



FORWARD

By Jeremy Andrus

Bringing people together to create a more flavorful world is our ethos at Traeger®. We see our grills as much more than just grills. We see them as gateways for crafting flavorful experiences, forging friendships, and creating lasting memories. That's what gathering around fire has done since the dawn of time. It's where communities were formed, bonds strengthened, and, of course, food was shared. By firing up your Traeger, you carry on the ancient tradition of cooking food over a wood fire and, in turn, unlock the same experiences (although thankfully with a little less effort than our ancestors had to put in).

And with a Traeger, you won't just unlock a new way to cook—you'll discover a welcoming and diverse community that we like to call the Traegerhood. Made up of everyone from parents cooking weeknight meals to professional athletes, outdoor enthusiasts, weekend warriors, and world-class chefs, the Traegerhood is a place where fellow wood-fired fanatics share their Traeger experiences, celebrate successes, and mentor each other—both in person and from across the globe. It's a force that's much bigger than the products we create, and together we are redefining what home cooks can accomplish with a backyard grill.

I hope that as you read through these pages, you'll get a taste of what Traeger and the Traegerhood are all about and feel inspired to see where they can take you.

Sincerely,

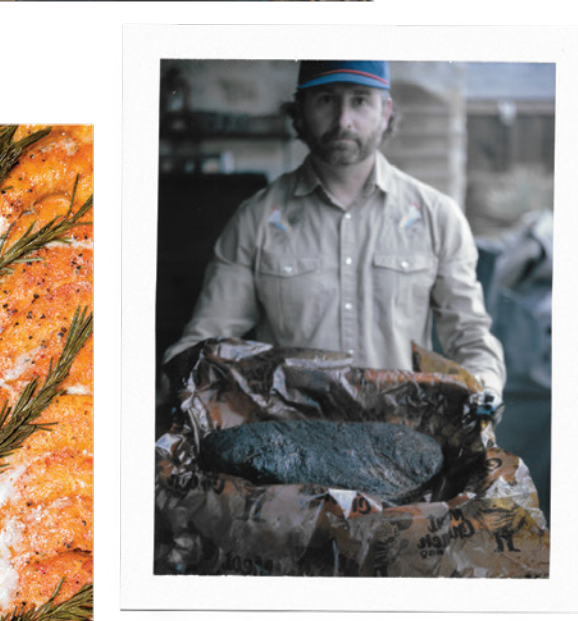
Jeremy Andrus
CEO



WHO WE ARE

We're a community of home cooks and backyard BBQers. Renowned chefs and seasoned pitmasters. Athletes, artists, activists, and adventurers. Providers, partners, and pals. We're obsessed with sharing great food and crafting flavorful memories. We work hard, play harder, and always eat good. We are a collective. And these are our stories. Welcome to the Traegerhood.

WELCOME
TO THE
TRAEGERHOOD



Featured - Issue No. 1

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C H E F



Ode to Betsy

BY HOLLY HAWORTH | PHOTOS BY IKE EDEANI

01

J R O B

When Justin Robinson was a kid in Mobile, Alabama, he came home every day after school to his grandfather cooking on the grill. “He always had it going,” Robinson remembers. “Ribs, steak, chicken wings, it was always something.” The young Robinson was a picky eater, though, and preferred McDonald’s, he said, laughing. He had no idea back then that one of his fondest memories would be the image of his grandfather at the grill, or that his own career as Chef JRob would be so inspired by that memory. “My grandfather loved being an entertainer, and I eventually followed in his path,” he said. “As a chef, I’m firing up the grill every day. Everyone knows that if I’m throwin’ down on the grill it’s going to be a great time, a great evening where we can just relax.”

The 26-year-old Robinson now offers what he calls the Chef JRob Experience, a private dining event at his home in Atlanta, where he said diners come as strangers and leave as friends. “I wouldn’t want to be a restaurant chef because I would get bored,” he said. “I want to keep things exciting and fun. I like to pay special attention to my guests, and I like to keep rolling out unique dishes and trying new things.” Last night, Robinson marinated chicken thighs in homemade pesto, smoked them on the grill, and finished the dish with a truffle-parmesan seasoning blend. “It was really untraditional, and it was the best chicken I’ve ever made.”

Robinson’s transformation — from the kid who preferred fast food over his grandfather’s cooking, to Chef J Rob — began in college. When his parents dropped him off at his dorm at Auburn University, they bought him a hot skillet and told him he would have to learn how to cook for himself. “That’s when it all started,” he said. “I started cooking in my dorm and my friends always stopped by and said, ‘what are you cooking, bro, it smells so good!’” He would cook jambalaya, red beans and rice, and pork chops. “I always had enough to share, so everyone would stay and eat.” He loved to feed his friends, and they told him he was talented. He had picked up a Cajun influence in his cooking from a childhood spent on the Gulf Coast, and friends thought his food had a special kick to it.

Then, he heard about a talent show at the University. “I can’t sing, and I’m not the best dancer,” he told me, “So I cooked.” He got second runner-up in the talent show and made a name for himself. “Ever since then,” he said, “my life has been a rocket ship, straight up.”





In school, Robinson had been studying to become a surgical assistant. When he decided to go abroad for a medical internship in Thailand, he suddenly found himself immersed in a world of new flavors. “I feel like all along, food has followed me,” he mused. “I was there to enhance my knowledge in the medical field, but I was also discovering entirely different flavor profiles and dishes, like a scorpion on a stick.” He discovered the depth of subtlety in a steak prepared rare, and he tried exotic new fruits. “I was really expanding my palate,” he said.



After his graduation, he moved back to Mobile, and worked as a phlebotomist at the hospital. But food followed him again. When he cooked a meal for some coworkers, word spread. “At that time,” he said, “the phlebotomists wore red scrubs, so everyone would recognize me. They would stop me and ask if I was the chef, and I would say, ‘yes, I am!’” His coworkers began hiring him to cook meals for them when they were tired and overworked. “They say food is a natural medicine, and I believe that,” Robinson added.



"It's really about cooking with love.
I want to offer a great experience, a sanctuary."

He was accepted to graduate school to study public health at Mercer University in Atlanta. At Mercer, he began to think about food within the context of public health. What if healthy food was covered by insurance? This question drove him to pursue a grant for a program he envisioned called Hearty Home Meals that would serve diabetic patients. Both of his grandmothers have suffered from diabetes, so the issue is close to his heart. “Diabetes is caused by poor eating habits,” he said. “Through healthy eating practices, not only can you eliminate a lot of the symptoms of diabetes, you can also start replacing medications.”



The grant for the program was approved, and the next step is to begin preliminary trials in the Atlanta area.

Meanwhile at Mercer, he began to grow a business as a chef. That’s when things began to “really start blowing up,” he said, “because I was in a bigger city.”





He has since graduated with a master's degree and continued to make a name in cuisine for himself in Atlanta. In 2017 he participated in Food Network's Iron Chef Showdown, and in 2019 he was featured on MasterChef, making it to the top 80 out of 20,000 contestants.

As his life as Chef JRob grew, he heard his father talking about a grill he had seen that was wood-fired. Robinson was curious. He bought his first Traeger and said that it "really elevated my cooking. It makes things so much simpler and easier and gives me great flavor." It also brought him back to his early memories of his grandfather, who had called his grill Betsy. "I named my first Traeger Betsy, that's my getaway where I have my connection with my grandfather." During the pandemic, Robinson says he "took big hits" as a chef. With his masters in public health, he decided to go to work as an epidemiologist. In that position, he was in charge of communicating CDC protocols to grocery stores and restaurants in Cobb County, Georgia.

Now, JRob loves to cook his grandfather's signature dish, BBQ short ribs. On the rooftop of his loft, he grills for private guests who enjoy a skyline view of the city. In a small raised bed next to the grill, he's growing a miniature garden of herbs and vegetables. He hopes to soon offer a full farm-to-table experience in a rural area outside of Atlanta called Chattahoochee Hills. He envisions a "pop-up" restaurant where diners can book an evening and enjoy a personalized meal.





“It’s really about cooking with love. I want to offer a great experience, a sanctuary,” he explained. “Being from Mobile, I’m a country boy at the end of the day. I’d like for guests to be able to dial back and enjoy nature in an intimate but spacious place. I want it to be what I call a ‘Traeger grilling sanctuary,’ where people can also come learn my techniques and cook a meal under the stars. This is a big city, and people want that.”

For now, he will continue to serve guests in his Atlanta loft. On a deck off of the kitchen are his Ironwood 885 grills, which he has named Butch and Braise. No matter where he cooks for his guests, his dishes speak for themselves. “I’m a Southern chef who plays with traditional cuisine to make it unpredictable and memorable,” Robinson said. One of his recent dishes was hibiscus-habañero duck thighs on the grill. “With the Cajun influence in my cooking, it’s always going to have a little kick to it.”

And no matter where he’s grilling, his first memories of his grandfather are always with him. “Anytime I’m grilling, I feel like I’m with him. I always feel his presence.”



