The Friday Club November 4, 2011

Book Report – Hemmie Gilmore

Beaten, Seared, and Sauced: On Becoming a Chef at the Culinary Institute of America by Jonathan Dixon was published by Clarkson Potter, NY, in 2011.

Nearly 38, Jonathan Dixon left Brooklyn to take the Associate of Occupational Studies (AOS) in Culinary Arts program at the famed CIA in Hyde Park, NY. His live-in girlfriend Nelly helped finance the move up state.

The buildings are impressive, situated high on a bluff overlooking the scenic Hudson River. The Conrad Hilton Library contains the second largest collection of cookbooks in the country. The main building, Roth Hall, had originally been a Jesuit monastery. Every three weeks a new group of students begin the grueling two year program (or the four year BA program). His first lecture outlined the range of courses for the first six weeks of academic classes, followed by 24 weeks of practical classes, and then an 8-week externship which requires a student works somewhere in a restaurant in the USA. The second half mostly is a repeat of academic and practical classes.

The dress code is strict and requires shaves and haircuts. Jonathan was measured for his uniform.

Students are allowed two meals per day at the school, so for the first six weeks one could be from the choice of the Asia, American or Mediterranean kitchens, and must be eaten in the Banquet and Catering room. The meals would be as complex as foie gras profiteroles, seared duck breasts with green peppercorn and pineapple gastrique. Sometimes the food was not very good, prepared by budding chefs who are testing new dishes.

Dr. Tim Ryan is President and is a Certified Master Chef and on the US Culinary Olympics team. His pep talk to the incoming students included reference to CPA. This brought up the name, once again, of the hugely successful Chef Thomas Keller of the French Laundry in the Napa Valley. If you get to work your externship at a place such as this you have to develop CPA – a carrot peeling attitude. Dr. Ryan explained that the job should be considered an opportunity to be the best carrot peeler they’ve ever had! He went on to say that you might even get so lucky as to go help Chef Keller pick the carrots for the evening’s meal. “The journey is the destination, people, the journey is the destination. And you will be able to use that attitude no matter what job you have in the kitchen. And if you do have that attitude, you can become the best at anything you want to do.”

Jonathan grew up in a small New Hampshire town bordering MA, living next door to his grand parents. His family moved there from a “remote bug in the White Mountains” when he was six. Both his mother and grandmother encouraged him to cook their favorite recipes. He loved to cook food he found mentioned in the books he loved to read. After college he became a foot messenger, a receptionist, a proof-reader, a host in a restaurant, and a nanny for a kid whose mother was dying from cancer. He wrote music and book reviews, he cleaned apartments – as he said, “I wasted a decade.”

Then he fell into a job as staff writer for Martha Stewart Living Omni-media. This is where he started an interest in the C.I.A. “If we ever get rich, we said, we’ll go to cooking school.” He was eventually laid off and met Nelly while working at a freelance job rating restaurants for New York magazine. Nelly sometimes joined him in his “work.” He then became an adjunct professor at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn teaching creative writing and literature. He and Nelly cooked together and Nelly mostly paid the bills. One day Jonathan bought the 1200 page CIA book, The Professional Chef, with the idea of cooking their way through it.

He took a knife skills class and then one on sauce-making. He studied different recipes. He sought out employment at a Brooklyn restaurant offering his services free in exchange for the learning experience. He sliced mushrooms and onions, then carrots. He graduated to oven fries and crepes. He filled in on a weekend and cooked brunch. Even though he got lost in coordinating everything to be ready at the right times, he did well enough. A paying job didn’t materialize so he decided to try cooking school.

Nelly bought a small house in Saugerties with money left from the house sale after her divorce and they moved up near Hyde Park which made Jonathan’s commute an easy one.

