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'El Bully' goes to New York

Jacob Richler helps David Hawthorth cook the meal of a lifetime in the kitchen from hell

Taste

WHILE IN THE midst of making plans for his dinner last month at James Beard House in Manhattan, Vancouver chef David Hawthorth did something uncharacteristically foolhardy, and possibly foolish: He rang me up and asked if I was willing to fly down to New York a day or two before the event, hang out with his kitchen crew and—ahem—lend a hand with the prep. Naturally, I said yes.

When the renowned American food writer James Beard died in 1985, a foundation was created in his name with a view to promoting the culinary arts in America. It runs a busy annual schedule of pricey Beard-endorsed dinners at venues across North America. Chefs are generally pleased with the invitation—and never more so than when asked to strut their stuff at the foundation headquarters, Beard's former residence on West 12th Street.

All the same, chefs understand well that the honour comes with a caveat or two. They are required to provide their services, food and wine uncompensated. What makes matters worse at Beard House is that they are expected to throw all that together to a very high standard in Beard's old home kitchen, which—alas—was built to a rather low one. "It's a dump," one Toronto chef confided to me upon completion of his hard-won successful visit. "Never again!"

Obviously, a decent array of restaurant equipment was posthumously installed. But

A movable feast: Chef Hawthorth (centre) with his crew; he's boning braised short ribs for dinner at the legendary James Beard House

the premises remain comically small for the purpose of serving hors d'oeuvres and a multi-course meal to 60 or 70 discriminating guests.

American chefs circumvent the logistics of cooking there by doing as little of that as possible; instead, they prepare as much as they can at their own restaurants, and use the Beard kitchen only for finishing. But Canadian and other foreign chefs do not enjoy that option. For if, like me, you have ever tried to fly home from Europe packing essentials like the Éclairé brand of butter or well-hung Scottish grouse, you know that customs inspectors have a knack for upsetting great plans with fines and heartbreak.

The Canadian chefs I know who cook at Beard house still chance it only on Canadian rarities, such as Dragon's Breath blue cheese and those labour-intensive

ingredients—like Hawthorth's bacon-flavoured *dashi* broth, which, instead of being clarified French-style, with egg whites, undergoes a three-day process involving gelatin, freezer, fridge and strainers—for which they lack time and equipment in New York. Generally, they fly in a few days prior to the event, in order to set up shop, take deliveries and do their prep in some local professional kitchen sympathetic to the cause.

On the Tuesday morning before his Friday event, Hawthorth pulled into New York on the red-eye with a streamlined kitchen team: executive chef Kristian Eligh, sous-chef Bryan Satterford and pastry chef Wayne Kozinko. They had pre-arranged to do prep at Great Performances, a bustling SoHo catering



Grace note: Beef with endive, celeriac and that tuile of sushi

operation that handles the parties at the Plaza Hotel, and other big-ticket events—for example, George Soros's third wedding, on Sept. 21. Which I mention only because I happened to walk through the kitchen just as they were disposing of some of the leftovers—namely, two beer-case-sized boxes of fist-sized black summer truffles.

"This is nothing," confided the cook in charge. "We ordered 900 lb. of King crab for the event and only used 10 per cent—because he only wanted us to serve the top joint of each leg." So now you know: Even octogenarian billionaires consider it a special occasion when they get hitched to a woman half their age.

Down a short corridor, I found Hawksworth and his team hard at work in a small kitchen of their own. Kozinko was off to one side, folding what looked like ganache in a large mixing bowl. Satterford was rolling chilled, shredded pork confit into crepes, and sealing the cylinders in tightly wrapped cling film to be set overnight. At the central island, Eligh was inspecting some shucked poached Dungeness crab, while Hawksworth filleted some whole black cod freshly arrived courtesy of Thomas Keller's supplier.

"You can all relax now—I'm here!" I announced.

As it turned out, they had worked a long shift the evening previous and things were already coming together. The short ribs were braised and their accompaniment of celeriac purée buzzed to a creamy, buttery state of bliss. The soy, mirin, ginger and cilantro marinade was mixed and ready for its sablefish. "Here," Satterford said, plunking a large tub of a late crop of B.C. chanterelles in front of me, "Scrape the stems down from the gills and trim off the bottoms—they're woody."

