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KERRY BRETT HURLEY

With a growing family of fashionable restaurants, everything Oringer touches turns to delicious.

RENAISSANCE KEN

By Ruth Tobias

AS A WRITER, I try to approach words the way, say, celebrated chef-restaurateur Ken Oringer approaches exotic ingredients: with a sense of wonder and a knack for showcasing them in striking combinations. But an article on a day in the life of Oringer himself brooks no zingy rhetoric. As he negotiates two nearly simultaneous restaurant openings—taqueria La Verdad and steakhouse KO Prime—on the eve of Clio's 10th anniversary, his every moment is too full for me to waste space on style. Come join us; you'll see what I mean.

ANTHONY TIEULI

e kitchen at Toro reflects
nger's natural state: calm and
lected. At right, Oringer and
ior Toro staff discuss every-
ng from exotic ingredients
patio maintenance.

FRIDAY, MAY 11, 11 AM Toro

The first thing that hits me when I arrive for Toro's weekly staff meeting is the last thing I'd expect from a restaurant with an open kitchen: calm and quiet. No rock on the airwaves, no raucous laughter in the air—just three or four clean-cut young men in pristine chef's whites moving deliberately around the spotless workspace, methodically separating eggs, trimming brussels sprouts. Others soon appear out of nowhere: managers Alyssa Shepherd and Adam St. Jean, who's chatting with a willowy, dark-haired beauty. She turns to me, smiling, and introduces herself as Celine, Oringer's wife of nearly a year and co-owner of Toro. Before I can pry into their courtship, Oringer arrives—shaggy-haired, denim-clad, a backpack over one shoulder. At 41 years old, he's a ringer for a college senior. Her eyes light up. He heads straight for her. They literally nuzzle. I stare at the wine specials on the blackboard, pondering my romance-writing credentials.

But then the room comes into focus for Ken (as we'll now call him; we're about to get to know him pretty well), and the conversation turns to lighthearted matters of business—like whether or not Toro's new watermelon-based cocktail is "girlie"—until Ken's cell rings (as it does, on average, 20 times an hour). When he hangs up, he laughingly tells us, "I just told a purveyor if he could find me a new Uni recruit I'd pay him $1,000. Doing the backwards headhunter thing." Finally Ken, Celine, Adam, Alyssa and chef de cuisine John Critchley—one of the tidy young gents from the kitchen—gather around one of the tapas bar's long communal tables to talk turkey. Or, rather, pork belly, octopus and glass eels. ("They're up to $350 a pound," Ken remarks, "so we'd have to charge, like, $65 for a small order.") They talk equipment repairs, from dishwashers to fire alarms. They talk patio maintenance, hiring practices, entertainment licenses. They even talk Pamplona: Ken wants to do something special for the Running of the Bulls—maybe rent a widescreen TV to air it live, or throw a costume party with free churros for guests who dress up.

For such a casual, leisurely meeting—only John and Alyssa take notes—it's surprisingly orderly, especially given the sheer range of topics they're covering. As Ken observes later, "[People] think, 'Somebody cooks something, somebody serves it and somebody eats it.' It all seems so simple. But it's much more complex than that. It takes all these people to run a restaurant. I love the teamwork."

12:15 PM Silver Line, en route to Downtown Crossing

Yes, Ken Oringer takes public transportation. Though he has a license, he isn't an ardent motorist (unless a low-rider pickup is involved; more on that later). Next stop: spanking-new steakhouse KO Prime.

"When Kimpton [Hotels] approached me, they said I could do anything I wanted to do. So I said, 'Why doesn't someone do a steakhouse that's a real restaurant? We'll serve beef from all over the world—all different types, from dry-aged to prime to bistro-type cuts to Japanese Wagyu to corn-fed to grass-fed. Let's have every part of the animal from oxtail to sweetbreads. Let's have everything from an organic salad to raw fish dishes.'"

"A steakhouse everyone can visit," I prompt.

"Yeah, and a couple of times a week! Create a modern, sexy feel, bring in a younger clientele, so it's not the old boys' club…."

But just as he's warming to his subject we pass through Chinatown, and he gets a wistful look. "I usually like to spend a lot of time in Chinatown, looking for exotic ingredients. If I didn't have so much to do today I'd probably get off the bus right now, grab a Vietnamese sandwich"—he gestures toward the awning of New Saigon—"and go to the market." And then? "Some of the stuff I play with I never can figure out how to use; some ends up on the menu that night. We have kimchi paste in our cocktail sauce at KO Prime. I really like thinking about the details people don't even detect."