The issued tool kits and cookbooks were followed by classes in such subjects as Garde-Manger (hors d’oeuvres), Culinary Math (“If a pound of carrots has a yield of 87%, how many ounces will that be? And if that pound of carrots is meant to serve seven people, what will their portion sizes be?”), Food Safety (sanitation and proper temperatures – and what happens to you when you get food poisoning), Gastronomy focused on the theory and aesthetics of dining. Auguste Escoffier’s Le Guide Culinaire defines the art. Product Knowledge taught how to identify vegetables and select the better ones. Besides class work, information was available on line and in the school’s fabulous library.

There were many strict regulations, as reflected in his Skills classes:

“Plates presented not hot enough or too hot will reflect 1 point deduction from your professionalism grade . . . Plates presented with smudges – 1 point; plates presented dirty – 2 points.

The dress code had similar requirements. No beards, white undergarments, only one plain ring and one watch allowed.

After the Academic classes came Meat and Fish Butchering.

Eating in the teaching kitchens for lunch was sometimes a surprise. The dishes served were either really good or awful!

The Meat Identification and Fabrication class was a 7-day crash course. How the animal dies affects the quality of its meat. The instructor Chef Sebald begins by saying, “Unfortunately, for us to eat, something – something – has to die. And that animal – or plant – deserves our respect. It demands our respect. It demands our attention. Our commitment is not to waste it. If nothing else, this is what I want you to learn here.” Jonathan learned that butchering looked easier than it is. Much practice is required.

The instructing chefs generated different responses by their styles of teaching. Chef Viverito was feared for his reprimands and screaming at slovenly students. He would make his point about filleting salmon in a loud emphatic voice, “You need to keep your knife flat. . . . Keep your knives flat!!”

Skills class dealt with “real vegetable cuts, real sauces, real stocks, real heat under real pans with real food.” There are certain ways to slice, dice or julienne an onion, tomato or potato. Waste was part of the evaluation. Points were added or deducted accordingly.

--- They learned to make stock, mire poix, soups, chowder, consommé, roux, mayonnaise and sauces such as veloute, espagnole, tomato, béchamel, hollandaise.

Skills II taught how to turn stock and sauces into demi-glace and sauces Robert, Diane, poivrade, bordelaise, charcutiere, using wine reductions and shallots, cream and mustard and cornichons. Vegetables were blanched, steamed, roasted, sautéed. There are certain ways to cook potatoes, rice, polenta, pasta, etc.

The legendary Chef Perillo would teach, “Taste, taste, taste. Build flavors. Season early. Taste what you’re doing and make the adjustments. Taste. Taste. Taste.”

Sauce Chasseur is used primarily for chicken, but can be used with beef: Sautee mushrooms until they begin to carmelize; add shallots, cognac and white wine. Deglaze the pan and let liquids reduce by half. Add demi-glace, cook, strain, and then add seeded, diced tomatoes briefly before serving, stirring in butter until it is dissolved.

Skills III worked on more basic techniques such as sautéing, stewing, poaching and roasting. The foods the class prepared were eaten by other students. By this time the class was formed more to the core of those continuing on to graduation. Several in Jonathan’s entering class had not made it this far.

Cooking was done on the clock. Coordination of the cooking group was essential. Timing was everything. You must take out the wishbone. You must season the chicken’s cavity. It gets trussed and tossed in the pan. Then make the gravy. The instructor hovers and yells, “Let’s go – let’s go! . . . Smell it. Remember the smell, the color. … Whisk it, season it. … don’t be so … timid! Cook with all your senses.” “Success is the sum of a lot of small things done correctly” is a favorite quote by Chef Fernand Point.

Externship lasted 4 ½ months. Going to such high places such as the French Laundry or Per Se was most difficult to obtain. Only about 20 restaurants were approved by the CIA for this part of their training. Students could expect to work about 90 hours a week with one day off.

