UNREASONABLE HOSPITALITY

WILL GUIDARA

THE REMARKABLE POWER OF GIVING PEOPLE MORE THAN THEY EXPECT

The International Phenomenon

UNREASONABLE HOSPITALITY

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

UNREASONABLE HOSPITALITY

The Remarkable Power of Giving People More Than They Expect

WILL GUIDARA



Copyrighted Material

1

Ebury Edge, an imprint of Ebury Publishing,
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Ebury Edge is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Copyright © Will Guidara 2022

Will Guidara has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this
Work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

First published in the United States by Optimism Press in 2022
First published in the United Kingdom by Ebury Edge in 2024

www.penguin.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 9781529146813
Trade paperback ISBN 9781529146820

Book design by Ellen Cipriano
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book
is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

To Frank Guidara—my father, my mentor, and my best friend,
for always showing me what "right" looks like, and for
helping me see how unbelievably fulfilling a life
spent pursuing hospitality could be.

And all the people I worked with at Eleven Madison Park,
the NoMad, and Make It Nice—everyone who gave
so much of themselves to care for others.
This book is a testament to all of you.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

CONTENTS

A Letter from Simon Sinek *ix*

1. Welcome to the Hospitality Economy *1*
2. Making Magic in a World That Could Use More of It *9*
3. The Extraordinary Power of Intention *21*
4. Lessons in Enlightened Hospitality *25*
5. Restaurant-Smart vs. Corporate-Smart *32*
6. Pursuing a True Partnership *49*
7. Setting Expectations *57*
8. Breaking Rules and Building a Team *77*
9. Working with Purpose, on Purpose *89*
10. Creating a Culture of Collaboration *100*
11. Pushing Toward Excellence *118*
12. Relationships Are Simple. Simple Is Hard. *131*
13. Leveraging Affirmation *147*
14. Restoring Balance *155*
15. The Best Offense Is Offense *163*
16. Earning Informality *180*
17. Learning to Be Unreasonable *184*
18. Improvisational Hospitality *199*
19. Scaling a Culture *218*
20. Back to Basics *235*

Epilogue *251*

I Appreciate You *255*

Notes *259*

Index *261*

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

A LETTER FROM SIMON SINEK

At Optimism Press, we imagine a world in which the vast majority of people wake up every single morning inspired, feel safe wherever they are, and end the day fulfilled by the work that they do. And the reality is, we are more likely to build this world if we commit to building it together.

But there's a problem. . . .

Over the last few decades, we've drifted apart. We used to do more things together. We attended church and other places of worship. We met up with friends and neighbors and met new people through bowling leagues and at our local rec centers. But these days, church attendance is down dramatically and bowling leagues and rec centers have all but disappeared. Add in the rise of digital communication and increased demand for remote work and we are left feeling lonelier and more apart than at any other time in recent history. Yet our intense desire to feel a sense of belonging remains—it's an innate human need. That's where *Unreasonable Hospitality* comes in.

On its surface, this is a book about a talented entrepreneur who helped transform a middling brasserie in New York City into the best restaurant in the world. However, this book is much bigger and more important than that. It is a book about how to treat people. How to listen. How to be curious. And how to learn to love the feeling of making others feel welcome. It is a book about how to make people feel like they belong.

Copyrighted Material

The greatest restaurants in the world became great by challenging the way we think about food: sourcing, preparation, presentation and, of course, taste. But when Will Guidara set out to make Eleven Madison Park the best restaurant in the world, he had a crazy idea about how to do it: "What would happen if we approached hospitality with the same passion, attention to detail, and rigor that we bring to our food?"

Most people think of hospitality as something they do. Will thinks about service as an act of service—about how his actions make people feel. And he recognized that if he wanted his frontline teams to obsess about how they made their customers feel, he had to obsess about how he made his *employees* feel. The two cannot be separated: great service cannot exist without great leadership.

Will not only transformed a restaurant, but challenged our entire idea of service. The lessons in *Unreasonable Hospitality* have as much relevance to real estate agents and insurance brokers—even government agencies—as they do for people who work in restaurants and hotels. His thoughts on leadership are as applicable to business-to-consumer companies as they are to business-to-business companies. Indeed, any organization would benefit from his thinking.

In this book, Will shows the amazing impact we can have on someone's life when we give them a sense of belonging . . . and, as important, how inspiring it is to work together to give people that feeling. And that's an idea worth sharing.

Be unreasonable and inspire on!
Simon Sinek

Copyrighted Material

UNREASONABLE HOSPITALITY

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO THE HOSPITALITY ECONOMY

At home, we were on top of the world.

