the mussels in the pot, transferring them as they open to a separate bowl. Discard any that don’t open after 5 minutes. Add the scallops to the boiling broth, removing them to a separate bowl after 2 minutes. Follow with the zucchini for 1½ to 2 minutes, then the carrot for 3 minutes. The vegetables should be tender but still slightly al dente.

Reduce the cooking liquid over high heat to about ½ cup, cooking for about 10 minutes. Transfer the reduction to a small bowl and let cool completely. Using an immersion blender, gradually add the olive oil to the reduction to form an emulsion. Stir in the lemon juice and season with salt to taste.

Scoop the chokes out of the artichokes and cut the hearts into quarters. Remove the top shell from each mussel and cut the scallops in half horizontally. Divide the vegetables and shellfish between 4 shallow soup bowls. Evenly divide the sauce among the bowls and garnish with the basil. Serve immediately.

SERVES 4

1½ cups coarsely chopped shallots (about 3 large shallots)
1/4 cup coarsely chopped garlic (about 6 cloves)
2 tablespoons coriander seeds
8 cups water
6 cups dry white wine
1 tablespoon tomato paste
½ teaspoon saffron threads
4 bay leaves, preferably fresh
1 teaspoon black peppercorns
1 tablespoon dried oregano
2 large artichokes, trimmed, outer leaves removed, and stems peeled
8 ounces medium shrimp, peeled and deveined
8 ounces mussels (preferably Prince Edward Island), rinsed and debearded
4 medium dry sea scallops (about 4 ounces)
1 small zucchini, cut into 1/8-inch-thick rounds
1 medium carrot, cut into 1/8-inch-thick rounds
1 cup good-quality extra-virgin olive oil
1 teaspoon freshly squeezed lemon juice
Kosher salt
2 tablespoons fresh basil cut into chiffonade (see Prep Talk, page 70)
Chicken Breast with Black Trumpet Mushroom Coulis

There are two distinct ideas at work in this dish: The first is the steamed chicken breast. Cooking the meat in this way gives it a very full, voluptuous texture and clean flavor. The other is the black trumpet coulis. Black trumpets are thought of as a poor man’s truffle in Europe, but I’ve always liked their earthy, nutty flavor, which I think deserves to stand on its own. They can be a little intense, and that’s the surprise of this dish: The mushrooms are the star, the chicken is the relief.

Heat a large heavy-bottomed saucepan over medium-high heat. Add 1 tablespoon of the butter; when it’s foamy, add the onion, garlic, and mushrooms. Cook, stirring a few times, until the onion and garlic are soft and translucent and the mushrooms have released most of their liquid, about 5 minutes. Pour in the stock, bring to a boil, and reduce until 1 cup remains, about 20 minutes. Let cool slightly, then transfer to a blender and puree until very smooth, leaving out the center piece of the blender cover to allow steam to escape and covering the top with a kitchen towel to keep hot liquid from escaping.

Wipe out the saucepan and pour the puree back into it. Set over low heat and whisk in the remaining 1 tablespoon butter, the Madeira, lemon juice, and kosher salt. If the puree looks too thick and pasty, thin it with additional stock or water to achieve a sauce consistency.

Keep warm until ready to serve, or refrigerate in an airtight container for up to 2 days and reheat, whisking, just before serving.

(You may need to do the following in batches, or in two steamers.) When ready to serve, set a steamer basket snugly over a large pot filled one-third with water. (If the steamer basket doesn’t fit snugly, line the edge of the pot with aluminum foil to help seal it and hold the basket in place.) Bring the water to a rapid simmer over high heat. Season the chicken on both sides with salt and pepper and set the pieces in the steamer. Steam until the breasts are almost cooked through, about 5 minutes. Transfer to a plate or platter and cover with foil; the carryover heat will finish cooking them.

To serve, spoon some sauce onto each of 4 dinner plates and top with a chicken breast. Season with sea salt to taste and serve immediately.

SERVES 4

2 tablespoons unsalted butter
1/2 small onion, coarsely chopped
1 1/2 medium garlic cloves, coarsely chopped
5 ounces black trumpet mushrooms, stems trimmed, cut in half lengthwise, and washed well in several changes of cold water (discard any slimy mushrooms)
2 cups Chicken Stock (page 292) or high-quality low-sodium store-bought chicken stock
1/2 teaspoon Madeira
1/2 teaspoon freshly squeezed lemon juice, plus more to taste
Kosher salt
4 boneless, skinless chicken breast halves (about 6 ounces each)
Sea salt
Bartlett Pears Served Two Ways

Kate has always had a talent for roasting fruits, finding that perfect balance between natural sweetness and the more intense, caramelized variety unleashed by roasting. At Chanterelle, she often serves dessert trios on compartmentalized rectangular plates, showing the various treatments of one ingredient that are possible, but two treatments seem like plenty in a home setting. One preparation here features the simple combination of roasted pear and cool, creamy ricotta cheese; the other offers the pear in a beignet (fritter) topped with truffle honey.

Wrap the ricotta in cheesecloth or a clean dish towel and place it in a strainer set over a bowl to remove excess liquid. Leave it overnight in the refrigerator until 1 hour before you are ready to serve the dessert, then remove to allow it to come to room temperature.

To roast and glaze the pear halves, preheat the oven to 400°F.

Peel 3 of the pears. Slice a disk about ¾ inch in diameter off the bottom of each one to remove the fibrous core that sits on the bottom of the pears. Stand the pears up on a cutting board and slice them in half, leaving the long stem on one half or split between both halves. Using a melon baller, scoop out the seeds and fibrous stems, leaving a round cavity in each pear half. Lay the halves down, cavity side up, in a roasting pan just large enough to accommodate them all in a single layer. Pour the white wine and Muscat over them, drizzle with the honey, and sprinkle with 2 tablespoons of the sugar. Roast the pears for 30 minutes, then remove from the oven and, with the tip of a metal spatula, gently flip the pears over, cavity side down, and roast for another 20 minutes. Remove from the oven again, flip the pears over, cavity side up, and drizzle some of the cooking liquids over the top.

Raise the oven temperature to 425°F. Sprinkle the pears with 1 tablespoon of the sugar and bake for two more 20-minute periods, basting them with the roasting syrup and sprinkling them with the remaining 1 tablespoon sugar after the first 20-minute period. The pears should be tender when a sharp paring knife is inserted, reduced in size, shiny, and have some areas of caramelization. If you think they need more time in the oven, ladle the cooking liquid over the pears and bake for another 10 to 15 minutes. Allow the pears to cool in the roasting pan. Reduce the oven temperature to 350°F.

To roast the pear slices, peel the pears and slice a disk about ¾ inch in diameter off the bottom of each one to remove the fibrous core that sits on the bottom of the pears. Remove about 1 inch off the top of the pears, at the stem end. Use an apple corer to remove the center core. With a sharp knife, slice each pear into 4 equal doughnut-shaped cross sections. Lay out the slices on a greased or parchment-lined baking sheet and dot them with the butter. Sprinkle with the sugar and bake for 30 minutes. The pears are done when they are soft to the touch; there

continued
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