One of the big tests was the Cooking Practical. The student draws from a hat one of six menus that must be prepared consisting of soup, a protein, two vegetables and a starch, within 2 ½ hours. If you mess it up the fine is $150. You are suspended for 15 weeks if you fail a third time. This includes an oral exam. Preparation is key. Jonathan was very nervous when the time came. He drew the menu for stew, vegetables, potatoes and consommé. The instructor changed the soup to cream of cauliflower. Several things went wrong. The roux burned, the potatoes weren’t cooked well enough for mashing. He creatively added some soup to help make them creamy. Then his plate got cold while waiting for the instructor who was dealing with a student who was failing her test for the third time. Nevertheless, Jonathan received a passing grade – just. He had a big mess waiting for cleanup in the kitchen.

His externship was spent at Tabla in Manhatten. On the ground floor was the Bread Bar, a more casual restaurant. The finer dining was upstairs.

Chef Cardoz has a well liked cookbook, One Spice, Two Spice. Jonathan thought this chef’s cooking sounded romantic, interesting and unique.

He only got paid $7.25 an hour. The kitchen was huge and had four sous-chefs. The only noise was that of chopping on the cutting boards. Jonathan’s job was to chop ginger into miniscule pieces. The chefs worked in tight orchestration. He cut up lemons, sliced cucumbers then stood for hours watching.

He became a prep cook. His list was long and required a lot of work: “Make cucumber raita, make spicy yogurt, make lamb marinade, marinate lamb top round, cut asparagus, soak beans for sprouting, sprout already soaked beans, make foogoth base, make mushroom korma, make lamb stew, make chole, make green sauce for halibut seviche.” While he worked he got criticized and lectured. A sous-chef directed him to the work one way and then Chef Cardoz came along and directed him to do it a different way. No one engaged him in conversation. It was all strictly work.

He comments, “For every end result, there are a dozen different ways to get there. Everyone in the kitchen had their preferred method to attack any given task. My problem is that I wasn’t fast enough to cross the finish line before anyone and everyone had the chance to comment on the method. … My first week ended, my second began. The days melted together.

Tabla was a lonely place. I arrived, started prepping from the list, got reprimanded and lectured, finished the list, and went home. . . .”

He learned the routines, speeded up, fought back the anger and did what he was told.

Chef Cardoz wouldn’t throw him any compliments but tells him he had not shown any improvement. Jonathan was putting in his time but not doing anything extra. He never stayed later than he had to.

Eventually Dwayne, a sous-chef showed him how to efficiently slice an onion, let up on his criticisms, and began to share some of his cooking tricks.

He got promoted to working the Bread Bar’s menu items and running the amuse-bouche station on Tuesdays and Thursdays. This involved seasoning and serving soup, deep-frying onion rings and squash pakoras to order. One of the sous-chefs finally told him he was doing a good job. But Chef Cardoz tells him, “I think it’s time for you to consider other career options, because this one is obviously not working out for you.” Jonathan didn’t get fired but was put on notice. When his time there ended he left feeling exhausted more than elated.

Back at the Institute he started off on the wrong foot by being late for the first class in Quantity Food Production. Feelings of resentment and resignation once more came to the surface. He screwed up the cooking assignment and again considered the idea that he just wasn’t a cook.

There were six weeks of L-Block: Restaurant Law, Cost Control, Menu Development, Nutrition, Introduction to Management. That was followed by Baking & Pastry Class. He comments, “I’ve heard cooking and baking compared to the difference between jazz and classical music; cooking requires an intuition and ability to improvise, but baking is all about exactitude, a science.”

Even though he was struggling to keep up his enthusiasm and was giving thoughts of cutting his losses and leaving the school, he thought it would be pretty “cool” to learn how to make beer bread dough, chocolate cherry sourdough, meringues, croissants. He was happy to be making puff pastry and pie crusts. His instructor was excited and obviously loved his work. The other students became friendly.

At first the bread dough got over kneaded until the gluten “gave up and died,” the ice cream ended up hard as a rock, and the kitchen would smell like a charred burned crust. But by the second week the biscuits and crème anglaise were turning out perfectly. This instructing chef made learning pleasurable and did not base his power on threats and abuse of his students.