OK, but what about the big picture? Is he carving out a vast empire, with La Verdad and KO Prime just the latest two ventures—as he must know some industry-watchers suspect—or simply living in the moment? Ken shrugs. "I'm far from a dreamer. A lot of people have big dreams, but they're so full of shit they can never make things happen. If I had stopped to think about it, opening a taqueria and a steakhouse within a month of each other—it's suicide. But if I have the opportunity to do something I want to do, I'm going to do it; I'll figure out how to make it work. In terms of conquering the world…" He pauses. "I just want to do what I can have fun with. Because I'm married now. In three years, I'm going to have kids, and I'm not going to want to be working 120 hours a week."

But right now, it's obvious he's loving it.

12:30 PM KO Prime

This kitchen's much bigger and more cluttered than Toro's. Yet here, too, the pace remains methodical, the decibel level low.

Ken's got his fingers in a dish of potato-roasted garlic gratin; he's grabbing a slice of prosciutto and asking, "What are you doing with this?"; he's checking out a pan full of duck necks: "Wow, nice, what was the price?" And when he has a question, his employees have an answer. Always. Not once in the course of the day do I hear an "I don't know" or "I forget."

The IMPROPER photographer sets up a shoot with Ken and chef de cuisine Jamie Bissonnette, about whom Ken enthuses, "It's almost like destiny—his neighbor in Connecticut was my roommate in college. He's not afraid of bold flavors; I love how he's very French-oriented, but he's a bistro cook at heart. And he's a fun guy. He's a lunatic." The photographer keeps urging Ken to smile; he gives Jamie a grotesque leer.

1:30 PM Green Line, en route to Hynes

I mention my surprise at the cool composure his kitchen crews emanate—so far from the rowdy, breakneck stereotype. "I like for things to be very organized," Ken concedes. "I can't stand chaos, people scrambling around. Wait'll we go to La Verdad—'cause then you're going to see not-orderly." He sighs. "Even Clio was easier [to open] than La Verdad. It has something to do with what's not familiar to me. When you think about it, a taqueria's a taqueria; it's as down and dirty as you can get. I had a really high vision of how La Verdad would be, but I'd never had to deal with 250 people in one hour. We're charging less for a taco than anyone"—I imagine that's debatable, but don't interject—"yet we're making everything ourselves. But people who come for a $2 taco and a $4 Corona aren't going to notice. So even if your vision is as serious as it is, they don't take it as seriously. It's been quite a learning experience."

As at all his restaurants, Oringer likes to have a hand in everything that goes on at Clio, from choosing the dining room décor (opposite page, bottom) to food prep, plating and service.

1:45 PM Clio

Ken and his longtime general manager, Christian Touche, catch up excitedly on the preparations for Clio's 10th-anniversary party on June 10—a $1,000-a-head benefit for the Harvard Center for Neurodegeneration, with guest chefs coming from top restaurants around the world. As Ken goes to change into his chef's whites, Touche—clearly in a reflective mood—traces the path to such a momentous occasion.

Back when the Eliot Hotel had no world-class restaurant, he recalls in his thick French accent, a young man with a backpack approached him in the breakfast room after taking notes on his French toast. "He says, 'I'm the new guy.' He explains his concept: He wants to do avant-garde food but with a base of traditional French cooking. We connect, and he asks me to be his manager. And I say yes without knowing 10 years later I would still be here. [Now] we're like an old couple. Before he was married, my wife called him my mistress."

I don't have to ask any questions; Touche is on a roll. "His philosophy was very simple: Focus on food. [Use] white plates. No flowers on the table. No salt and pepper. Some people were upset: 'Where's the salt?' They complained about portion sizes. They wanted mashed potatoes and weren't happy if they didn't leave with doggie bags…. But back then I said, 'Wow, it would be great if you really brought something new to Boston.' And it happened. When [Ken] has something in his head and he knows it is right, he doesn't change a thing. And usually he is right."

2 PM Clio kitchen

I know what to expect by now: a crew of six or seven well-groomed young men working quietly and intently on a given task. One shells a heap of lobster tails, one gingerly separates sheets of bean curd, one chops chives at warp speed. What I don't expect: They're doing it all in a kitchen no bigger than the one in my own dinky apartment.

Nor do I anticipate the hugeness of the treasure trove that is the downstairs pantry, and the excitement with which Ken still raids it. Jars and bottles and bags and bins cram the shelves, their labels in Spanish, Korean, Arabic. A prep table is piled high with produce Ken virtually fondles—long beans, ramps, green garlic. He thrusts baggies of fresh chocolate mint and lemon verbena under my nose for a sniff, has me taste cherry-blossom petals from the walk-in freezer that's lined with containers of mushroom oil and lamb tongues.

