

introduction

IN SEARCH OF AMERICAN CUISINE

WALK INTO ANY RESTAURANT—a diner, a bar or a fine dining establishment—and you’ll find that it has its own unique culture. And the longer a restaurant is in business, the further ingrained that culture becomes. Of course Fork is no exception. After ten years, having worked with roughly six hundred employees and served well over a half million guests, we certainly have a story to tell.

From the beginning, our goal at Fork has been to serve simple, unpretentious, New American bistro-style cuisine in a casual but sophisticated environment. Because the industry is so competitive, a restaurant that doesn’t reinvent itself on an ongoing basis doesn’t survive. Fork has been flexible enough to survive shifts in eating trends, new competition, the growth of Philadelphia and fluctuations in the economy because we are constantly asking ourselves the question, “What is a New American bistro?” All of our answers have started with being open to new ideas. From the beginning, Fork has been fluid. If something didn’t work, we’d adjust it, fix it or tweak it to make it work.

However, it would be false to imply that this fluidity alone explains our success. The formula for a successful restaurant is almost impossible to nail down. Is it the location, the food, the service, the interior? Good food is obviously important, but as our current chef Thien Ngo says, “If you are hungry enough, the food will



Ellen, mom and auntie

taste good!” To keep a restaurant going for ten years as we have, you need more than just good food. You also need more than a good location, good service and a beautiful interior. To succeed over the long haul, a restaurant has to have a clear, concise and consistent vision. While we have worked incredibly hard to do everything well, we have worked just as hard to make all of our efforts support our vision of a simple, elegant bistro that serves delicious, reasonably priced food and provides friendly service that makes you want to come back soon.

CHINESE JERSEY GIRL

People are always curious to learn how chefs or owners enter the restaurant business. Although a lucky few know their career calling right away, the rest of us figure it out by trial and error. Of course, we all have one thing in common: a love of good food.

During my childhood, good food was a part of my daily life, thanks to my mother, Ching Yun Yin. Although many of our relatives and friends took her good cooking for granted, my brothers and I had a sense that our nightly dinners were a cut above normal home cooking. Whereas other kids our age were eating meatloaf, pot roast, pasta or chicken, we were treated to a smorgasbord of five or six different traditional Chinese dishes every night; seaweed, jellyfish, braised oxtails, chicken feet, roasted duck in soy sauce, prawns with their heads on and steamed whole fish were among the

usual dishes at the table. Because my mom's family was originally from Shanghai and my father's family was from Hunan, she exposed us to a variety of ingredients and made specialties from different regions of China.

Some of my fondest childhood memories include sitting at the kitchen table with my grandmother and my mom, rolling and wrapping dumplings. I would listen to my mom and grandmother describing how to make the perfect dumpling, elaborating on its consistency, size, filling and cooking method. Then, when I was in high school, I started baking simple fruit breads, brownies and cakes in my home economics class. Soon, I was experimenting with all kinds of baking recipes. I couldn't wait until I was old enough to get a job in a restaurant kitchen so I could learn more about cooking.

The summer I turned sixteen, I began working at the Chinese Kitchen, a small restaurant just outside our town of Rumson, New Jersey. It was a tiny place that specialized in Mongolian barbecue. Even though Rumson was a bedroom community for New York, the Chinese Kitchen was considered exotic at the time. Raw meat would be sliced to order, marinated in a sauce customized by each guest and cooked on a special Mongolian barbecue grill. The owners had another restaurant as well, and since the menu at the Chinese Kitchen was so limited, I wanted to work at their other location as soon as I had mastered that job. At the second



Ellen Yin

restaurant, I helped make spring rolls, fried rice and other simple foods. The kitchen was located by the entrance to the dining room, and I enjoyed catching glimpses of people enjoying their meals, or overhearing the conversations of the waiters and waitresses. Everything about that restaurant fascinated me.

I started out in the kitchen, but the more I worked, the more intrigued I became by the idea of serving people. So I applied for a job as a busser at the

Fromagerie, the most upscale restaurant in the area, which was just around the corner from where we lived. It had an excellent reputation throughout New Jersey and was one of the few restaurants in the area that had been reviewed by the *New York Times*. In the early 1980's, people still considered French food the epitome of gourmet cuisine. I remember how I felt when I pushed open the restaurant's heavy wooden door for the first time. The door reminded me of the entrance to a mansion, and when I entered the restaurant and looked around, I suddenly became very nervous. I had never eaten at a restaurant that had tables set with fine tablecloths, multiple pieces of silver, fancy china and stemware. At home, we just used chopsticks and maybe a spoon.