A TEXAS KING

OF SMOKE
&
MEAT

02
MATT PITTMAN

Interview & Photography
by
Tyler Sharp

One of Texas's favorite BBQ sons, Matt Pittman has enjoyed a meteoric rise in cooking circles, winning the hearts of BBQ connoisseurs and earning a place in the smoky halls of meat Valhalla. A former corporate tech VP, Matt jettisoned the suit and tie life to pursue his dream: a beloved seasoning and rub company called Meat Church. You may have heard of it. A guy so nice you could introduce him to your Southern mother, the success that he and his family have enjoyed is well deserved. After all, they are in this together. On a beautiful spring day in Waxahachie – a town about 30 miles south of Dallas that is now often a BBQ destination for this reason – I was able to visit the Pittman home. Their dog Dolly greeted me like an old friend, their young daughter told me about her upcoming volleyball practice, and between

introductions their son begged to ride his mini bike down to his friend's house for dinner. Cartoons were on, snacks were being made, and the buzzer on the dryer went off. I felt at home. We sat down in the backyard, and over a few beers and many bites of freshly smoked brisket, talked about Matt's wild road thus far, and what it all means to him. For those few hours, I was part of their family, as are so many others who come to the classes, events and cookouts that Matt and his family host at their home. When I left, he handed me an entire brisket, which to a Texan such as myself, is quite the kingly gift. Like I said, he's a really nice guy. So next time you're in north Texas, drop on by and tell them that Uncle Tyler sent you.





TYLER A lot of people are likely familiar with Matt Pittman, the BBQ Master, but we're hoping to dive a little deeper into who you are as a person. How did your upbringing affect the path that you took to get into cooking?

MATT Good question. I played a lot of sports growing up, just through grade school. My parents divorced when I was eight, and that really shaped a lot of my life. I was born in Tennessee, and spent a lot of time there and in Alabama. Then I followed my dad to Texas at age 13 and have been here ever since. I'd like to say it was smooth, but I did go to a different school each year from the sixth grade on. I didn't have a ton of friends when I was young. Both of my grandmothers taught me to cook, and it's taken me a lot of years to figure this part out, but what I do in cooking is take care of people.

That comes from my upbringing. I used to joke that with either one of my grandmas, you would eat this huge lunch after church and by the time dishes were done, I'd be sitting on the couch about to pass out watching either baseball or NASCAR, and grandmother would come in and say, "Y'all want something to eat?" I'd say, "We just ate!"

I never intended on going to culinary school, or anything like that. A lot of what I do now was formed in college when I started grilling. Then, right after college, I had a couple fraternity brothers who had a huge BBQ pit made. Pete would call me and say, "Hey, we're going to make ribs this weekend. Do you want to come over?" and that meant he was going to smoke 30 racks, or some enormous amount of BBQ. I fell in love with that. I started going to Dallas Cowboys games to tailgate, and somebody had to do the cooking. First I started grilling, and by Thanksgiving, I was frying turkeys out there. Looking back, I wasn't trying to necessarily be the best guy at brisket, I was just this outdoor cook. I didn't want to be inside. Then I took a trip to Lockhart, Texas, and had a beef rib for the first time. When I took that bite of beef with salt and pepper seasoning, my head popped back. I thought, "Whoa. I want to do that." So I started researching it like crazy, got a charcoal grill and an offset smoker, and just started cooking everything I could outside.

TYLER Did you have a role model through that whole process, and what values did they impart to you?

MATT Yeah. I come from a family of blue collar, really, really hard working individuals. My dad's always been an entrepreneur, welder, pipe fitter. He taught me to save money, and work really hard. My mom's a thrifter. All of them had to make this happen for themselves, but both my parents and my grandparents were very hard working. All of them instilled a strong work ethic in me, and that's where it all comes from. That's all I ever needed.

TYLER What were some of the events that you feel shaped you the most on this journey? Were there any particularly hard knocks you learned from?

MATT I've been pretty fortunate with Meat Church, because it didn't have to work, it was a hobby. At the time, I had a really successful career as Vice President of IT in financial services. I realized after a few years that the side business could really be something special. My marriage went through a really tough time, because I had a full-time legit career, while I had this booming hobby and wanted it to be the job. It was getting a lot of notoriety and we cooked for a fair amount of well-known people. There was a point where my wife said, "I didn't sign up for this. You shouldn't be working 100 hours." It took me nearly a year to convince her to let me leave (the IT job). "I'm not nervous anymore. We're going into our fourth year, look where our revenue is. I feel very confident in this, because I'm running this brand off the side of my desk." My wife agreed, and then I told my boss



that I was going to retire. This year, I've been nominated for the Ernst & Young Southwest Entrepreneur of the Year, and ironically I'm going against the CEO of my previous company. Pretty wild stuff. The greatest thing that's ever happened to me was being able to leave corporate America. I tell people I'm living the dream, because I've turned my hobby into a job.

TYLER Do you find that you can be yourself in this business, or at times, do you feel like you have to be more of an idea of yourself?



MEAT
CHURCH



MATT

Oh yeah, for sure. Not to sound insincere, but we're portraying an image. Everyone thinks that everything I cook is perfect, and that it was Instagram worthy when I made it, and that's not the case. Some of the best food I ever made looked terrible. We're not a restaurant, we have BBQ products, and we have this product called Matt Pittman. I can make one brisket, I'll take a picture of it, tell you how I did it, teach you about it, and I walk on water with you. But truth be told, my buddies that own BBQ joints are selling 40, 50, 60 briskets a day. Every bite of every one of those has to be perfect, or they'll get slaughtered online. I've got less pressure than they do, but I still want to do my best.

TYLER

What makes Texas BBQ unique from other styles? Or what makes it superior? You can definitely take the gloves off if you want.

MATT

I appreciate all the regions of BBQ, I say that all the time. But with that being said, Texas BBQ is king. When you travel the world, rarely do you see Joe's North Carolina BBQ. It's so and so Texas BBQ. First off, beef is king. It's simple and straightforward. We say that good BBQ doesn't need sauce, so when you can take a piece of meat, season it with salt and pepper, smoke it with post oak, and it pops my head back like it did at that young age for me, that's special. Compare that to some really good pork that tasted great but was accented or covered up with a sweet BBQ sauce on a bun and might have slaw on it. That's not the deal here. Again, having grown up on a different type of BBQ, I came here and it changed my life, literally. I just don't think there's anything like it.

I T , S A G R E A T

D A Y F O R G R E A T

B B Q G E T

T H E F A M I L Y

S M O K I , N



TYLER It's safe to say that you're famous in BBQ circles, but has that added to the pressure of your craft?

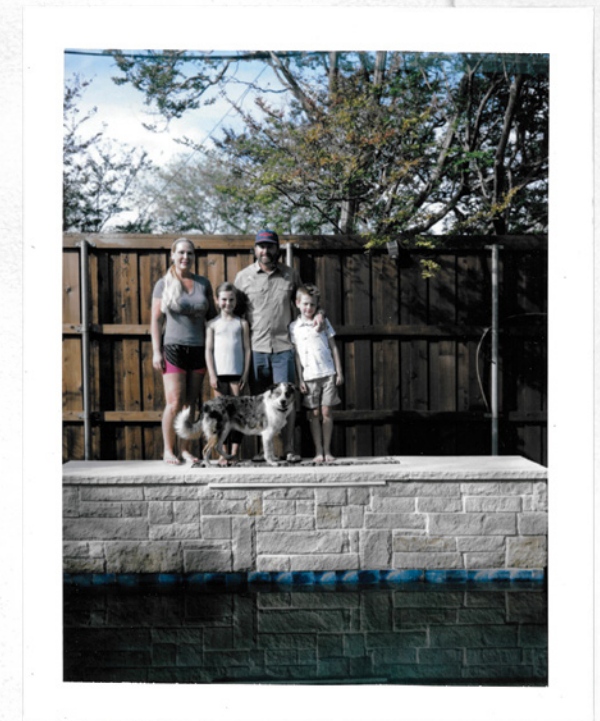
MATT Yeah, there's pressure in unique ways. My main pressure is to continue to try to be on top, because there's always people behind you, the next Meat Church is always coming. So trying to be sharp, relevant, and new. For me, it's about, "Okay, what could we do today that we haven't done before?" I said this earlier, we do things seasonally, so we're doing different things at different times, cooking a variety of cuisines for each season. From comfort food, to boiling crawfish outside, to smoking turkeys on the Traeger at the end of the year, it changes. Only pressure is that people have this expectation of us. I don't want to disappoint anybody. No different than brands like Traeger and Yeti, they set a standard for a reason, and so the only pressure I really feel is just to keep turning out new, cool stuff that people are interested in.

TYLER How does social media play into this? How do you keep it from changing the way you conduct yourself and your business?

MATT Social media is super interesting, and it's how we created this business, but not intentionally. The Meat Church Instagram, for instance, is basically Matt Pittman's reality TV. What you see is what you get. We have half a million Instagram followers, and I'm putting myself out there. I feel like I'm walking in front of the windows of your house naked sometimes. I put a lot of thought into making sure I say what I meant to say, whether it be in print, on social media, or in a video. There's a ton of pressure around that. Generally, our social media following is pretty positive, and if something happens, then our customers and followers usually self police and deal with it for us. YouTube is a different animal, there are a lot of savages on there and people love to tell you what they think. People have lost a lot of decency and talk to you in a manner that they wouldn't normally talk to you face-to-face like this. It bothers me. I really try to take the high road with all things, because it never ends well if you engage. We would not be where we are without social media, so I'm completely indebted to it, but it's a double-edged sword. When I wake up every day, it's the first thing I check. I'm the only one that's logged into it, and every word on there was written by me. This is not a team of kids just out of college. You are talking to the expert who cooked the food, told you how to do it, and answered your questions, which is extremely authentic and I think is a huge part of our success.

TYLER Where do you see opportunities for food to transcend just being sustenance?

