

## 5 Questions with Grant Achatz

Submitted by andrew.zimmern on Tue, 09/09/2008



[Alinea](#) is part kitchen, part science lab. This highly-regarded, curious kitchen experiments with balloons, snow, fire... all with the hopes of creating innovative dishes. Whatever the process, just ask anyone lucky enough to have a bite: Grant Achatz is one hell of a chef.

**AndrewZimmern.com:** What did you learn from the amazingly talented chefs who have mentored you over the years before you opened [Alinea](#)?

**Grant Achatz:** I have been lucky to have a few key people take me under their wing at various points in my development. Steve Stallard was the first chef that I worked for. I credit him with giving me a great deal of confidence at a very young and essential age. His focus very European, I remember making prociutto from scratch and butchering game that he had shot on hunting trips. He would lecture me on the importance of hanging the birds, having a light touch and cooking sensibly.

Thomas Keller mentored me at the [French Laundry](#)... really, he is the main one who guided me during my formative years as a young chef and I was exceptionally fortunate to have him as a teacher. Chef Keller leads by example and more than any technique, recipe, or dish, I learned that it takes incredible commitment, time, and passion to get things right. I truly learned how to season food from him. He is the one whom I credit fully understanding food and the experience of dining can be emotional and therefore art.

Bill Smith of the former La Jota Vineyard Company, whom I worked for as an assistant winemaker for a year, taught me all about wine. From growing it, making it, and honestly learning how to appreciate it.

**AZ.com: I have eaten at your restaurant twice and sampled over 40 of your dishes, among the most memorable was a straightforward seared squab with truffle sauce, a classic dish. Do you think too many food writers get hung up on some of your experimental techniques?**

**GA:** I understand why it makes good press to write about new techniques and technology, but we never emphasize that in the dining experience at Alinea. Ultimately dining at Alinea should be an enjoyable experience, filled with emotion and delicious food. That is our goal. In order to achieve that we need to really examine food, emotions, the arc of the dining experience, and in doing so we utilize technology where appropriate. But Alinea is not a "techy" restaurant... it is a refined experience that focuses on emotion, and the experience as a whole. I have to say I don't recall a seared squab with truffle sauce at Alinea.....maybe I was off that night.

**AZ.com: How did your interest in experimental cooking develop and do you think the term molecular gastronomy continues to accurately describe what you do?**

**GA:** I never did! I don't know any chefs that like the term. We do what we do... I don't know what the appropriate genre classification should be, or whether it is even necessary. I have always been curious in the kitchen. I used to wrap pickle slices around French fries, and add strange spices to the mashed potatoes at my parent's family style restaurant. I think experimental is a misnomer though. The unusual flavor combinations are only unusual because they are not wildly popular, not because they are an experiment. They work; they are proven...otherwise we wouldn't serve them. I think explorative is a better way to describe it. We constantly explore new ways to cook, combine and present food. Sometimes this requires science to help us achieve our goals; most often it is based on cooks intuition.

**AZ.com: When I first dined at your restaurant I immediately ran back to my computer and wrote an article naming it the most important eatery in America. I am sure that all the accolades become homogenous after a while, so what are your top three kitchen experiments gone wrong?**

**GA:** Well, we try things all of the time that simply don't work. We spent a while trying to make snow, to see if freezing various flavored liquids by spraying them into a chamber and allowing them to crystallize like snow does would produce a unique texture. We worked with Philip Preston at Polyscience on this and he rigged up a few different experiments that became increasingly elaborate and large. We made something that approximated snow, but we have not produce anything unique or worthwhile... yet. But all of our failures are temporary in some fashion... we just look at them as ongoing experiments that often lead to some place we did not expect.

We have been trying to blow a balloon from soft sugar, like caramel for about 6 years to no avail. And then there was the ill-fated concept of a lamb with charcoal crust. But really the guests never see the failures. We are very careful of self-editing ourselves. We know when a dish is menu ready.

**AZ.com: Currently, your Lincoln Park restaurant, Alinea, is regarded as one of the top restaurants in the world, and this year, you took home the James Beard Award for "Outstanding Chef". What's the downside of all the hullabaloo?**

**GA:** Should you be allowed to complain about success? I don't think so. We are really fortunate to have a willing group of 90 diners per night, every night, who are excited to come to Alinea. That is all any chef ever should want. But it certainly produces a level of pressure to not only execute at a certain level each night. But we have not been shy about defining our identity as a restaurant that continually reinvents. Therefore we have to deliver on that. We are not setting back and cycling the 350 dishes that have already been created and documented. There are days I wish we could....but that is not Alinea. The restaurant world looks to us now for ideas and inspiration. They expect us to be new all the time. That is not easy.

**AZ.com: In October, you're set to release the [Alinea cookbook](#): 400-pages showcasing 600 recipes and photographs. I checked out a preview of the book, and I can't wait to get my hands on the real thing. But I have to ask, how did you balance the need to document your style of cooking as it exists today with the notion that most home cooks will find it difficult to reproduce your food? Are there techniques in the book that the typical culinista can find accessible?**

**GA:** Most publishers wanted us to "dumb down" the recipes for the home cook, to convert them to teaspoons and tablespoons even though doing so would compromise the results. We took the opposite position entirely -- we believe that passionate amateur cooks can make 90% of the dishes in the book to one extent or another, and further that changing the recipes is precisely why many cookbooks fall short. None of the techniques are particularly difficult to execute individually -- what is daunting most of the time are the sheer number of preparation steps in any given dish. So we say in the introduction... take parts of the dishes -- key elements -- and use them to create your own versions of the food. We also include at least one picture of every single dish... so the book is enjoyable as a visual experience as well. We had amateur cooks try out recipes before we published and they did very well. There are also people posting their versions on the [Alinea Mosaic](#) already and it is amazing how good they look.