I cleaned them up as tidily as possible and, an hour later, I was on to the next big thing: peeling a large batch of red and yellow tomatoes. They had been blanched, but barely enough to loosen their skins. It was not done this way to torture me, as I initially assumed, but because their destiny was to be diced into a two-tone "tartare," and that final purpose demanded that their flesh be as firm and raw as possible. And that they be seedless, which was my next task. Then it was time to break down some acorn squash into segments, which I peeled, trimmed and whittled, which were then handed off to Hawksworth, who

smoothed them down with a vegetable peeler until each was smooth and nearly identical. There were 80 of them—for one of several accompaniments to 70 plates of roast duck breast, with 10 more for insurance.

Hours passed. Finally, at 4:30, Hawksworth called it a day and broke for lunch—a normal schedule for chefs that had left me feeling like I had been on hunger strike. Fortunately, another normal thing for chefs to do when travelling is to eat like mad in their free time: Two hours after sensational pizzas at Kesté, we had a six-course dinner at Mario Batali's overrated Esca.

dehydrator. The powdery mince would be sprinkled over the tomato and burrata canapés like olive-flavoured fleur de sel. Then I sliced bacon for the oysters Rockefeller—which, in Hawksworth's excellent take, are made with wilted arugula and mornay. I even peeled some horseradish (for the crab salad) and halved and trimmed the fresh figs that would be served with duck. And it was on that last job that I received a minor correction from Eligh. "Don't saw," he said, examining my first effort. "Slice in one smooth motion. Find the middle and let the knife do the work."

My wife—who, in my kitchen at home, where I am the boss, calls me "el Bully"—had expressed the fervent hope that I would earn a much sterner rebuke. In fact, she had hoped that Hawksworth would go all out and curse and throw things—say, taking a page from the routine of his one-time boss Marco Pierre White, who once reduced a young sous-chef named Gordon Ramsay to tears. But it was not to be. The stakes involved in my knife work were simply not that high. And, more to the point, chef Hawksworth runs a quiet kitchen, serenely relaxed in its efficiency. As it happened, they finished their prep and cleaned the kitchen at Beard House hours before the guests were due to arrive. So we stepped out for a pre-service pint. "Thank God all our stuff made it here, or we'd be sweating right now," Hawksworth allowed.

Instead, two hours later at the Beard House, all was calm as the guests filed in—as per Beard House ritual, passing through the kitchen on their way to the reception in the solarium. When the hors d'oeuvres were done, we settled in the dining room upstairs for a refreshing first course of chilled crab with apple jelly and horseradish. The rest followed—sablefish in smuggled bacon dashi broth, then duck, then shortribs—and it was all extremely well received. Like me, my seatmates considered the sablefish to be the showstopper—though, oddly, neither had anything to say about those nicely trimmed chanterelles so prettily adrift in that exquisite broth. ♦

The honour of cooking at Beard House comes with a caveat. 'It's a dump,' one chef confided. 'Never again!'



The meal's highlight: *The sablefish, caramelized and served with a bacon dashi broth, was (shh) smuggled across the border*

The next morning, prep moved to Beard House. The kitchen contained within the U-shaped wood-topped counters is just big enough for three. When I arrived mid-morning, Kozinko was stationed on the far side, struggling to turn out ice cream from the Beard House's tiny, non-commercial Breville churmer. On the near side, Eligh was deep-frying sheets of sushi rice—intentionally steamed to mush—and converting it to crunchy, puffed tuiles to serve atop the short ribs. Hawksworth was boning and portioning those at the front pass. So I was assigned to a cutting board in the corner, tucked beneath the low looming corner of an obviously vengeful vent hood, whose corner edges someone had sensibly taped and padded several times over.

My indispensable tasks for the day began with chopping some Kalamata olives, which were dry and hard after a long stint in the



For a recipe from acclaimed Vancouver chef David Hawksworth, see this week's iPad issue of *Maclean's*

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTOGRAPH BY BENJAMIN LOWYGETTY IMAGES