Our restaurant, Eleven Madison Park, had recently received four stars from *The New York Times*, and a couple of James Beard Awards, too. But when my chef-partner Daniel Humm and I arrived at the cocktail reception the night before the awards for the 2010 World's 50 Best Restaurants, we understood: this was a whole different ball game.

Imagine every famous chef and restaurateur you've ever heard of milling around, drinking champagne and catching up with friends—and not one of them was talking to us. I'd never felt so much like a freshman at a new high school trying to figure out where to sit in the cafeteria, not even when I *was* a freshman.

It was a huge honor to be invited. The 50 Best awards had begun in 2002, but they'd become immediately meaningful in the industry. First of all, they were decided by a jury of a thousand well-regarded experts from around the world. And nobody had ever considered before how the best restaurants on the planet ranked against one another. By doing so, the awards gave these restaurants a push to become even better when they might have been content to rest on their laurels.

The awards ceremony itself was held at London's Guildhall, so regal

Copyrighted Material

and imposing it might as well have been a palace. As Daniel and I sat down, more than a little intimidated, we foolishly tried to gauge where we were going to land on the list based on where we were sitting relative to chefs like Heston Blumenthal of England's Fat Duck, or Thomas Keller of Per Se, both of whom had been in the top ten the year before.

I guessed forty. Daniel, always more optimistic, guessed number thirty-five.

The lights went down, the music played. The emcee for the night was a handsome, debonair Brit. And while I'm sure there were all the usual formalities and introductions and "thank you for comings" before the bomb dropped, in my memory there was little preamble before the man said, "To kick it off, coming in at number fifty, a new entry from New York City: Eleven Madison Park!"

That knocked the wind right out of us. We slumped over and stared at our feet.

Unfortunately, what we couldn't have possibly known (because it was our first year at this event, and because we were the very first restaurant called) is that when they call your name, they're also projecting your image onto a gigantic screen at the front of the auditorium, so that everyone can see you celebrating your win.

Except we weren't celebrating. We were at the very bottom of the list! Mortified to see our dejected faces on the thirty-foot-tall screen, I elbowed Daniel, and the two of us mustered a smile and a wave, but it was too little, too late: an auditorium filled with the most celebrated chefs and restaurateurs in the world—our heroes—had already borne witness to our devastation. The night was over for us before it had even begun.

At the reception afterward, we ran into Massimo Bottura, the Italian chef of Osteria Francescana, a Michelin three-star based in Modena—and number six on the list (not that we were counting). He saw us, started laughing, and couldn't stop: "You guys looked pretty happy up there!"

Copyrighted Material

Fair enough, but Daniel and I weren't laughing. It was an honor to be recognized as one of the fifty best restaurants in the world; we knew that. Still—in that room, we had come in last place.

We left the party early and headed back to our hotel, where we grabbed a bottle of bourbon from the bar and sat, ready to drown our sorrows, on the steps outside.

We spent the next couple of hours moving through the five stages of grief. We'd staggered out of the auditorium in denial—had that really happened? Then we got mad—who the hell did they think they were? We breezed through bargaining and spent the better part of the bottle on depression before settling into a state of acceptance.

On one level, it's absolutely ridiculous to call any restaurant "the best restaurant in the world." But the importance of the 50 Best list is that it names the places that are having the greatest impact on the world of food at a given moment in time.

The techniques that Spanish chef Ferran Adrià pioneered at El Bulli introduced molecular gastronomy to the world. René Redzepi championed foraged and wild-caught foods from the land and water surrounding his Copenhagen restaurant Noma, and a local food movement was born. And if you've eaten out or walked down the aisles of your local grocery in the last ten years, you've felt the impact those innovations have had on my industry and beyond.

These chefs had the courage to make something no one had made before, and to introduce elements that changed the game for everyone.

We hadn't done that yet. We'd worked our butts off to earn a spot on that list, but what, really, had we done that was groundbreaking? The more we talked, the more it became clear: nothing.

We had everything we needed: the work ethic, the experience, the talent, the team. But we'd been operating as glorified curators, picking the best features of all the great restaurants that had come before us and making them our own.

Copyrighted Material

Our restaurant was excellent and made a lot of people happy. But it hadn't yet changed the conversation.

When I was young, my dad gave me a paperweight that read, "What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?" That's what I was thinking about when Daniel and I wrote, "We will be Number One in the world," on a cocktail napkin.