A stunning moment for Jonathan came while he stood watching an intense competition for the Bocuse d’Or finals. One of the twelve American chefs would go to the Bocuse d’Or in Lyon, France to compete internationally. The judges were renowned chefs such as Keller and Boulud. They started cooking at 6 a.m. and had 2 ½ hours to present a Scottish salmon dish and one of lamb.

Watching the teams work was exciting and revealing. Nelly had once told him that she thought he didn’t just fear failure but success as well.

“To do something right,” he reasons, “carries with it a set of demands that you will be able to do it again, that you irreversibly elevate your standards.”

He picked out the chef and team he thought would win: “You could tell they *knew* they were doing well.” They moved with confidence and competence. He thought, “They’ve worked for this moment for a long time, even before they ever knew they’d be here.”

This was philosophy in action. Their decision to be excellent, their discipline, their practice had brought them to this new level. It works the same way for musicians, dancers or football players. “Every gesture, no matter how small, was about the individual attempting to be great.”

(p. 225) – “What those guys did – what they do – is attainable. You’ll wind up bleeding to get there, but you can get there. But not me, at least not with the bruises and slights of how I think about myself, with all my hesitations, my timidity, my half=assed methodology of doing what was expected of me but little more.

This is why they yell at you. This is why you’re forced to get up in the morning and go cut fish. This is why they will never give you a compliment. This is why.

And I disagree with so much of how they do it sometimes, the chefs, with their bullying, their brute force. But I understood now the impulse behind it. If you can get rid of all your mental baggage and distractions, all your own doubts and pettiness and bullshit, you can arrive at the clarity of mind with a diamond focus that lets all of a person’s training and skill bloom. Then a person can be great.

I had gotten to see greatness today. Everythink that had gone on for me up- until now, the exhaustion, the being disciplined, the building angers, the energy of those angers, the nervous, racked nights of the last summer were all leading to watching this today.

I had a better understanding of what people meant when they referred to being born again. I looked the same, but my body felt different. My mind had had a bypass done on it. I felt able. I felt electrified. I saw school and everything about it as an opportunity to try and touch perfection, to hone efficiency, to find at every moment a chance to be better, no matter the external pressures.”

Jonathan felt reborn, different. School now became an opportunity, a chance to become better at whatever he decided to do.

Working under Chef Perillo in the Mediterranean kitchen he found more confidence, and things were going well until he grasped hold of a very hot sauté pan. His skin stuck to it. He tried wrapping his hand in a towel and continued with his assignment. The school nurse later put salve on it and he went back to do the clean up.

The Banquets and Catering course included seven days of cooking in quantity for the incoming students. Jonathan worked hard at keeping his composure at their rudeness and narrow mindedness. One of the instructors thanked him for his amusing efforts, then added, “This is definitely not the career path you should be choosing.”

The Wines and Beverages class had a 30% failure rate. The 800 page textbook covered vineyards around the world. And there was only three weeks, from 2 to 8 p.m. every day, to learn it. Pairing of foods with wine is important. The class learned to smell for the “wine’s nose” and taste, hoping for a “long finish.” They found a Syrah wine called “Le Posseur” from the Bonny Doon Winery priced at $18 they thought better than the ones costing three times as much. Jonathan crammed and studied late into the night and only got a 75. Taking the test a second time he felt lucky to get a 79.

The final three months were spent working as a cook and waiter in one of the four campus restaurants: Caterina D’Medici (Italian), American Bounty (regional American), St. Andrew’s (locally sourced, sustainable foods), and The Escoffier Room (classic French cuisine).

The instructors kept up their prowling and thunderous yelling if things weren’t moving fast enough. Dishes had to be remade under intense pressure.

There was a surprising amount to learn about the “front of the house.” The service was described as a transaction – hospitality an experience. There is a system for seat numbers and learning how to get the right food to the right customer. The computer program was complex. The flow should go without the customer realizing what you are doing.

He graduated with his class, most of whom were heading for employment in a restaurant of some kind. Jonathan knew he wanted to keep cooking but it had to be on his own terms. Maybe, after he wrote about this experience, he’d start up a catering business . . . .