MATT Well, I frequently say that my life centers around food, but if you think about it, most peoples' lives do. Everybody has to eat. But the reason I'm really passionate about what we do is about creating great memories, with great people, around great food. How much time have you spent around the table, breaking bread with other people? My family makes sure that we eat dinner as a family every night, and we have for years. It's important to us. I've talked about how my passion is teaching, but I say this at the beginning of my classes, my number one goal is to see you down the road, a month, two months, three months, and seeing the lightbulb go on for people, that's so rewarding. I tell people that BBQ's a religion in Texas. It's just about the joy that people get from eating really good food with their friends and family, it's a great time. Having a drink, eating some good food, that's what we're all about. Again, I don't think that my way's the only way, or the gospel, or the right way necessarily. Just go out and do your own thing, and make your memories, and have fun with it. Just don't come bitch on my YouTube channel.





Smoke the ultimate full packer brisket with Matt Pittman



03

BBQ
Undefeated



BENNIE KENDRICK

Story: Bill Roden Photography: Elias Carlson





We all have our low moments. Momentary cracks in our otherwise upbeat lives. It's part of life's push-and-pull. But sometimes life pushes back a little harder and wedges those cracks open with a crowbar, perhaps via an unexpected life-altering event that throws us into a state of deep depression. Depression can swoop in and kidnap a person, holding their dignity hostage. Rendering their souls inert.

Some pursue healing via the long courageous road of therapy and medication. Some self-medicate with drugs, alcohol, or risky behavior. While others default to wearing public-facing masks and live a lie that everything is ok.

Bennie Kendrick bought a grill.



Nine years ago, when Bennie’s phone rang with the tragic news that his brother passed away at 37 years of age, Bennie lost more than a brother. He lost the center of his world and himself in the process. The collateral damage sequestered him to three years of clinical depression. Bennie hit bottom and cut himself off from his family, his wife, his daughter, and his son. Eventually, he reached that bottom most point where life lost all meaning. That moment many depressed individuals reach where the thought of living a lie becomes too great of a burden.

With the help of his wife, Bennie pulled himself out of the dirt, dusted himself off, and made another go. It took everything he had to rebuild his life from moment to moment. Help also arrived in his rescue dog, Tillie. They bonded as dog and owner do but on such a level that his depression started to melt along the edges. One evening, while visiting the Bay Area with his family, he spotted a Traeger grill at a BBQ. Bennie was captivated by something far more than the wood pellets or the versatility.

Something sparked inside him the second he looked at the grill. Something he still can’t put into words: he just had to have one of his own. Bennie scraped together the means to buy one for himself and a door opened.

Bennie threw himself into the world of BBQ and began experimenting with various techniques and recipes. The more he explored, the more he lost himself in the cooking and discovered a new path unfolding right before his eyes. Could something like BBQ become a way to make a living? A reason for living?

Most celebrity BBQ chefs come up through family restaurants, apprenticing within the tight-knit BBQ world, or through glitzy culinary schools. Bennie originally made his living swinging a hammer on construction sites. While he hails from Central California, it’s not the first BBQ region that pops up in everyone’s mind. The world of BBQ was still a mystery to Bennie, yet every cut, every meal, every attempt to push his craft further filled that growing crack in his life and became an uncharted path to blaze on his terms with his own hands.





A decision to begin posting his journey on Instagram turned out to be the path for a much brighter future. Bennie shared his attempts at famous recipes and advanced techniques. He posted his trials and errors while documenting his transition from amateur to a professional-level chef. Fans witnessed Bennie sharing the anxiety that comes with overcooking a \$60 brisket. Since day one, brisket was his most challenging recipe. Through years of hard work, he's now known for his unique brisket BBQ. His fans followed along as he tried his hand at the art of deboning choice cuts without any training or knife-handling courses. His experimentation with various types of food combinations and techniques became something everyone could relate to on their respective BBQ journeys. Bennie's growing fanbase celebrated his triumphs and failures right there by his side every step of the way. A few months in, Traeger came calling.



As Traeger put it, “We saw something in him.” Bennie’s humility, his vulnerability, his honesty and relatable journey through the world of BBQ spoke to everyone who came across his feed. Most notably, his social platform became more than a place to share his BBQ adventures. He’s received hundreds of messages from fans who shared their personal stories about how his work inspired them in their darkest hours. Including candid notes from soldiers overseas who connected to his work through his personal loss and fighting spirit to carry on despite life’s headwinds. As Bennie put it, “It’s mind-blowing to think how many people I’ve helped from my backyard.”

Bennie embodies everything Traeger believes and hopes to offer to cooks at all levels in the Traegerhood. With Traeger behind him, Bennie left his construction career to dive into his newfound passion with even greater zeal.

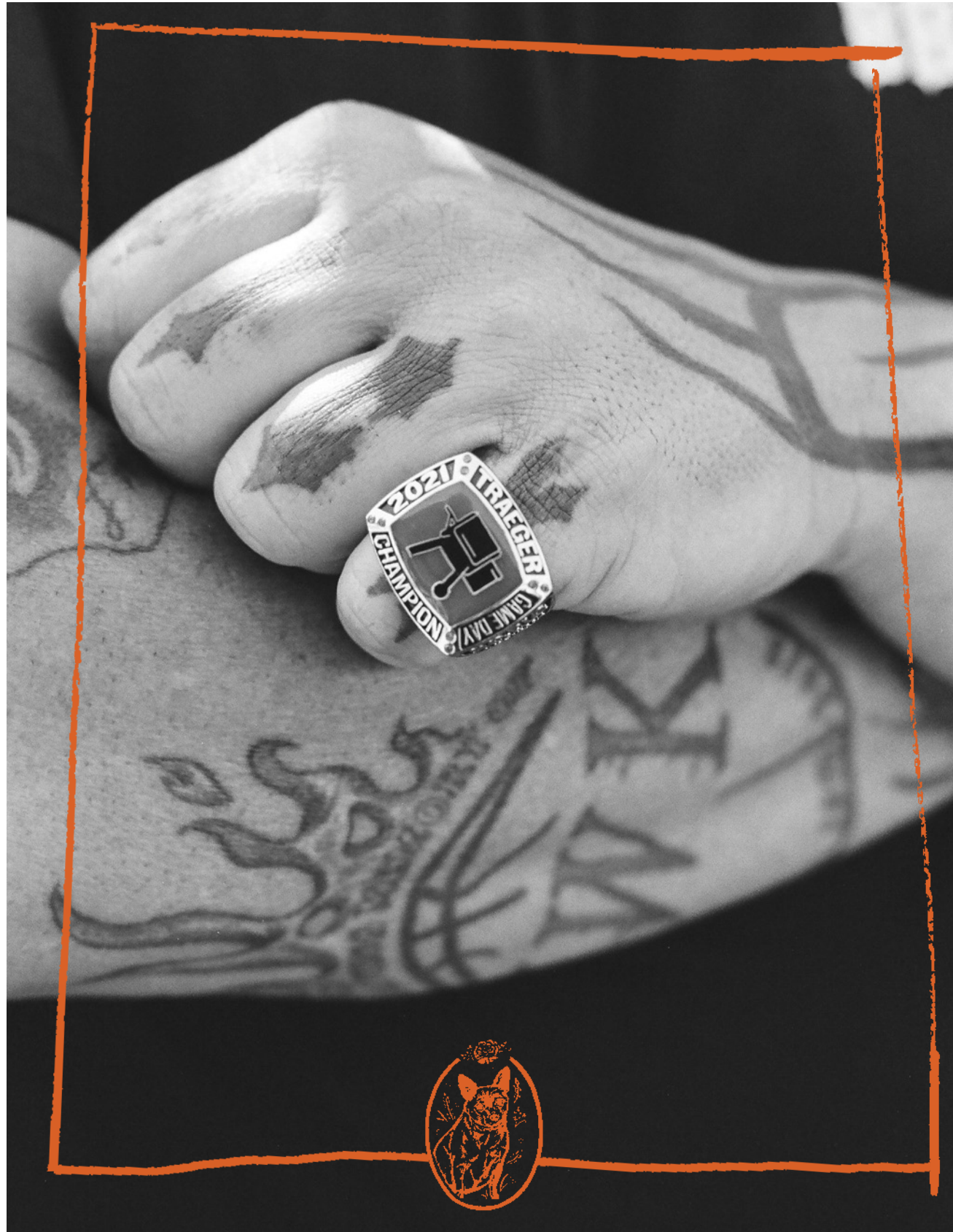
Celebrity chefs often operate from behind the curtain, appearing to cook with a level of magic gleaned from years in an ivory tower that furthers the myth that BBQ takes a lifetime to master. We only observe their mastery after years of hard work, experience, and failures. They rarely engage with their audience in the comments on social feeds, furthering the illusion that only the chosen few reach the pantheon of master chefs. Bennie showed the world that hard work makes up for lack of talent or decades of experience. He democratized his BBQ adventure in a way that empowered his audience, broke down long-held rules and rites of passage, and gave the crown of BBQ mastery back to his fans.

Over the years, Bennie leaned into his growing skills and began to create his own unique recipes. More experimenting led to more posts. More posts led to more followers. More followers led to lucrative sponsorships from knife makers to cooler brands to high-end meat suppliers. Yet Bennie remains the backyard BBQ chef who wears his heart on his sleeve, “I don’t worry about my man card. I’m not afraid to show emotion. It’s who I am.”

Bennie’s original recipes for BBQ Sweet Pepper Meatloaf, Smoked Pork Chili Verde, Stuffed Avocados, and Italian Beef Pinwheels now grace the permanent archives of Traeger recipes. He’s cooked for Hollywood celebs, MLB, NFL, UFC athletes, and even for his local law enforcement community. A remarkable feat for a chef only seven years into the BBQ game.