It was very late, and the bottle was mostly empty by the time we stumbled back to our respective rooms. I was exhausted, but my mind kept racing back to that napkin.

Most of the chefs on the 50 Best list had made their impact by focusing on innovation, on what needed to change. But as I thought about the impact I wanted to make, I focused on the one thing that wouldn't. Fads fade and cycle, but **the human desire to be taken care of never goes away**.

Daniel's food was extraordinary; he was undeniably one of the best chefs in the world. So if we could become a restaurant focused passionately, intentionally, wholeheartedly on connection and graciousness—on giving both the people on our team and the people we served a sense of belonging—then we'd have a real shot at greatness.

I wanted to be number one, but that desire wasn't just about the award; I wanted to be part of the team that made *that* impact.

Just before I drifted off to sleep, I smoothed out the napkin and added two more words:

"Unreasonable Hospitality."

Service Is Black and White; Hospitality Is Color

When I was younger, I took a lot of pride in coming up with interview questions.

I now believe the best interview technique is no technique at all: you

Copyrighted Material

simply have enough of a conversation that you can get to know the person a little bit. Do they seem curious and passionate about what we're trying to build? Do they have integrity; are they someone I can respect? Is this someone I can imagine myself—and my team—happily spending a lot of time with?

But before I had the experience to let the conversation flow, one of my favorite questions to ask was, "What's the difference between service and hospitality?"

The best answer I ever got came from a woman I ended up *not* hiring. She said, "Service is black and white; hospitality is color."

"Black and white" means you're doing your job with competence and efficiency; "color" means you make people feel great about the job you're doing for them. Getting the right plate to the right person at the right table is service. But genuinely engaging with the person you're serving, so you can make an authentic connection—that's hospitality.

Daniel Humm and I spent eleven years turning Eleven Madison Park, a beloved but middling two-star brasserie serving seafood towers and soufflés, into the number one restaurant in the world. We got on that 50 Best list by pursuing excellence, the black and white, attending to every detail and getting as close to perfection as we could. But we got to number one by going Technicolor—by offering hospitality so bespoke, so over the top, it can be described only as unreasonable.

We had a radical idea of what the guest experience could be, and our vision was unlike any other out there. "You're not being realistic," someone would invariably tell us, every time we contemplated one of our reinventions. "You're being unreasonable."

That word "unreasonable" was meant to shut us down—to end the conversation, as it so often does. Instead, it started one, and became our call to arms. Because no one who ever changed the game did so by being reasonable. Serena Williams. Walt Disney. Steve Jobs. Martin Scorsese.

Copyrighted Material

Prince. Look across every discipline, in every arena—sports, entertainment, design, technology, finance—you need to be unreasonable to see a world that doesn't yet exist.

Chefs at the finest restaurants in the world had long been celebrated for being unreasonable about the food they served. At Eleven Madison Park, we came to realize the remarkable power of being unreasonable about how we made people feel. I'm writing this book because I believe it's time for every one of us to start being unreasonable about hospitality.

Of course, I hope everyone in my own industry reads this book and makes that choice, but I believe this idea can result in a seismic shift if it extends *beyond* restaurants. For most of this country's history, America functioned as a manufacturing economy; now, we're a service economy, and dramatically so—more than three-quarters of our GDP comes from service industries. So whether you're in retail, finance, real estate, education, health care, computer services, transportation, or communications, you have an incredible opportunity to be just as intentional and creative—as unreasonable—about pursuing hospitality as you are about every other aspect of your business. Because whether a company has made the choice to put their team and their customers at the center of every decision will be what separates the great ones from the pack.

Unfortunately, these skills have never been less valued than they are in our current hyperrational, hyperefficient work culture. We are in the middle of a digital transformation. That transformation has enhanced many aspects of our lives, but too many companies have left the human behind. They've been so focused on products, they've forgotten about people. And while it may be impossible to quantify in financial terms the impact of making someone feel good, don't think for a second that it doesn't matter. In fact, it matters more.

The answer is simple, if not easy: create a culture of hospitality. Which means addressing questions I've spent my career asking: How do you make the people who work for you and the people you serve feel seen

Copyrighted Material

and valued? How do you give them a sense of belonging? How do you make them feel part of something bigger than themselves? How do you make them feel welcome?

There's a long-standing debate in my profession as to whether hospitality can be taught. Many leaders I respect believe it can't; I couldn't disagree more. In fact, in 2014, I founded a conference for dining room professionals with my friend Anthony Rudolf, who was at the time the general manager of Per Se, with the intention of doing just that.