Back upstairs, sous chef Andres Julian Grundy presents him with a foie gras special-in-progress, garnished with a bright pink rhubarb-lavender foam. Ken tastes it, ponders, responds unhurriedly: "The rhubarb is delicious. The lavender comes out nicely—perfumey, but not like grandma's closet. The color is crazy. Can we use a different plate?" Next he tries some burrata soup—spoonful, pause, spoonful, pause—and directs a line cook to add a little chorizo juice to the batch. And then he suggests we head to La Verdad "before it gets too crazy"—the Sox are in town that evening, and the sun has come out. It's a warm spring afternoon. He's still wearing his apron.

3:45 PM Walking to La Verdad

Granted, he admits, his whole life has been an apron-clad journey.

"I couldn't wait to get my first job. The first day I was allowed to work legitimately, I was at a department store restaurant. I remember cracking 12 dozen eggs, and I was so excited just to do that. I'd never seen so many eggs at one time. Then I went to business school…."

Does that mean becoming a restaurateur as well as a chef was always part of the plan? "Yes. I like to be my own boss. I never wanted people telling me what to do. But even then I'd cook whenever I could. I'd go into people's dorm rooms and look in their fridges and say, 'Oh, I'll cook you dinner.' It was a good way to meet girls."

3:55 PM La Verdad

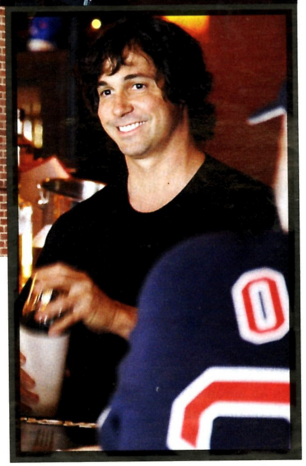
Ken makes the rounds, greeting the line cooks in Spanish, shaking hands; he smiles at the matronly tortilla lady, impassively working handfuls of dough from an enormous bowl of masa. It's obvious he gets a charge out of the month-old taqueria, co-owned by the locally ubiquitous Lyons Group. "We really wanted to create something very funky, Mexico City street-style. We wanted a takeout window. We've got 60 tequilas, all 100 percent agave. In the margaritas, there's no triple sec, no Cointreau, none of that stuff. That's why we call it La Verdad—it's the truth of Mexican street cooking."

As the bar fills up with pre-game revelers, we rejoin the IMPROPER photographer out on the curb, where an electric-blue low-rider truck sits, emblazoned with Day of the Dead–style decals. Ken merrily boasts, "It's our only form of advertising. The horn plays 'La Cucaracha,' the Mexican Jumping Bean song…. I just want to drive it up and down Newbury Street." He gets behind the wheel and mugs for the camera. But his eye never strays for long; as we leave, he spies a bartender going the wrong way with a tray of margaritas and confers with her briefly to find out why. (Too strong, the customers complained. Apparently the truth hurts.)

4:45 PM Walking back to Clio

I ask a man who doesn't seem to have a moment to spare what his ideal day off would look like. "Probably just chilling out," he decides. "I'd go do yoga in the morning with Celine, go to some really funky place for brunch. Then maybe go to a movie, grab some cocktails, have some people over for dinner. There'd be a lot of laughter…." I interrupt. "You'd cook on your day off?" He laughs. "Yeah. But we don't have a kitchen in our apartment right now. It's under construction."

ANTHONY TIELLI



Rather than shifting focus to his newest ventures, KO Prime (top) and La Verdad, Oringer has simply added them to his daily itinerary. He even finds time to play bartender at the taqueria.

ANTHONY TIEULI

"Building your dream kitchen, are you?" Oddly, it's the first topic he seems reluctant to delve into. But after hesitating, he admits, "It's going to be a whole-roof addition—very modern, very minimalist. There'll be an immersion circulator, a taco jet…." At least that sounds like what he says. I don't ask him to repeat himself, pleased with the idea that I might not have misheard—that if Ken Oringer wanted to invent something called a taco jet, he probably could.

5 PM Clio pre-meal meeting
Crisply dressed for service, the waitstaff gather at the back of the dining room with Ken and sommelier Ryan Cole, who goes over the evening's reservations list: This one's a "five-time Valentine's Day" guest; this party was sent over by No. 9 Park due to accommodation issues ("wow 'em"); this one's a "super-VIP" from a major (nonlocal) newspaper.