Bennie would be the first to tell you anyone can pull off what he's accomplished. What you put out into the world is what you get back. His success in combating his depression head-on is the result of helping others as a way to help himself. BBQ became his path to healing. A personal and professional path he continues to document with the same level of modesty, grace, and passion.

Today, Bennie is a sought-after BBQ icon for speeches, coaching, and other appearances reserved only for the chosen few in the world of BBQ. Yet he prefers to spend his time doing it the way he's always done it: in front of a grill in his backyard. Recently, Bennie lent his skills to help the Make A Wish Foundation. He hasn't forgotten how he made it this far. Sometimes hope arrives in unexpected ways from unexpected places. Bennie shows us more than how to cook. He shows us what it truly means to be human.



traeger.com/recipes/bennie-kendrick

KIA DAMON

It's spring in the city, and New York is bursting with color. Through the din of a busy evening in Brooklyn, the breeze carries a hint of grill smoke and something you can't quite put your finger on, beckoning you further down the block. There on her front stoop, is Kia Damon, grilling meatballs on the Traeger and making conversation with the strangers who lean on the railing instead of hurrying on by. With a small chunk of real estate, eight cement steps to be exact, and a chef's heart for feeding people, Kia is stoking the fires of community when she offers a bite hot off the grill.

After serving as Lalito's executive chef and Cherry Bombe's former culinary director, the Chopped champion who was named "The New Face of New York's Food World" by *Vogue*, has a new dream to feed those in need right down the street.

04 Kia Damon - Feed The People

Story: Katie Marchetti

| Photography: Gabriella Herman





Tell me a little bit about how you got your start cooking, when did you discover you loved it?

I definitely come from a cooking family. I feel like I learned how to eat good food before I learned how to cook that food, and I owe that to my grandma. She was always feeding me whatever she was eating. So it started pretty young, I think it was pre-teen ish when I started to like cooking. I was the oldest child and both my parents were working full time, so I had to help. It was a lot of trial and error for sure, and I didn't really get good at it until I was in my mid to late teens.

Did that build a lot of confidence? I feel like finding your thing at a young age kind of shapes who you are a bit.

Oh, absolutely. I had lost a lot of my confidence when depression and stuff came along, and it was very difficult to deal with that. I felt like a failure, until I realized I was good at cooking. I finally felt good, and there was immediate affirmation when someone ate something you made and said it was great. It built my confidence as a young adult. I'm glad that I found it, honestly.

You're self-taught as a chef — what was that progression like? When did you decide that this is something you could make a living at?

I think I was like 19 or 20 when I thought I could do this for real.

At the time, I was a really big fan of Bobby Flay. I remember reading that he dropped out of high school and was working at a pizza shop, but someone came in and saw something in him and paid for him to go to culinary school. So I thought I was going to get my Bobby Flay moment - I'm just going to be self-taught, and then someone's going to see how great I am and send me to school.

So I just worked my way up through kitchens, and I definitely was not mentally prepared for it. It wasn't difficult working in

the kitchens — the difficulty was the treatment. Just realizing, in a way that I hadn't before as a young adult, the biases and the prejudices that existed. And I just thought, 'dude, we're all working at the same place, working the same job, we're the same.'

I thought if I put my head down and cooked and just showed them that I do have the skill, then maybe that'll push me forward. And even then it really did not.

I did most of my cooking in Tallahassee — my first job was at Panda Express. From there I went to work at a diner where I feel like the bulk of the base of my training and cooking came from. Worked for a very wretched woman, but she taught me a lot. The Bada Bean, Sweet Pea Cafe and even a stint at Universal Studios making the famed Butterbeer at The Wizarding World of Harry Potter followed that. That's kind of when I started doing

my own thing, cooking for dinner parties and stuff like that. Developing the Kia Cook's identity from there.

What brought you to New York?

I was hitting a wall in Florida. I had a really devastating family thing, I got fired, and then I got the rejection letter for the James Beard Culinary program. I felt like

my life was falling apart, and that I should go somewhere else. In hindsight I just feel like all those things were kicking me off the diving board. I went up to visit my friend in New York, and her restaurant up there, formerly Lolita, was looking for sous chefs and my friend said, "You should apply to this. If you don't apply I will apply on your behalf!" So I worked for it and I got it. And next thing you know, I'm in New York, working as a sous chef, it was actually insane.

So then you were promoted to head chef of Lolita, correct?

Promoted is a cute word choice. I had no choice, I was forced into it. Looking back, it was so chaotic. I took a wild chance. I felt like it set me up to learn a lot of great things.





A lot of really difficult things, very early on in my career. I had to grow up really, really fast.

Was it affirmation that you were on the right track when you got that position?

Good question. I don't think affirmation in that sense of, 'yeah, girl, you deserve this, you can do this'. I think affirmation in the sense of 'I am doing things that are larger than before and oftentimes more uncomfortable than before. So that must mean that I'm growing.' I'm always trying to find the path that is the most uncomfortable, just so I can step out of myself and think about discipline and think about growth, and be truly challenged.





Kosciuszko Street

Kosciuszko Str

SNOOPY

GRAFFITI

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New York City RASTRY BROOKLYN

“I DON’T THINK I’M DOING ANYTHING REVOLUTIONARY. YOU KNOW, I’M JUST ADDING TO WHAT ALREADY EXISTS AND JUST PICKING UP A PIECE OF IT AND MOVING FORWARD WITH EVERYBODY ELSE, JUST LIKE SOMEBODY WILL DO AFTER ME.”





I was reading a couple of articles about you and one headline said you were "The New Face of New York's Food World," which is an incredible tagline. After getting rejection letters and not being promoted for so long, what did it feel like to suddenly have your face everywhere?

That was crazy, even now it feels very affirming. As imperfect as I am, as bootstrapped as my life has been, I just tried to remain my most authentic self. Sometimes it's people looking for the next hot thing to talk about or it's hip now that this black girl is doing this thing; there's always going to be that but I'm glad that I didn't let that discredit the hard work that I was actually doing.

I feel like that authenticity, though, really draws in a special crowd. So have you left the restaurant world behind?

I'm supporting it in a different way. It was not that I'd never wanted to be in restaurants. It was just that the current system that I was in was harmful to me. So I had to step away but I always say that a restaurant is a building, you know, it's the people who come to it that make it what it is. My dream is to own a diner. I used to have dreams, dreams for real fine dining, Michelin Star, et cetera, and now that I've gotten more experience, I realized this is the food that I want to make and that's okay. There's nothing wrong with that. I want a diner. I love diners. That's where community is built and those regulars, familiar faces, things like that. So I'm just taking the detour to build another part of my life and my career, and then I'll come back to it, open a diner.

I feel like that's just part of growing. Right? You get a lot more clarity about what that dream actually looks like.

Exactly, exactly. You just get more clarity. And I have to remember that as much as people love the young, new, hot 30 under 30, that I have the rest of my life, you know? I'm thankful for clarity. And I'm thankful for the career that I've built thus far. Now I just want to also focus on enjoying my life.

Do you feel like your process and style and how you cook has really evolved over the last few years?





I can say that it has changed immensely just in the last year of quarantine. I left the restaurant, it was very difficult for me to figure out how to cook again, because I was only used to cooking in bulk, not just for myself. Now, I'm just cooking cause I'm hungry, I'm eating because I need to nourish myself, which is my focus. Whether that's acknowledging I haven't had a lot of vegetables and roast them or nourishing spiritually when I really missed my mom, I have to call her and get a recipe from her — this kind of cooking and eating intuitively on a personal level is important so that I can have the energy and the creativity to cook for work.



NOTHING
WITHOUT
INTENTION



HOPPING LIST KIA
BOX CATK THIGH 68 / CASE ✓
BAG ONION
BAG CELERY

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SHIE BOUWON ✓
SHROOMS ✓
BAG OKRA
CUILE PALLET 40 / CASE ✓



Tell me a little bit about how your relationship with Traeger came about.

A couple years ago I went to this event on a vineyard and they were using this gigantic smoker. I thought, 'oh, this is pretty cool.' But what I thought was even more cool is to put something on the smoker that didn't have anything to do with meat.





I made smoked Concord grapes with burrata cheese, and everyone was losing their mind over it. So that kind of opened up my mind about what the possibilities were. I moved during quarantine and I asked Traeger if the grill they offered me was still available and here we are. I just felt really freed up to smoke anything, do anything. Instead of meat, what if I just want to smoke oysters, pizza, pie, fish? The possibilities are truly limitless, you know? I feel it was another moment where I felt really confident about myself and my skills. I want other people to feel this way.

So what's your favorite part about cooking outside now? Coming from cooking in big kitchens to your front step is a big change.

Just being outside when the weather is good, and you get the energy from people around you walking down the street. I can talk to people and interact with them when someone walks by and wants to know what I'm making. I can show them and then it's a whole conversation. Now we're talking about food. We're talking about recipes or they're showing me pictures of their uncle who does stuff like this. It feels good. It feels communal.

You touched a little bit on community, which I'd love to talk about. How do you think food can change and enrich a community? Why is the table so fundamental?

I feel like that was very much the earliest form of communica-

tion, just getting together and going to get food, harvesting or hunting or whatever. Today that's still where you build community, you build relationships with each other, and it just feels good. It's not good to be alone so much. When you cook for your community, it shows that you care for people other than yourself. I think as a world, as a culture, we've deviated from that and moved very much into an individualistic place. There's something refreshing, seeing people who still hold on to that communal piece and thinking about one another. When you're being fed, you feel cared about by others and that's nice.