Chefs gathered at different conferences around the world, but there wasn't a single one for the people who worked in the dining room. So we set out to create a space where like-minded, passionate people could form community, trade ideas, and inspire one another—and, in so doing, evolve our craft.

We called it the Welcome Conference, and it was an instant hit with restaurant people. Dining room professionals from all over the country attended lectures, networked over drinks, and went home reinvigorated.

By the conference's third year, though, when we looked out into the audience, we saw sommeliers and servers sitting next to people who didn't work in restaurants at all: tech titans, small business owners, the CEOs of huge real estate companies. These people believed, as I do, that *how* they served their clients was as valuable as *what* they served. And they knew that what they could learn from leaders in my business could supercharge how they ran theirs.

When you create a hospitality-first culture, everything about your business improves—whether that means finding and retaining great talent, turning customers into raving fans, or increasing your profitability. It's my hope this book will be part of the movement ushering in this new era. But my motivation isn't your bottom line—or not my only one, anyway. Because what I'd really like to do is let you in on a little secret, one that the truly great professionals in my business know: **hospitality is a selfish pleasure**. It feels *great* to make other people feel good.

Copyrighted Material

In this book, I'll share stories from the twenty-five years I've spent working every position in a restaurant, from dishwasher to owner, and everything in between. And I'll share the lessons I've learned about service and leadership through the lens of hospitality—the little ones, the big ones, and the little ones that turned out to be big ones. Everything, in other words, you need to turn the world from black and white to color for you, the people you work with, and the people you serve.

Welcome to the hospitality economy.

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER 2

MAKING MAGIC IN A WORLD THAT COULD USE MORE OF IT

For my twelfth birthday, my dad took me to the Four Seasons for dinner.

At the time, I had no idea the Four Seasons was the first truly American fine-dining restaurant. Or that the elegant, mid-century modern interior was so iconic, it would eventually be designated a landmark by the City of New York.

I didn't know that James Beard and Julia Child had consulted on the menu, or that President John F. Kennedy had celebrated his birthday there an hour before Marilyn Monroe serenaded him with "Happy Birthday, Mr. President." Or that celebrities, titans of industry, and heads of state could judge whether their star had fallen in the city's ever-shifting power rankings by how close their table was to the Carrara marble pool at the center of the room.

What I did know was that the Four Seasons was the fanciest and most beautiful place I'd ever been in my life.

I was glad I'd insisted my dad buy me a classic Brooks Brothers navy blazer with brass buttons for the occasion; this was a place you dressed up for. I remember watching, wide-eyed and openmouthed, as a uniformed server expertly carved my duck on a gleaming cart pushed right up next

Copyrighted Material

to our table. When I dropped my napkin on the floor, he replaced it with a *totally new one* and called me "sir."

"People will forget what you do; they'll forget what you said. But they'll never forget how you made them feel." This quote, often (but probably incorrectly) attributed to the great American writer Maya Angelou, may be the wisest statement about hospitality ever made. Because thirty years later, I still haven't forgotten how the Four Seasons made me feel.

The restaurant cast a spell I was all too happy to be enchanted by. It put the world on pause, so that everything else fell away; the only thing that existed for me, for those two and a half hours, was what was in that room.

That night, I learned a restaurant could create magic, and I was hooked. By the time we left, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my life.

People Will Never Forget How You Made Them Feel

Both of my parents worked in hospitality.

They met in 1968, when my dad was working in Phoenix for Sky Chefs, American Airlines' catering arm. This was back when people dressed up to get on an airplane and the food they were served in the air was delicious.

My dad's distinctive Boston accent stuck out in Arizona, and one day, someone on his team said, "Hey, Frank: there's a woman on the plane who speaks the same language as you." He was talking about my mother, who also spoke with a thick Boston accent. She was a stewardess, which is what they used to call flight attendants in the bad old days, when they were weighed every week and weren't allowed to keep working after they got married.

The two Bostonians connected. My dad recognized my mom right

Copyrighted Material

away; as it turned out, the two of them had gone to grade school together, where he'd nursed an enormous fourth-grade crush on her. She had no recollection of him whatsoever. He'd lost her when she'd disappeared in middle school; her mother had passed away, and she'd moved to Westchester, just north of New York City, to live with relatives.

Suddenly, there she was again.

The two of them fell madly in love. (This was temporarily complicated by my dad's three years of army service in Vietnam, and the fact that both of them were engaged to other people when they met.) They were married in 1973.

