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.
The kitchen at Toro reflects Yager’s natural slate tiles and fixtures. At night, dimmer light creates a relaxed setting, inviting diners to savor sweet and savory dishes that are influenced by various cuisines from around the world.

3:35 PM | La Verdad

Rita looks for a table where people are eating to see what food is like. She is interested in trying the Spanish cuisine. She decides to try the paella, which she tries for a change. She is pleasantly surprised by the flavor and quality of the dish. She enjoys her meal and decides to return sometime in the future.

4:15 PM | Rio by Starlight

This is a private closed-mouth dining experience where guests can enjoy a personal chef-prepared meal in a private room. The chef, Rafa, creates a custom menu based on the diners’ preferences. Rafa is knowledgeable and passionate about his craft, and he prepares a delicious meal that impresses everyone present. The ambiance is cozy and intimate, making it an ideal choice for special occasions.

5:00 PM | La Casuela

This is a family-owned restaurant known for its traditional Argentine cuisine. Their signature dish is the Asado, which is a grilled meat platter served with grilled vegetables and a side of rice. The restaurant has a warm and welcoming atmosphere, and the staff is friendly and attentive.

6:00 PM | The Quirky Chef

This is a small, locally owned restaurant that offers a variety of dishes, including vegetarian and vegan options. The chef, Maria, is passionate about using fresh, locally sourced ingredients to create delicious and healthy meals. The restaurant has a casual and laid-back atmosphere, making it a great choice for a quick bite or a family dinner.
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.

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 improve 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 PM 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 drops 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 wolking with 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 fat boy, goofy-eyed newlywed. But Ken the chef is the source of all my excitement. I’ve seen in operation today—which, in turn, is the anthology 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 ticket 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 8pm 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 fuzzy tasting party: “No raw fish, no foe 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 hang ’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.

Our in the dining room, the big-time journalist has arrived. “VIP on table 47.” All right, three amuseurs 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 his 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 spot 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 arrivers to take him to the birthday party. Imagine—tomorrow, he’ll start all over again.