So important. I read in a previous interview, you were discussing the importance of bridging the gap to food security in Brooklyn. Tell me a little bit

about what that looks like and why it's such a pertinent issue.

Well, right now a lot of great people have been doing good by putting up community fridges, mutual aid for food donations, grocery bags and such. If this last year has shown us anything, it is that a lot of people get their food from work. Or kids who are no longer at school, where they ate, are now struggling to get what they need. It's something that we know exists, but as a global issue, not a home issue for sure. I think a lot of folks didn't realize how prominent this issue is, until we got hit with COVID and they found themselves experiencing that for the first time. The lack of available good, fresh produce is an issue.



What makes me hopeful in a sense is that there are so many people who are dedicating themselves to that work. The need for good will probably never go away as long as the world operates the way that it does. We're kind of going to be stuck with this for the rest of our lives. So at least we can try to add to the wheel. We're not going to fix it all but you can do your best to add to the wheel.

Tell me what inspired you to start Kia Feeds the People?

I was just very much in that same head space of 'I have to do something.' I'm a chef, I'm a cook, and my whole career has been about cooking and feeding people, and that doesn't stop just because there's not a restaurant for me to do it in or no accolades for me to collect. So what does that mean for me? I was trying to figure it out during the protests. I thought, 'okay, once a protest subsides, the issue still exists and people need to eat.' People need access to food and I could do that. It's been a long journey almost a year since its conception. By Fall 2021, our aim is to raise enough money to pack 200 boxes of organic produce, and gather 50 turkeys, and 50 chickens to be distributed to underserved communities in Brooklyn, New York. I hope to also provide hot meals for the unhoused and establish a free breakfast and lunch program.



I don't think I'm doing anything revolutionary. You know, I'm just adding to what already exists and just picking up a piece of it and moving forward with everybody else, just like somebody will do after me. There's always going to be a need for it. I'm very excited about it. Even when the work gets tough, it's definitely passion work, you know? My mom instilled in us from very early on that spirit of service and giving. She'd be at the store and see a mother struggling to buy formula or diapers and she would just put her card out and cover it. Now whenever I see an opportunity I try to do it too.

That's such a good reminder to look for where you can help, in the daily lives of those around us.







Yes! I think it should always be our mentality. My hope is that someone would extend the same grace to me, if I ever found myself in that place. And I have found myself in that place before, so who are we to look down on someone and turn away from someone because we feel like we're good. You could find yourself needing a free produce or pantry bag, I want that to be accessible to you.

You should be so proud of what you've built. It's really beautiful. Do you have a favorite recipe that you've created?

I did this really dope fish. Oh, it was so good with pickled jalapeños and onions, lime and a fish sauce. It's summertime and I feel like grilling fish a lot, so I need to do it again and actually write down the recipe because it was good.

Last question. What advice would you like to give your younger self?

Let me go look at the pictures of myself, I was a cute kid. [laugh] I think I would just let her know that, it will be okay. That eventually she will find the words to explain how she feels, and there will be people who love her and support her, and she'll choose a

family who will know her and accept those really bad things that she feels about herself. I'd let her know that she won't be alone, that it's okay that she is a skinny child with big feet, she will grow into it. And that someday you'll be making a homemade hamburger recipe for YouTube and you'll get paid lots of money for it. You'll be okay, just keep being weird, keep trying new things. There will be people who accept and celebrate and affirm that.

That's perfect. I wish every young kid had someone to tell them that.

Me freaking too, that way we would not have to spend so much on therapy.

You can support Kia Feeds the People: www.kiacooks.com

05

The Hungry
Life

EDUARDO GARCIA

Story & Photography: Tyler Sharp



“When most people go to the theater, they go to see the play, not to look at the stage,” Eduardo quips with his signature mix of philosophical seriousness and an almost maniacal smile — a smile that belies old knowledge that he might’ve dug up in the backyard, but hasn’t shown you yet.

We’re standing in his kitchen — or stage in this context — but it’s more like a functional art gallery. He’s preparing a dish called choucroute for our adventure ahead: chopping homegrown herbs, boiling potatoes from the garden, spooning homemade sauerkraut and pickles into jars, and seasoning pork chops from a pig he killed and butchered himself. The light is dim and grey, and snow clouds are forming in the sky as Montana refuses to let spring, and definitely not summer, have a say in the weather yet.

There are a few more moments of stillness, broken only by the sharpening of the knife, the circular sound of mason jars lids being twisted off, the crescendoing bubble of boiling water, and the muffled flap of a robin’s last wingbeats that Eduardo’s cat has



brought to contribute to our impending feast. Though appreciated, it will not be part of our meal.

Chef, entrepreneur, TV host, brand ambassador, and motivational speaker, Eduardo Garcia’s personal story has been told in a variety of formats, and you may be familiar with his inspiring, death-defying perseverance that has touched the lives of so many, as chronicled in the documentary, Charged. But this is a different sort of story altogether, one where food is only one part of a much larger cast.

With the *mise en scène* complete, he launches into an explanation of what this is all about. “Early on in my career, I had a mentor tell me that there were plenty of other chefs who were better than me. But it was who I was and the way I did things that were unrivaled, and that is what made my food and the experiences I offered memorable and magnetizing. That stung at first, but over time I realized it was the key to my success. How do I set the table in a way that only I can? How do I weave stories and life into cooking experiences that people will never forget? To do this, I need to really celebrate all of these parts and bring them to the table. Not just the salt and pepper, or the T-bone steak, but how it came to be. It’s building a kitchen of reclaimed materials, getting closer to some other passionate grower, farmer, or an individual who reclaims lumber. So I started down this path of imagining my cooking dojo, knowing that it is where I would spend the majority of my time. How do I dream up a home kitchen that only I could?”

The answer to that question came from a man named Francis. He was selling an old outhouse for \$65 on Craigslist and said it would make a great chicken coop. Turns out, they were speaking the same language, and when Eduardo met up with him to buy the shack, a mutual love of reclaimed materials was discovered, and a fast friendship was formed. Apart from the chicken coop to be, Eduardo also went home with a few handpicked pieces of wood from a nearby grain elevator that Francis was dismantling board by board — a solitary, meditative process that sometimes takes years. A spark was lit, and the idea for Eduardo’s kitchen stage was born.





“I committed to literally headhunting every individual piece for this place because this is where life comes in and out of. Everything has a place, everything has a story. At some point when you’re a chef, or a craftsman, you fall in love with your tools, the lenses or brushes you use, the hammers or chisels that you like. The same goes for cooking, and it’s not just the organic material that goes in the mouth. I think there’s a lot of stage presence that bringing a meal to life can have. I see Francis as one of my farmers, and instead of vegetables, he farms reclaimed, 100-year-old wood. He offers those goods to me, and I get to build that into any meal I cook for someone in my kitchen,” Eduardo beams as he waves his arms in grand gestures, adoringly, around the open space of his kitchen. In my opinion, many kitchens seem very commonplace, or too clean and industrial with cooking gadgets and utilitarian items, but not much soul. Eduardo’s kitchen, however, feels like a collaged photo album that tells the history of his life and those who come and go in it. It has a voice and a story of its own, adding context and meaning to whatever meal is being prepped, cooked, or enjoyed within its walls.

I get a quick tour of some keystone pieces; the massive vent-a-hood constructed from antique tin, drawers made from barnwood flecked with tiny particles of white that at first glance seems to be paint, but in fact is decades-old pigeon shit — details most folks would sand down or clean off. But to Eduardo, they are important details of time and place, so he lacquered over them. There is a unique piece of weathered, battered wood resembling a mountain range that forms the hearth, and another piece of “burn-pile, never-going-to-see-the-light-of-day wood” that he adhered to plywood with cement and gravel from the driveway. It serves as the entry to the pantry and looks like a mine shaft.

“This whole door is made out of things that were tools. Things that people used and held and actually worked with every single damn day. It had a function. So the tin that sandwiched the door is a part of a complex food story. This is the wood from inside the grain chute itself. When the wheat was flowing in or out of a truck or a train car, it would run over this wood and over time it got sanded down by half an inch just from wheat hitting it,” he tells me as he admires the door. There are even pencil markings on the tin where folks from a bygone era did long-form math to figure out grain weights.

In this kitchen, all of these pieces have a chance to tell their stories again. But this is just the stage he built, and it pales in comparison to the much greater stage of the outdoors. For Eduardo, as he tells me in our final moments of food prep that morning, cooking is so much more than just making food, it’s about creating experiences and memories. “My passions actually do not lie in cooking, they lie in living. I’m hungry for new experiences. I’m hungry for life.”



This is “the hungry life,” as Eduardo calls it, and it’s why we’re going to drive 10 hours roundtrip to go hang out with Francis for an afternoon, so that he can pay it forward to the “wood farmer” who provided all of this bounty. He wants to create a memorable food experience by showing up, breaking out the Ranger on the tailgate, and whipping up a simple but delicious meal as a way to say thank you. Of course, Eduardo also wants to dig through the stash of reclaimed wood.

So we make our way north from Livingston and head to Malta, where Francis is about halfway through dismantling another old grain elevator. As we come to find out, it will take him almost another year to finish. During the five-hour drive, we have a much-needed opportunity to catch up on both personal and professional matters, and while I’m familiar with his pursuit of “the hungry life,” I rarely get to join on one of the adventures. I press him to articulate the definition further, especially as it pertains to this road trip to hangout with Francis in an old building.