Then Ken takes the floor, describing overnight changes to the menu. It turns out the foie gras special hasn't made the cut; he's told the foam wouldn't hold. He seems disappointed on his sous chef's behalf.

5:20 PM Sidewalk in front of Clio
The entire kitchen crew heads outside for a cigarette break, where they discuss last-minute prep. I express amazement that I've never observed this public huddle before, but Ken swears, "We've never missed one in 10 years."

5:25 PM Uni
Ken checks in with Uni chef Christopher Chung to ensure the sashimi bar is sufficiently stocked for him to swipe some of the goods. "We just got a big shipment from Japan, so we'll probably use a lot of fish for the tasting menu," he tells me, looking around to see what he can "play with."

Wait a second, I stop him. You improvise your tasting menus? "Yeah." He smiles, surprised that I'm surprised. "It's all spontaneous."

5:30 PM Clio pastry kitchen
Ken oversees a pastry cook making "citrus rice": He puts marinated orange and grapefruit segments into a bowl, pours in liquid nitrogen from a hefty tank and begins mashing them; before my eyes, they turn into tiny frozen grains. He gives me a taste: tart, unadulterated citrus.

5:40 Clio office
For the first time that day, literally, Ken sits down to relax with Celine, who has stopped in to discuss the midnight birthday party they'll be attending. My jaw goes slack. She gets it, confirming, "He's always go, go, go. If he didn't do it, he wouldn't be able to function." He tries to argue, but she insists: "He and Christian are like little kids, running around. They get so excited about every new cheese that comes in."

5:45 PM Uni
Cue the intermission music: I'm wolfing sashimi, my first meal since mid-morning. Ken, who eats as he goes, has returned to work.

6:30 PM Clio kitchen
I've spent the day with multiple personalities: shrewd businessman, jovial frat boy, googly-eyed newlywed. But Ken the chef is the source of and model for everything I've seen in operation today—which, in turn, is the antithesis of all the kitchen-set psychodramas on reality TV. The pace he sets is swift but even; his voice is loud but steady as he calls out orders from the tickets he keeps in front of him at all times, running the show. At any given time there might be a dozen tickets in play—half of them for tasting menus, some of them for room service, many involving special requests. Somehow, he keeps it all in his head, and expedites it mostly in complete sentences.

Ken to a waiter on a fussy tasting party: "No raw fish, no foie gras—do they even like food? Find out how adventurous they are."

Ken to the crew as service peaks: "We've got a lot of menus out now, so bang 'em out. We do not want to be slowing down. Pick it up, boys." (This is as close to a harangue as he comes.)

Ken to a line cook: "What have we got for the kids?" Not even mac 'n' cheese is beneath his concern.

Out in the dining room, the big-time journalist has arrived. "VIP on table 47. All right, three amuses for table 47." Before sending them out, he shows me the tray: an array of tiny beakers and vials, all containing savory sodas and ice cream cones. "There must be 30 ingredients in here," he says, rattling them off as though he's been making the dish he just created on the spot all his life.

9 PM Green Line, en route to Park Street
Come on, I challenge him anew. Has his placid, respectful demeanor been for my benefit? He laughs. "Believe me, I've had my days. But people make mistakes. If they're smart enough to deal with it, I feel that I am very fair." OK then, what's a mistake he was smart enough to deal with?

"Once I put some persimmon in a blender, added some salt and some yuzu juice, and the fruit kind of coagulated. It looked like sea urchin. So we served it in a sea urchin shell with soft tofu and Japanese herbs. People would say, 'Oh, I don't eat urchin,' and we'd say, '[Just] taste it.'"

9:15 PM KO Prime kitchen
Both the bar and the dining room are packed. The kitchen crew sport a few splattered jackets, a few glazed eyes, but they're hardly the zombies you'd expect on the first Friday night in business. Ken jumps right back into it. But he refrains from taking over, following Jamie's directions and even running a few dishes out to the dining room himself. As I head out to the bar to meet him for a wrap-up, he's helping a veritable schoolboy work the grill: "Don't take any chances," he's advising. "If they want it well done, make it well done."

In short, he's working as hard now as he has all day.

9:45 PM KO Prime bar
Surprised by greetings from a mutual acquaintance, we sit down to margaritas and a few appetizers with her and her friends—one of whom whistles, "Wow, Ken Oringer in the flesh." He smiles but says nothing, seeming to take the compliment with his trademark equanimity. And when I depart, he's still sitting there, chatting about the difference between Kobe and Wagyu, passing the time before Celine arrives to take him to the birthday party.

Imagine—tomorrow, he'll start all over again. iB