**AZ.com: When it comes to dining out, what five restaurants in Chicago do you like the most these days?**

**GA:** To be honest, I do not get the opportunity to dine out in Chicago much. The only time I sit down to dinner is when I am traveling, and lately that has been in NYC or Europe... and even then that is infrequent. Most chefs are NOT the people to ask where to eat.

But I will say I have had great meals at these 5 Chicago restaurants: [Schwa](#), [Charlie Trotter's](#), [Everest](#), [Green Zebra](#) and [Moto](#).

**AZ.com: What are your guilty pleasures? BBQ? Hot dogs? Pizza? Are you an eater or a diner in your off time?**

**GA:** I love [Potbelly's Sandwich Works](#).

**AZ.com: Your courage and tenacity in battling cancer was and continues to be inspirational for so many in and out of the food business, how is your health these days and how has your cancer changed your professional relationship with your team at Alinea?**

**GA:** My health is good. All of the latest check ups and scans have been clean. The side effects from treatment still prove difficult. Radiation is a powerful thing. And while that is a good thing when considering how it effectively drives away the cancer, it does leave some destruction in its path. I am learning to adjust, simple things like swallowing are difficult from the tissue rigidity. But the result of this treatment is far better than the alternative.

I have certainly learned to trust key members of my staff more as they really kept things running tightly when I was forced to miss a few services during my chemotherapy and radiation treatments. I am exceptionally grateful for their commitment during that time -- Alinea did not falter and that was incredibly important to me.

**AZ.com: What is your favorite new cooking gadget and what new menu items are you toying around with for fall and winter?**

**GA:** Balloons. We have used water balloons in ways that they clearly were never intended. We fill them, then drop them in liquid nitrogen, then "pop" them by passing them over a flame leaving a perfectly round ball of food with a liquid center. A low-tech solution to a previously vexing problem.

**AZ.com: What is your favorite band to listen to when you want to change your mood?**

**GA:** A few come to mind. [Godsmack](#), [Tool](#), and [Rage Against the Machine](#).

**AZ.com: Name your 3 favorite ingredients to work with as a chef.**

**GA:** All chefs have their go to or favorite ingredients. I love fennel and anise based flavors. Which is funny because I despised black licorice as a child.

I am a big fan of Bonito. I love its complexity and honestly it's ability to lend to both sweet and savory applications.

Sudachi. The juice from this Japanese citrus fruit is complex. You get the bracing acidity falling somewhere between lime and lemon that you expect, but it also shows tones of cumin and coriander.

### **AZ.com: What's in your fridge?**

**GA:** Not much! I pretty much live at Alinea... and eat my meals there as well. When I am at home, I am sleeping for a few hours. To be specific...Ketchup, eggs, champagne, pickles, a moldy lemon, yogurt (likely spoiled as I can't remember when I bought it), mustard (whole grain), capers, mayonnaise, and two sprigs of rosemary, grape jelly and three bottles of Evian.

### *About Grant Achatz*

*Born in Michigan in 1974, Grant Achatz grew up in the restaurant industry, literally, his parents and grandparents being restaurateurs. Early on he realized he wanted to be a chef, and upon graduating from high school immediately enrolled at the [Culinary Institute of America](#).*

*Excelling at the C.I.A., Achatz graduated and ascended the culinary ladder at several prestigious restaurants, including the acclaimed [French Laundry](#) in the Napa Valley. Working closely with Thomas Keller, Achatz thrived in this highly creative and dedicated environment, and after two years became sous chef to Keller. After four years at the French Laundry, Achatz chose to broaden his knowledge and worked as an assistant winemaker at La Jota Vineyards. In 2001, he accepted the Executive Chef position at the four-star [Trio](#) (Evanston, Il.), garnering accolades including being named the "Rising Star Chef in America," [James Beard Foundation](#), 2003 and one of ten "Best New Chefs in America," *Food & Wine*, 2002.*

*Known worldwide in culinary circles as one of the leaders in the forward-thinking movement, Achatz realized a lifelong dream by opening [Alinea](#) in Chicago in May 2005. The restaurant received extraordinary attention from day one, and was nominated by the James Beard Foundation as the Best New Restaurant in America that same year.*

*Under Chef Achatz' leadership, Alinea has received worldwide attention for its hypermodern, emotional approach to dining. Alinea has received four stars from both the [Chicago Tribune](#) and [Chicago](#) magazine Achatz was named the "next great American chef" by [The New York Times](#) (September 2005) and in October, 2006 Alinea received Five Diamonds from AAA and Ruth Reichl of [Gourmet](#) magazine declared Alinea the "Best Restaurant in America" in its twice-per-decade list of America's Top 50 Restaurants. Chef Achatz has appeared on the Today Show, CBS Sunday Morning, The Food Network, The Discovery Channel and PBS, and has been featured in dozens of periodicals around the US and from as far away as Sweden, Finland, Great Britain, Spain, Italy, the Philippines, and France.*



Grant Achatz is a featured presenter at StarChefs.com's International Chef's Congress, speaking on New Tools of Gastronomy: Service Ware, Re-Imagined. The event runs Sept. 14-16, 2008 in New York City. For more information,

[check out StarChefs.com.](http://StarChefs.com)