“So the hungry life is exactly as it sounds; it’s my hunger for life that guides my journey. It’s my interest in reclaiming parts of Americana, like a loaf of bread or a bottle of whiskey for someone thousands of miles from here that started in some field, or that single grain of wheat made its way through this elevator and slid across the timber in my kitchen to make those textures. I want that story. As we drive, we are that story, this is our hungriest life. So it’s recognizing things that excite us and give us energy, and celebrating that journey. How privileged are we that we get to do this in our own free way?”

As I look out the window to see the beauty of the rolling, fragmented hills and chasms of the Missouri Breaks, I have to wholeheartedly agree.





Pulling into town, it's no mystery where the grain elevator is, and we find Francis quickly. They greet each other like the old friends they are, genuinely excited to see one another. I introduce myself and my dog Wyatt, who then promptly chases all of the stray cats out of the barn and eats their food. It seems we're not the only hungry ones.

After a quick, surface-level tour of the building, Eduardo makes notes of a few choice items, then fires up the Traeger. A portable, wood pellet grill is apparently foreign to Francis, and he seems really excited about the meal, as well as our visit. In a matter of minutes, the formerly stale and dusty smell of the old building is filled with the thick, aromatic plume from the Ranger, and Eduardo sets the pork chops on there to smoke. He closes the lid, his eyes light up, and he says "show me what you got." Francis, a man of contagious passion, can hardly wait to show us what he has spent countless hours working on.

As he points out wood, beams, handles, signs, and pulleys, he tells the history of all of it; where it came from, how they used it, when the technology improved, and how their process for building these structures and using the equipment evolved. He tells us about where stains on the wall came from, when they had fires, where they had termite problems, and how they would dupe the insurance and fire inspectors with inoperable alarm

systems. Francis knows every detail about every piece in that grain elevator, partly because he's handling every single board and nail in there, but also because he's hungry for it. You have to be, as I don't think most people would want to spend a year pulling boards and nails out of a questionably stable structure. Eduardo eats it up, and starts to pull some choice pieces to take home, knowing exactly where they will go in the theater stage he calls a kitchen.

But now it's time to eat, and it's time for Eduardo to shine. The spectacle is nothing short of dazzling, pulling all of his homemade goodies out of the cooler. Already smoked to perfection, he sets the pork chops aside and puts the cast iron griddle on to cook potatoes, onions, carrots, and sauerkraut. Coupled with a quick sear of the pork, and the French-inspired, Montana-style choucroute is complete in a matter of minutes. Eduardo pulls out homemade pickles, fresh bread, quickly chops herbs and doles out dollops of the mustard-based sauce to round the whole thing out. We make plates, sit in the afternoon sun, and devour the simple, but incredibly delicious lunch fare. It is obvious that Francis is touched by the gesture, and his day is made.







**“MY PASSIONS
ACTUALLY DO NOT LIE
IN COOKING, THEY LIE
IN LIVING. I’M HUNGRY
FOR NEW EXPERIENCES.
I’M HUNGRY FOR LIFE.”**

We all take turns telling stories and try not to fall asleep in our chairs after second helpings. It is one of the better meals I've had in a long time, but it is so much more than just the food, and this of course, is by Eduardo's design. Satiated, lethargic, and loaded up with a few unique pieces of wood, we start to say our goodbyes and prepare for the five-hour journey home. They are already plotting another meetup. I'm plotting a nap.

On the drive home, Eduardo tells me about his dreams for the future, for new cooking experiences, and for more ways to share his passion for life and adventure. We see eye-to-eye on all of it. As the sun starts to set, he pops up in his seat with his characteristic jubilation and points to a beautiful grain elevator in the distance with bright orange letters on the side of it. "We've gotta take a photo of that, it's the perfect way to end this journey!" We pull over, admire the scene, and I shoot the last few Polaroids I have left before the sun retreats behind the distant horizon — just one last bite of the Hungry Life before we both go back to our busy lives.



Traeger.com/eduardo-garcia



ELLEN BENNETT

06 - Suit Up & Show Up

Story: Katie Marchetti

Photography: Gabriella Herman

For Ellen Marie Bennett, her childhood in L.A. was a fascinating cultural collision bursting with the scents and flavors that honored both sides of her heritage.

English and Swedish traditions were baked into shephard's pie and served with afternoon tea in her grandmother's home; tortillas and tamales were made from scratch in her abuela's kitchen where spices abound.

As the eclectic mix of food poured from both kitchens, Ellen came to love the Mexican effervescence of food. "It was so colorful and lively. I thought, this is my jam." She soon found that the kitchen was her favorite place to be, curiously peeking around doors in friend's houses to see what other families liked to eat.

Like most teenagers, she wondered what she should pursue after graduation. “The kids I went to school with all wanted to be actors and models and things like that, and I just didn’t quite fit that mold.” It was her mom who suggested that she go live in Mexico for a month or two; neither of them could have anticipated that the short trip would turn into Ellen calling Mexico home for the next four years.

“While I was there, I thought it was amazing. I was living this entirely different, crazy life. It was just a little bit of an alternate path but I was really happy to do that,” said Ellen, who spent those years attending Culinary School in Mexico City. At the age of 22, she realized there were a lot of things she still wished to do, and if she stayed in Mexico, she wasn’t going to do them.

“It was just one of those forks in the road, staying in Mexico was going to be an easier path, I was in a comfortable spot. But I decided that if I could build a career in Mexico, I could go back to the U.S. and do it again there too.”

So she sold what she’d accumulated in Mexico and headed back to the states where she took up residence in her mom’s house again to make something out of her culinary degree. “It was a bit startling to go from being by yourself in a foreign country and doing well to living with my mother again,” she said with a laugh. “It was totally fine, just part of the journey. Sometimes, you gotta make adjustments to make things happen.”

Ellen got into a new rhythm quickly, working as a line cook in two restaurants, simultaneously. “One was high-speed, lots of covers every night as they call it in restaurant land. And then the other one was very fine dining. The combination of the two led to a really good experience because you were learning speed and precision, at the same time.”

When her chef told her he was ordering new aprons and asked if she’d like one, she set her life on a new trajectory with a bold question. “Can I make the aprons, Chef? I have an apron company,” — which she did not. Not yet, anyway. “I convinced him to give me the order for 40 aprons. I clocked out, and immediately wondered, how do I do this? That’s how it all began.”

With virtually no experience except for the confidence that

she’d be able to figure it out, Hedley & Bennet was born. Now, it’s one of the most well-known apron brands in restaurants and homes across the country.

“I was just taking these leaps of faith in life, adding notches on my confidence belt. And I thought, okay, this is another one I can do.” According to Ellen, those first 40 aprons turned out terribly. When her Head Chef informed her that the straps “sucked” she was determined to make things right for her first client. She took half of them back and made the repairs needed — in doing so she developed the design that is used to this day.

“The theory of it was right, but the execution was not. Which are things I’ve learned in business time and time again. You can have a really clear idea of how something’s going to turn out, but until you get on the journey, you don’t know exactly how it’s all going to land.

It was saying yes when the opportunity presented itself that made all the difference, according to Ellen. “I think that’s where a lot of entrepreneurs sometimes get stuck. They think: I still have more stuff I have to figure out. Whereas I just began and started learning on the journey.”

After that first order, she began working at farmer’s markets and food events outside of her restaurant hours to meet people; those connections led to her first custom apron orders made for local chefs. “There was just something very exciting and thrilling about that first order that I got in. It filled me up with this light surge of energy and enthusiasm that I was hooked on this feeling of helping someone. There was something I could give them that they needed and it’s going to be better because I was doing it. To this day we produce gear that makes people feel a certain way. Right? Every chef and every cook out there now is part of this team that encourages them to show up, and to try to get better.”

Week after week, Ellen would spend her days meeting and talking with chefs, taking custom orders, and then working the line at night.





During the first year of business, Hedley & Bennett was focused solely on pursuing relationships with restaurants, her little website was the least of her priorities. “While I was focused on restaurants, people just started buying aprons on the website and then people were talking about us. Being featured in an *LA Times* article felt wild, and then the mention in the *New York Times* followed soon after.”

It wasn't long before Martha Stewart called to say she wanted to wear their aprons and outfit her cafés with them as well. Overnight, it seemed if you were in the know, you were wearing Ellen's aprons. “It was so exciting and emotional that this was happening, and I knew that we just had to keep going. There was never a moment where I thought, ‘we made it, I'm going to go home and celebrate.’ It got bigger but the desire didn't really slow down.”

Ellen continued to work as a line cook for the next two years while Hedley & Bennet grew, she held onto her “safety net” for as long as possible. With an office, and a small staff she peeled days off of her restaurant schedule until she had to pull the ripcord and go all in. “It was the right decision,” she adds confidently.

Hedley & Bennett's focus throughout the years has slowly shifted from restaurants to the direct-to-consumer model that they operate under now. “We're very much outfitting the home cook, not just the professional chef. Which was an interesting switch that happened over the years. That was a really exciting adventure for us because there are just so many home cooks out there who could use all the knowledge that we gained from the restaurant industry, and bringing that sort of like, craft and skill and professional lens to the home kitchen so they can have gear that looks as good and feels as good as everything else they have in their kitchen.”





The faces of customers have shifted over the years, but the design is still very much the same. While they've tinkered and chiseled away at the aprons to make them better, they've added a lot more color along the way. Their original designs, which were neutral, are pale compared to the colorful, vibrant aprons they offer today, a detail which matches Ellen's bold, vivacious personality to a 'T.'