My dad left American Airlines and moved around the restaurant business before taking a job as a regional vice president for Ground Round, an old-school, casual-dining chain known for passing out whole peanuts and encouraging patrons to throw the shells on the ground. They moved to Sleepy Hollow, New York. My mother kept her job, traveling all over the world (times had changed, and American had suspended the rules about married flight attendants). After I was born, my cousin Liz moved in to help take care of me while my parents were away for work.

My parents had a good life. They were happy at home, and they shared a ferocious work ethic, as well as an intense sense of pride in their careers. My mom finished college by putting herself through night school, and she even earned her pilot's license, though she was never a very good driver, which makes me wonder who thought it was a good idea for her to fly a plane.

Then, one day when she was working in first class, my mother dropped a cup of coffee.

Over the course of my career working in restaurants, I've dropped lots of things. But my mother maintained such a high standard of excellence that the incident stood out—even more so when, a few weeks later, she dropped another one.

Copyrighted Material

That's when they went to see the first doctor.

A few months, and a hundred appointments and tests later, my mother was diagnosed with brain cancer. The disease had spread, so her doctors couldn't neatly remove the tumor; they'd need to use radiation to kill whatever parts of it they couldn't take out.

She had her first surgery when I was four years old. Afterward, she was in pretty good shape, except her face drooped on the left side, and she couldn't use her left arm or her left leg (which did not, incidentally, improve her driving). But radiation then was less precise than it is now, and when the radiation sickness kicked in, her condition began to decline.

She didn't let her steadily deteriorating health stop her from being a mom. She drove me to tennis practice a couple of times a week for as long as she could. When it got too difficult for her to get in and out of the front seat, she would drop me off and wait in the car for an hour and a half, patient while the New York winter raged around her.

She was like that. She loved me recklessly.

One night, she fell coming down the stairs. My dad was working restaurant hours, as he did for most of his professional life; when he got home around eleven, he found my mom and me sleeping on the bottom step. I was too little to help her up, but not too little to fetch us pillows and a blanket so we could make a comfy nest.

Eventually, my mom became a full quadriplegic. After that, she lost the ability to communicate. But she kept going; she kept *living*.

My dad wanted me to be as independent as possible given the circumstances, so he sold our house and moved us three blocks away from my school. That way, I wouldn't have to rely on other people to drive me around, and friends would naturally end up at my house. In junior high, I started playing drums. I played in punk bands, and ska bands, and funk bands—and we rehearsed in my room, which was right above the kitchen, where my mother hung out during the day. Listening to a crew

Copyrighted Material

of high school boys stumbling through the iconic opening chords of Nirvana's "Come as You Are" a thousand times would be a waking nightmare for most people. My mom loved it.

Eventually, home health aides came in to help with her care. Every single day, my mom would ask the aide on duty to push her wheelchair to the end of the road to wait for me. She could no longer speak or get up to give me a hug, but she could be there with a huge smile on her face when I got home from school. That smile was all I needed, and it taught me an invaluable lesson—what it's like to feel truly welcomed.

The Power of a Genuine Welcome

By the time I was a senior in college, my parents were living in Boston. My mom relied on a pretty complicated medical setup by then, so travel required specialized equipment and a medical van. I was playing in a sixteen-piece funk band called the Bill Guidara Quartet, and my mom hadn't seen me play music in years, so my dad had the idea he'd bring her to Ithaca to see me perform. The trip would also serve as a trial run for their upcoming trip to my graduation.

Smoking was still allowed in bars then, which wasn't going to work with my mom's medical equipment. So I talked the powers that be into letting us do a show at Willard Straight Hall, the student union community center at Cornell. It wasn't the show we usually did, but it was an incredible experience: I got to play Stevie Wonder's "Superstition" to my mom, sitting in her wheelchair in the crowd.

Her smile lit up the dark room.

The next term, my last one at Cornell, I took what turned out to be my favorite class: Guest Chefs, a spring-semester class run by a professor named Giuseppe Pezzotti, who was an absolute legend at the school.

As Cornell has evolved, it's become less about food and beverage

Copyrighted Material

programs at restaurants and hotels and more about real estate and consulting. But there was still a tiny group who were more interested in what it means to be a classic, old-school maître d' than in spreadsheets, and Giuseppe Pezzotti was our king. (To give you an idea: it was in his class I learned how to peel a grape with a fork and a knife.)

As far as I was concerned, Guest Chefs was the coolest class at Cornell because we got the experience of running a real restaurant. Every semester, a guest chef would come to do a dinner, staffed entirely by the students. One group of students would serve as the chef's management team, another group would work as kitchen staff, while the third group ran the dining room.

