



WORD OF MOUTH BLOG

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Raw talent or raw ingredients?

Ingredients or a chef's technique - which is more important for assuring a good meal?



Is it what you've got or what you do with it that counts? Photograph: Manfred Rutz/Getty

According to Thomas Keller, chef-impresario behind the French Laundry in Napa and Per Se in New York (and also with Bouchons in both places), Californians care more about ingredients (you know – place of origin, please God make it local, organic and boutique farmed) while New Yorkers are more interested in technique.

As a devoted New Yorker, I agree (I know how to slice a tomato and I have access to heirlooms) as did my dear, departed friend Alan King, actor-comedian-gourmand, who once said, "I like to see a little cooking for my money."

So how do chefs feel about this? This past Sunday that began the three-day [Starchefs.com International Chefs Congress](#) in the magnificent ruin known as the Park Avenue Armory, I had the chance to ask Heston Blumenthal, Marco Pierre White and Anthony Bourdain this question: If you had to choose between first-rate ingredients prepared by a second-rate chef, or second-rate (but not spoiled) ingredients cooked up by a first-rate chef, which would you choose?

After some careful thought, both Blumenthal and Bourdain chose the second-rate ingredients in the hands of a first-rate chef. Bourdain confessed that he thought that's was the thing to say anyway because it makes chefs seem more important and this was a chefs event. Blumenthal also mused that Brits tend to agree with Californians about ingredients and, later, Bourdain suggested that in Spain, it's all about technique.

Hair flowing, reeking of cigarette smoke and cellphone to his ear, White hedged. "I'd have to know what you mean by second-rate," he said, adding, "I have never seen first-rate ingredients ruined by a chef." I volunteered to suggest about 100 restaurants in New York City alone where that occurs every day, but his thoughts were elsewhere, understandably on the panel he and Bourdain were about to take part in with chef-groupie author Michael Ruhlman as moderator.

This discussion centered around the Congress's theme, the responsibility of the chef. The specific aspects discussed here were the moral, ethical and business questions raised by celebrity chefs who rarely hang around to cook in their own restaurants.

Dubbing the itinerant Alain Ducasse "soulless", White said, "When I buy a ticket to hear Elton John play the piano, that's who I expect to hear, not his assistant. The best football team is Manchester United because Alex Ferguson is on the touchline at every game." Easy for White to say now since he very publicly traded his role of chef for that of a restaurateur.

Cleverly working the word 'fuck' six times into only the first half of his comments, Bourdain seemed to imply that the chef's main responsibility was to himself and his good life, posing as unthinkable a life spent only behind the stove.

Having thought about this for a long time, I have decided that although I know a kitchen can do a great job if an absent famous chef has trained a reliable stand-in, the average customer, lured by publicity, has a right to expect that famous chef to be there, golden hands or at least golden eyes on. That celebrity is in large part what the customer pays for. Perhaps the answer is a discount when the star chef is away.

So which is it? Ingredients or technique? The raw materials or the chef? And how much do you think it matters if that famous chef isn't actually in the kitchen?

Posted by
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