Ellen's passion for empowering people to feel confident and creative as they tackle something new, whether that be in the kitchen or business, has accumulated into a book entitled: *Dream First, Details Later: How to Quit Overthinking & Make It Happen!*

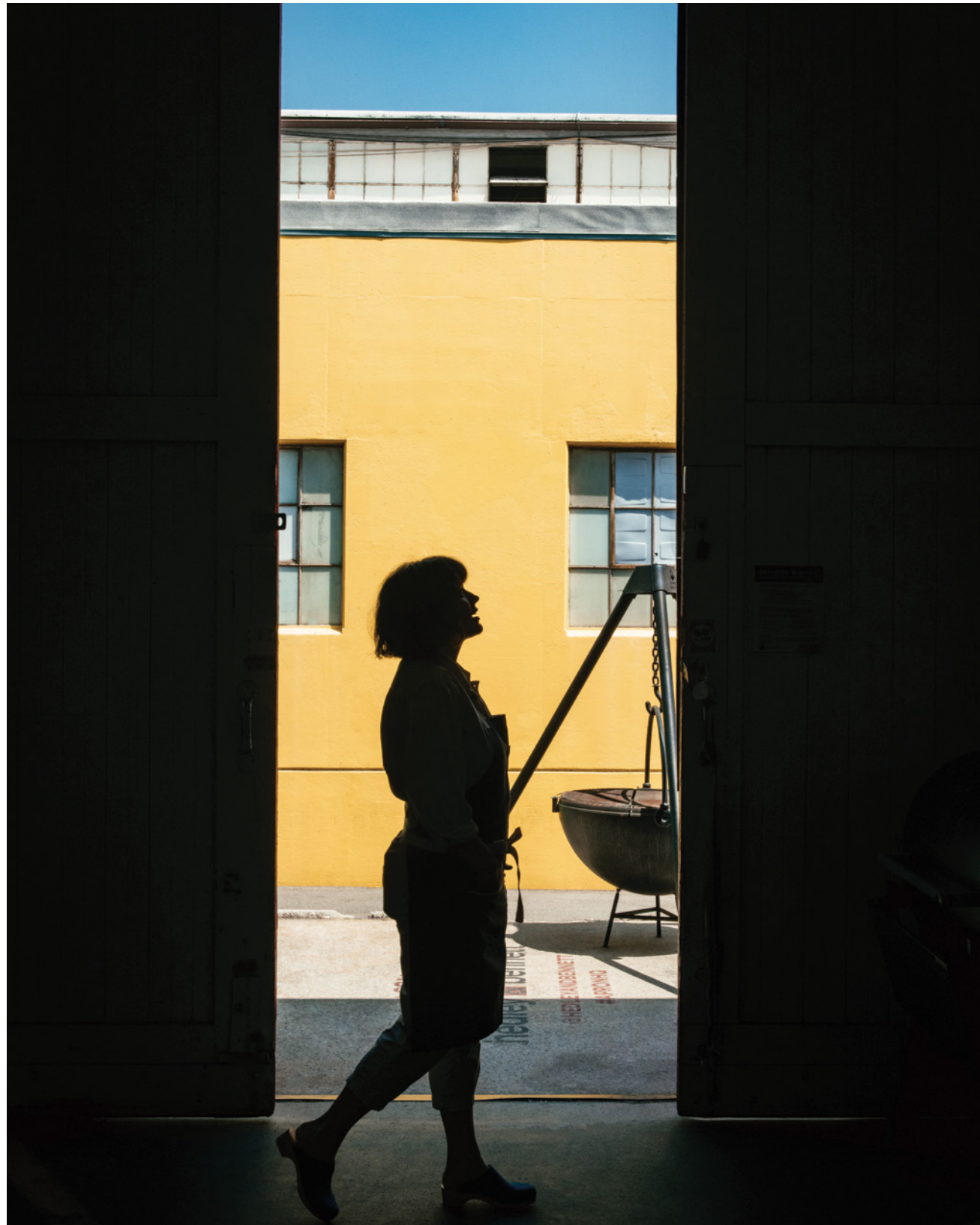
"I've been working on my book for three years — it's been a wild journey of running a business while writing, and learning more about what I was writing while running the business," Ellen said. For her, it was important to break the mold of men writing business books for men, and women for women, she wrote it for people in general. She broke the mold in more ways than one, as this is one of the first Penguin Random House books to be published, full of color. Each chapter is chock-full of graphics and designs.

"Most business books are about startups that raised a lot of money in the beginning to get started but that's not the only way. I wrote it to kind of kick people off the iceberg, show them the path does not require an MBA, just a willingness to get uncomfortable. It's going to be tricky, challenging, and there will be a lot of no's along the way, but the path less traveled can still be the right track."

Ellen is still putting notches in her confidence belt, by pushing herself to try something new. While she's no longer working the line, she is honing her cooking skills at home. "I got really into making brisket, it seemed hard but I wanted to try; I ended up staying up all night to cook it on my Traeger, and it turned out great, I was hooked!"







“Check out Ellen’s new book: www.hedleyandbennett.com/products/preorder-dream-first-details-later”



Ellen had known about Traeger for years, and the relationship seemed to be a perfect fit right from the start. “I was introduced to them a couple of years ago when they came by HQ to cook for us. Their team was very kind and I love their genuine community-building approach right from the beginning. Traeger, much like Hedley & Bennett, gives people that confidence boost to help them over the edge of the iceberg, try new things, so there’s a real congruence in our company missions,” said Ellen in closing, who has set a wonderful example of where allowing yourself to be uncomfortable can lead.

With a clear idea, and a ready and willing ‘yes’ to what the future holds, Ellen has stitched together a life and career that encourages those around her to pursue their dreams, with a kick in the butt and an apron guaranteed to withstand the heat.



HOG ISLAND

07
HOG ISLAND
OYSTER CO.

Interview: Jens Heig
Photography: Gabriella Herman

On one day, farmers waded out to their wide, open boats under cover of darkness to tend and harvest a crop that has spent the last year slowly growing in the cold water of Tomales Bay, California. On another, the voyage commences beneath the unrelenting California sun, the smell of low tide thick in the air. Their departure is dictated by the tides, the ocean performing its ritualistic advance and retreat as it has done for eons, washing life-giving brine through rack after rack of oysters on the bay's tidal flats. An hour to the south lies San Francisco, whose tight streets and rows of colorful Victorian homes seem near, and yet a world away. Growing these mollusks doesn't require daily feeding or attention; only time, patience, and vision, while nature takes care of everything else. When the time is right, the farmers will hoist

heavy bags into the vessels and begin preparing the many thousands of oysters for market, minus a choice few that fall victim to an on-board shucking knife.

These farmers wear the colors of Hog Island Oyster Co., which began in 1983 as a five-acre lease signed by two marine biologists, Terry Sawyer and John Finger. Its origin is humble. As the years went by the company grew, opening multiple restaurants and developing a robust nationwide delivery service. Soon John and Terry realized they were engaged in a delicate balancing act that far exceeded growing the highest quality oyster possible. "Reluctant growth," as John called it, gave them the opportunity to serve their families, community, employees, and environment.





This conversation with John revealed a man who embraced the challenge of a principled approach to operating Hog Island. He cares deeply about truly understanding an oyster's role in the natural rhythms of the ocean and addressing its existential threats. He remains committed to serving those who work at the farms, nurseries, and restaurants by providing a Bay Area living wage and room for advancement. Through diversification, thoughtful planning, and trusted counsel, he and Terry have positioned Hog Island to withstand the squalls of an unpredictable world, coming through a global health crisis possibly healthier than ever before. Using Traeger grills, they have even introduced local, wild-caught finfish to their restaurants, an ode to John's first love of fishery biology. "We don't get to be sustainable if we can't stay in business," a hard truth that he had to wrestle with after laying off nearly their entire staff of 300 people at the height of the pandemic. Due to Hog Island's success and high oyster demand, many were soon hired back.

Despite years of awards, accolades, and success at Hog Island Oyster Co., John believes he can do better, that there is always room for improvement. Call it the oyster approach; just as they strive to produce a better oyster, they keep growth slow, deliberately becoming a better company with each rise and retreat of the tides.





JENS Can you tell me about some of the people who work in different parts of Hog Island?

JOHN For some people, this is a means to an end, but a lot of our restaurant employees are career people. This is the life they want, whether they're a front house server or a line cook. We have a lot of people who have been with us in excess of 10 years, which we're really proud of. It's a testament to creating a good workplace that people like to stay in. Looking at the Bay Area and how expensive it is, we want to make sure this is sustainable for the people who work for us. A living wage is 20 bucks an hour in this area. Forget about 15, we passed that a long time ago. Actually, right now we're at about 25 bucks an hour for a dishwasher who has been with us a while, because we do a tip-pooling policy, where the tips get spread out amongst the staff. Everybody's responsible for the experience and everybody gets to be able to afford to live. At the same time, we're trying not to price ourselves out of markets in terms of what we can charge, but sometimes good food is about spending a little bit more money.

JENS I noticed on the Hog Island website that there are small selections of fish available, as well. Can you tell me about that?

JOHN My first love was fisheries biology and I even wanted to farm fish. Growing up, I had never eaten oysters, cooked or otherwise. Then one thing led to another. I love what we do because of the sustainability factor with oysters. But having the restaurants means we are also going to sell fish, and I'm very passionate and persnickety about where we are sourcing them from. We target our fish program on what we can get locally, which means it changes throughout the year.

We don't have salmon on our menus year round; we never have, we never will. We try to get people to eat things like anchovies and sardines because they're lower on the food chain. In particular, we try to get close to the fishermen to make sure we know what we're getting. They are mostly line-caught fish that are extremely fresh and well cared for. We buy the fish whole so we can tell that it wasn't net caught, and we know that it was handled well. Then, we're breaking down the fish ourselves in our restaurants; in our San Francisco restaurant, we were doing that in front of customers. So much of what we do is about transparency. We want people to see our guy shucking oysters. You can see the chefs cooking the food because we think that's interesting. We've always been about educating people.