I was fortunate enough to be part of the management team for the great Daniel Boulud. Daniel is so renowned in my industry he is known by his first name alone; it is also the name of his Michelin-starred restaurant in New York, which he opened in 1993 after years as the acclaimed chef at Le Cirque. Since then, his empire has since expanded to *a lot* of restaurants, in places as far-flung as London, Palm Beach, Dubai, and Singapore.

He is unquestionably one of the most famous chefs in the world—and yet he was prepared to come to upstate New York to cook a meal as part of a college class. Later, I would learn this is entirely consistent with his character: Daniel is well-known for his generosity toward young people coming up in our industry.

I was assigned to be the marketing director for the dinner. There wasn't much marketing to do for a dinner with a chef as famous as Daniel; the dinner would sell out as soon as people heard he was coming. But I still wanted to do something cool. Knowing guests would want to watch him in action, I arranged for a chef's table in the kitchen—the first ever in the history of Guest Chefs. It was odd to see a formal table set up in the middle of the ugly, industrial hotel-school kitchen, so I put a red velvet rope around it to make it swanky.

We auctioned off the chef's table and raised a few thousand dollars

Copyrighted Material

for the charity Taste of the Nation. I was happy to attend their annual dinner a few weeks later to hand over a big cardboard check from Cornell, but I was most excited about playing host to the chef and his team. I didn't have much in the way of resources, but I was going to make sure they had a great time.

Daniel's advance team was scheduled to arrive on a Thursday. The two sous chefs were Johnny Iuzzini and Cornelius Gallagher. Johnny went on to a successful television career and to win multiple James Beard Awards as head of pastry for Jean-Georges Vongerichten's restaurants; Neil would earn three stars from *The New York Times* as the chef of Oceana, a temple to impeccable seafood in midtown Manhattan. At the time, though, the two of them were just kids, and I was a nerdy senior at hotel school trying to impress them. So when it was time to go pick them up from the airport, I borrowed an Audi A5 from the girl I sat next to. It was the nicest car in our class.

There aren't any fancy restaurants in Ithaca. If you want to show people a good time, you take them to the Pines—Glenwood Pines on Cayuga Lake. The Pines is known for its view and huge cheeseburgers served on French bread. Think jalapeño poppers, stained-glass Yuengling lamps hanging over the coin-operated pool table, a game on the TV behind the knotty pine bar.

The burgers did not disappoint, and the beers we had alongside didn't hurt, either. Afterward, my distinguished guests wondered if I happened to know where they could score some weed.

As a matter of fact, I did. The group ended up back at my house—130 College Avenue, your quintessential college party house, complete with a janky pool table in the dining room and a pair of mildewing couches on the porch, where the party continued until the wee hours.

The next morning, I staggered off to class, while Neil and Johnny reported to the kitchen of the student-run Statler Hotel on campus to prep for the Guest Chefs' dinner. I didn't see them again until the eve-

Copyrighted Material

ning, after Chef Boulud had arrived. I was incredibly nervous to meet him, but Daniel was charming right off the bat, and Johnny and Neil were obviously happy to see me again.

The dinner went brilliantly. Afterward, everyone—Daniel, Neil, Johnny, and most of our class—ended up, as was the custom, at Rulloff's, a dive bar near campus. As the night wore on and more (and more) friends showed up, it seemed natural to head back to my place, where we always had at least one keg stashed in the basement. But the crowd was getting snacky, and my kitchen cupboards—including the one whose door had been hanging from a single hinge since the day we moved in—were bare.

Which is how I found myself, three sheets to the wind at one in the morning, talking my way back into the kitchen of the Statler Hotel with Daniel Boulud.

"I am the chef from the event tonight," Daniel explained in his charming French accent as the two of us approached the front desk, "and I must get into the kitchen." Once in, we rounded up pans, butter, eggs, truffles, and caviar and headed back to 130 College Avenue.

So there was Daniel Boulud in my busted kitchen, drinking Milwaukee's Best from a red Solo cup and whipping up scrambled eggs with truffles for a bunch of wasted college kids. Did one of the most celebrated chefs in the world do a keg stand on my pool table? I'll never tell.

The party reluctantly broke up around three in the morning. We parted with hugs all around.

The Nobility in Service

A month and a half after the Guest Chefs' dinner, all the arrangements were in place for my parents to attend my graduation. Then, two days before they were set to leave, my mom slipped into a coma.

Copyrighted Material