Sidewalk café

Despite my anxiety, I applied for a job there, and I was hired as a busser. For the next two years, the Fromagerie was my hobby. I became friends with the other bussers, servers, cooks and bartenders. And working there exposed me to foods I had never tasted before, such as fettuccine Alfredo and quiche. My mom never cooked with cream or butter, and we certainly didn't eat cheese at home. The blue varieties struck me as particularly stinky and unappealing at first. I can't say that I became a total convert, but at least I would try cheese on occasion. I also learned a lot about desserts, because the Fromagerie made its own pastries. At home, I tried to replicate pastry recipes from the restaurant and tested them out on my family—until my father finally said, “No more desserts, unless you help us eat what you make.”

That year, when I was eighteen years old, I declared my goal to open a restaurant after college. But my parents thought that I would have more financial security and an easier career if I became a doctor or an engineer. As a compromise, I entered the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School in Philadelphia to study economics and business. Because Penn was only an hour and a half away, I would rush home on the weekends to visit my friends at what we called the Fromage. But eventually I realized that I didn't have to go home to be in a restaurant. I got a job at the Conversation Cafe, a dingy basement cafe in Penn's Student Activity Center. Business was slow, and when the owner asked if I had any ideas, I suggested serving



Fork 1997

desserts in addition to pastries. The next thing I knew, I was making them in my dorm room in a toaster oven.

Yet even my efforts could not save the cafe from closing. Next I found a job as a server at the only French restaurant near campus, La Terrasse. Immediately life seemed exciting again. La Terrasse served simple, traditional French cuisine with an Asian twist. That summer, I stayed in Philadelphia instead of going home. In less than a year, I had formed new restaurant friends (many of whom are still my closest friends) and met many customers, some of whom now come to Fork.

In my junior year, one of my classes required students to form teams to come up with plans for a new business. A bartender at La Terrasse named Wain Ballard and I put together a business plan for the Harmony Cafe. Interestingly enough, the proposed cafe was located in Old City at the corner of Third and Arch Streets, a block away from Fork. Although I learned a lot through this effort, the project gave me a glimpse of a harsh reality: my dreams needed capital to fuel them. Without any angel investors or my own money, I had to put my ambitions on hold and settle for looking for a “real” job after graduation.

Over the next five years, I held various jobs in advertising and fundraising, but I couldn't stay at any one for more than a year. However excited I was at the beginning of each job, I quickly became bored. At least I was narrowing down my options! Finally I decided to return to school to try once again to figure out "what to do with my life." Two years later, I graduated with an M.B.A. in health care administration from Wharton and began my job search again.

At that point, I had lived in Philadelphia for almost ten years, and the city had already begun to change for the better. It was even selected as one of the best U.S. cities in which to live. I had formed even more friendships by then and really didn't see how any out-of-town job could entice me to give that up. Also I was learning a lot about planning and developing a business at my new job at a health-care consulting firm. Yet even after I became an independent consultant, I continued to dream about opening a restaurant. I craved the creativity that had been missing in all of my other jobs. I loved food, entertaining and serving people, and I devoured any books or magazines I came across that were related to restaurants, food reviews or cooking.

I still remember the moment when I decided to try to make my dream a reality. I was thirty-one. While sitting in a bookstore, I picked up a copy of *Food & Wine* and realized that almost every featured restaurateur was between the ages of

twenty-five and forty-five. If they could do it, why couldn't I? If I failed, I could always go back to the kind of work I was doing already.

But however determined I might have been to make a go of my dream at last, I knew I couldn't do it alone. So I began to talk with those closest to me about my plans. Many of my friends had listened patiently to my career complaints over the years, including Roberto Sella, a classmate from graduate school. Roberto's academic interest in finance was so different from my focus on health care that I was surprised our paths had crossed. Yet ever since I have known him, Roberto's passion has been wine. Over the years we had organized many dinner parties for groups of friends. Often, after enough wine, he and I would begin to discuss opening a restaurant and to choose the types of food and wine we would serve. So when I announced that I was ready to open a restaurant, Roberto couldn't wait to be a part of it. Roberto always loves a new project, and this one would gain him a decent place at which to drink his own wine!

With both of us eager to pursue a venture that incorporated our passions for food and wine, Roberto and I started on an exciting journey.