

Nick and Choose { NICK ALTSCHULLER }



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TRIAL BY FRYER

Trying a slice of another life



Toil and trouble

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THIS ISN'T A COLUMN telling you to abandon your dreams. This is just a reminder that sometimes your dreams are dumb.

We all need hopes and aspirations. They guide us toward fulfillment. Without goals, we lose sight of the path ahead, and that forces us to look inward to ask the most terrifying question: What am I doing with my life? To cope with the stress, we spoon up some ice cream, or we visit our favorite restaurant. We experience joy through food, and sometimes we allow a meal to calm our existential crisis. This is how foodies are born. Humans are genetically designed to love eating. If you've taken the extra step to give that love a nickname, you need a secondary passion.

Then there's the final step, the culinary bridge too far: professional cooking. The world needs chefs, of course, so I don't mean to be haughty. Most of us have shared the same vocational fantasy, after all. But unless you're reading this column during your summer vacation, it's too late to find

To my happy customers, I hope you enjoyed your meal as much as I enjoyed desecrating it.

the level of success you're imagining. Let me remind you where the fantasy begins, should you try to make it a reality.

It's June 21, the first full day of summer. The mercury at Logan Airport reads 96 degrees, a record-breaking high. Where you want to be is in a bar, bathed in darkness and refrigerated air, your insides cooled by icy beer. Where you don't want to be is by that bar's oven.

Jason Santana, the chef at Silvertone Bar & Grill, has graciously allowed me into his kitchen to be low man on the totem pole. In return, I've promised not to be a liability, both in terms of efficiency and legality.

Got an opinion? Send your stories and suggestions to nick@improper.com.

At 5 pm, Santana has me chopping mirepoix for the shepherd's pie. I took a knife-skills class once, and ever since, I've been a little cocky about my ability to dice an onion. But a work environment is eons from the safe confines of an adult education center. It's 115 degrees in the kitchen, a delightful sensation compared to the evaluating gaze of my new boss. Ten minutes in and I've got a blister developing on my index finger and \$1.50 worth of vegetables sunk into the holes of the kitchen mat. Santana decides I should assemble kebabs. I immediately stab my blister with a wooden skewer.

As service starts, I move to the grill, where my guide is Ronabel Freitas, a young man affectionately nicknamed "Taco Bell." The estimable Mr. Freitas broke his arm a while back. Five replacements in a row worked one shift and never came back for another. He's a full assembly line under a single hairnet.

Freitas stuck with the one-and-done approach to mentoring. He'd show me a recipe, and I was expected to execute. In the beginning, this set a flame under my nerves. Chicken wings require little more than nine minutes in hot oil, but I still found myself pacing around the fryer like an expectant father in a waiting room.

As the hours passed, I burned my knuckle, singed my arm hair and gradually developed some confidence. It got so I could handle four dishes at once without sweat and tears leaking into the Bolognese. I also learned the beauty of a well-done steak. To a foodie, if you order meat well-done you're a heathen. As a cook, you were my new best friend, as you gave me an order I didn't have to think about. "If it doesn't taste like cardboard, they'll send it back," Santana advised. To my happy customers, I hope you enjoyed your meal as much as I enjoyed desecrating it.

As the shift ended at 11 pm, I received the kitchen seal of approval: "Not bad for a white guy." Of course, the night was slow, with only about 90 covers in a restaurant that regularly clears 300. I was well-rested, while Santana had been working since 7 am, a 16-hour day not outside his normal routine. A career in the kitchen demands a genuine appetite for the grind. Just one night on the job had me sweaty, dirty, greasy and satisfied. But not wholly fulfilled. (Oddly, I didn't feel hungry afterward.)

Cooking is a profession of inventiveness, in which people should be inspired to create. I remain ever happy to eat the results of their labor. The food stains, however, belong on my desk, a place where I can express myself better. ***



DO YOU
WANT TO LOOK
fresh,
vibrant
AND
sexier
THIS SUMMER?