Another fun thing has been starting our finfish subscription box. On top of getting the whole fish, breaking it down, then shipping it out, we're smoking a lot of fish on Traeger grills. So that's been really fun and it adds to what we do at Hog Island.







JENS Can you explain why you chose Tomales Bay for the first farm? What would you want people to know about oysters?

JOHN Oysters, because they're filter feeders, have a really low ecological footprint and they're also considered a cornerstone or keystone species. We're not feeding them, we're not fertilizing them, we're not using tons of fresh water, so we're growing all this great animal protein using very little resources. It ticks a lot of boxes in terms of it being a great product to grow. Filter feeders are actually part of a well-functioning, healthy estuary where you actually need them in a bay to help it function correctly. But if you want to eat them, you've got to have water that's fairly clean. So, for all those reasons, we felt Tomales Bay was a good place.

JENS Can you talk about the sustainable aspect of growing this business? I'm sure you're walking a fine line with where to grow, adding new restaurants, and adding more different dimensions to your business.

JOHN Yeah, we have a term called reluctant growth, meaning that if we don't grow to be bigger, we grow to be stronger or better. I never wanted to have a large company, and yet there were inflection points where if we did one thing, then it meant growing to a certain point. In the beginning, just growing oysters made it very difficult to keep our heads above water because the Bay Area was an expensive place to live and do business. The first thing we did was open our farm so people could stop by, and then we did the picnic area where you could sit down and shuck the oysters, or we could BBQ for you.

That really helped change the company and made us a lot more healthy financially. Then we were invited to open up a small oyster bar in San Francisco's Ferry Building Marketplace and it was phenomenally successful. The company doubled in revenue and employees in a year. For the first time, we kind of went, "Well, where are we going with this?"

We wanted to be long-term sustainable, so we should be growing oysters in more than one bay. We should be growing more than one species in case of disease. Then, maybe we should do more than one restaurant. If we were going to have these restaurants, a certain percentage of the oysters should be from us and we can buy from other farms to have diversity. As we started growing and did another restaurant, we realized we wanted to do another farm. At that point in time, there were a lot of problems on the West Coast with seed production, due to changing ocean conditions. We needed to have some security on our seed production, so we did our own hatchery.

These things became connected one to the other, but we did it really slowly; it wasn't like we had a plan to open a restaurant every year. It has been more like five years between restaurants. Now

we're trying to figure out, what is a sustainable rate of growth? I don't know how big we're going to get, but we're going to be very thoughtful and do it very slowly.

JENS How would you describe oysters to someone who hasn't tried them yet?



JOHN We tell people all the time, if you have an oyster that you like, you remember two things about it. First, you remember the variety. Whether it's a Pacific oyster, or an Eastern oyster, or Olympian. They uptake minerals differently, just like wine. After that, it's what we call merroir. Like terroir, it really is about that place.

JENS Merroir, being from the sea, right?



JOHN Yeah. From the sea. The taste of that place of the sea. Look, we've been successful. We do a lot of things to make sure we grow good oysters, but I swear 75% of it is site selection. A lot of it is just really knowing where oysters like to be in the bay and good tidal exchange with the ocean. All these things can really make your job as a grower a lot, lot easier. The oysters wind up expressing themselves in really good flavor. The vegetal qualities, the minerality, all of that comes from chewing the oyster and savoring that a little bit. I think oysters are more about place than just about any other food.

JENS *Ultimately, this all comes down to the future. We want to build sustainable businesses so that we can run in perpetuity. So, where do you see oysters in the future? Are people eating more oysters? Are there trends?*

JOHN I've been in business 38 years now. I have never been able to produce enough oysters, ever. We're not a massive oyster company that deals in commodity markets, but in terms of producing a high-quality oyster, we can never keep up. A few years ago, the talk was about aquaculture, mostly about finfish. There's a role for finfish aquaculture, but we need to learn how to farm fish well. Since fish are cold blooded, the environmental footprint of farm fish is less than a lot of terrestrial animals.

Not all farmed fish is bad. But shellfish are what we call non-fed aquaculture. It's about putting them out there, letting them do their things with nature. I think people are getting that positive message about shellfish farming. They are truly sustainable and we should be eating more of them.







DIVA Q

Danielle Bennett

08 Danielle Bennett - Diva Q

Story & Photography: Natalie Rhea

**“DON’T JUDGE ME ON THE FACT THAT I’M A
WOMAN. JUDGE ME ON THE FACT THAT I KNOW
MY STUFF, INSIDE AND OUT. I WANT TO BE
KNOWN AS A GREAT PITMASTER, NOT A GREAT
‘FEMALE’ PITMASTER.”**

Thirteen years ago if you had told Danielle ‘Diva Q’ Bennett she would be on the world stage representing Traeger as a pitmaster, her response would not be one of shock, but of acknowledging the challenge, and readying herself to take it one step further.

Today, she is unifying the world through BBQ and introducing more women, including young individuals and minorities, to the grill, a success far more important to her than any trophy. “I want to inspire women. I want to inspire men. I want to inspire kids. I want to inspire anybody that ever thought they could not do something. Because I was told the whole time I couldn’t do this.” After winning nearly a dozen world and international BBQ championships, including three-time Jack Daniels World Champion, Best Wings on The Planet (twice), and International Kansas City Barbecue Society Team of The Year, it is safe to say that Bennett has proved those naysayers wrong.

Diva Q’s kitchen in Central Florida is quaint, but in the backyard, 20-plus Traeger grills line the pool, firing all day long, creating a smoky sensory experience. She brings out a tomahawk roast, which she dubs the ‘queen’s crown’ or ‘mac daddy’ of all roasts, a truly sexy cut of beef. Rocking her electric blonde hair and full-face makeup, fingernails painted glossy candy-apple red, she works into the roast a mix of dry rubs and Worcestershire sauce.



The 'Diva Q' glamour is not to stand out amongst an industry dominated by men, but simply because she loves to feel feminine. To an extent. "Being a female in this industry, it's tough. They assume you are flighty and flaky, and they want to slap pink on you all the time. Cause you're a girl, right? They obviously think you need to have pink and frills and glitter. I'm not that kind of girl."

Bennett strives to prove her competence and expertise through her skillset, which is why she has shied away from what she refers to as the 'dog and pony show.' She speaks of regional contests specific to women, which she refuses to participate in out of principle. "There is absolutely no reason for a woman to be competing separately from a man. There is no physicality there ... It's that caveman mentality of meat, fire, man. I've always stood by my principles and financially, sometimes it's hurt me, but I can sleep at night."

Bennett was born and raised in Canada, hinted at by her occasional 'eh' in conversation. While Canada is not known for its BBQ, she entered this world through a friend's request to judge a BBQ contest in the United States, an event that hooked her from the start. From there she never looked back. Her humble beginnings in the kitchen, however, do go back to the Great White North, where she learned to cook at the knees of her mother and grandmother. They instilled the importance of no food waste at a young age; a Great Depression mentality that carried on. Of course, they didn't call it "food waste" in those days, as it was out of necessity.

While she can now afford the expensive cuts and finds well-marbled wagyu beef tantalizing, she is more passionate and intrigued by elevating a 'lesser' quality meat. As someone that grew up impoverished, she understands that not everyone can afford the quality selects. Today Bennett finds satisfaction in creating goodness out of something that is often viewed as the discards or pieces deemed lower-quality. "Have you ever had bone marrow on toast? Split the beef shank wide open, roast it, caramelize it, throw on salt and pepper and serve it with toast. That would be perfect."

Seeing the beauty in secondary cuts is a unique skill that not every pitmaster hones in on, and she is equally passionate about the science behind preparing food. "This is not just showboating, it's learning and testing; meat science." Dreaming up new recipes and waking up at 3 a.m. to run to the 24-hour grocer and immediately test these ingredients is a ritual; her version of a dopamine rush. "Absorption levels, denaturing of the protein levels, all those things that add up to this [cooking] experience and that comes from true skill."







All of this experimenting benefits her local community where she uses her BBQ superpowers to feed the first responders. “It’s important to give back, to be a responsible neighbor, to be a responsible human, to be a responsible community, and just try to take care of people.” Bennett prepared several mouth-watering cuts before driving them over to the fire station. As she walked in, the aroma of her juicy roast drew in the crew like moths to a flame. The firemen operate on different shifts — the running joke being one shift never leaves scraps for the next crew; a mental note she takes home with her.



When Bennett is not working, she's still working. Creating, donating, educating — occasionally with bourbon and cigar in hand — orbiting in a full circle BBQ universe, as reflected in her forearm ink that reads, 'live eat breathe BBQ.' She realized early on that elevating people's eating experience with smoke and fire was her definition of success.

“The BBQ pie is big enough for everybody. I love teaching BBQ more than anything and connecting people with food.” She talked at length about changing humanity's relationship with food, how it's important to know where our food comes from and connect with it in the kitchen. “We've created this entire nation that doesn't know how to cook. We know how to order really well.”

The responsibility of education for Bennett is multifaceted. To make food more accessible; to teach those who have been left without a seat at the grill; to bring the community together over the longstanding tradition of BBQ; all while being a disruptor in the BBQ world. “There are 1,440 minutes in every day, and I'm just trying to make them count. And hopefully, that's with good deeds, good BBQ, good friends, good bourbon, and good cigars. That's the reality.”

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