



In the Kitchen With Chef CJ Jacobson

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Cooking takes place in a high-performance environment but also requires teamwork. Join William Blair's Hugo Scott-Gall and CJ Jacobson, former member of the U.S. National Volleyball Team and current chef partner at Chicago restaurants Aba and Ěma, for a discussion about food and sports, creativity and process, and how COVID has changed the restaurant industry.

Comments are edited excerpts from our podcast, which you can listen to in full below.

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I really want to know about your journey. When you were 10 years old, what did you want to be? When did you realize you wanted to be a chef?

CJ: At 10, I wanted to be Indiana Jones or an astronaut or a fighter pilot in space. I always needed some sort of creative outlet. The first time I wanted to be a chef, I was watching cooking shows, and wandering around restaurant supply stores because they had all these cool pots and pans and gadgets, and I started feeling it—the synergy of the history and the science, how beautiful it is, and how in the end I'd get to give what I make to somebody. I was around 23 or 24, which is a little late to start.

You attended Pepperdine University on a volleyball scholarship and played for the U.S. National Volleyball Team. With both volleyball and cooking, you're part of a team in a high-performance environment. Is that relevant?

CJ: It's absolutely relevant. In team sports, you learn very quickly that you're doing a job together and don't need to like that person next to you. In a working environment, people struggle with that. The team mentality isn't there right away.

Kitchens seem to be very tough places. How do you foster teamwork in places that are kind of hostile? Without teamwork, it grinds to a halt, right?

CJ: It's not just that they're tough; there's also a lot to accomplish in a small amount of time. In a team sport, you have an obvious goal; in restaurants you don't, so it's tougher for it to come together. Sometimes you come in a couple hours early and stay a couple hours later, and that fosters comradery.

But you can tell which people have played team sports because they don't mind being arm-to-arm next to someone in a space when they have to do something. I always try to hire people that played sports because they get along much easier. They understand that we're all in this together.

You see that in our industry as well—a correlation between people who do well and people who have played sports. There is a difference, though. In sports, you might be competing once a week. In a kitchen, you do it every day.

CJ: Yeah, I think sports teaches a mental toughness, a foundational layer of what hard work is. But oftentimes in sports, we have recovery days that are as important as practice days. But a lot of restaurants are open lunch and dinner every single day. Sometimes the chef has to work seven days a week.

How do you assess people who can make it in a kitchen? How do you work out whether they have the curiosity, hunger, reliance? Those things are hard to test for.

CJ: Gut feel is a huge part of it. I try to get to know the person. There are a few ways I do that. One is, do I like them?

I can find that out by my sequencing of questions. Oftentimes I will ask, "What do you like to cook?" From that I can tell how far along they possibly are. They might say, "Oh, I was inspired by this Thai dish last weekend. It's my third time at this restaurant and I'm really trying to explore their menu." Then I say, "Wow, that's fantastic. What did you have? How did you interpret it? How did you make it when you came home?"

That way you can see if there's a real interest. If there's not, it doesn't mean that they're not going to be a good employee. A lot of people take hospitality jobs because they want a job. You have to be aware of those go-getters and also the employees that will hold down a station, show up on time, and be part of your engine.

That all makes sense. Now I want to move to creativity and process, because a common thread running through our podcast series has been what process is, particularly for creative people. How do you find the space to be creative?

CJ: When I first joined Lettuce Entertain You on a five-month intro stint as a chef, it was all about showcasing the food I love cooking, which is California cuisine with a lot of foraging. By expressing that terroir of the area, you showcase what you want to say with food, whatever that is. And you can be inspired.

The food I create here at Aba demands a different sort of creativity because I need to serve 1,000 people a day and make 350 or more of each kabob; I need gallons of hummus. So the creative process is about how I make three or four movements down the line to make it easier for my cooks, and how it can still be beautiful, represent our brand, for me to be proud of it.

I never thought I'd ever exercise my creativity this way. I was much more into serendipity: Look up into the trees and see patterns and be inspired, or wake up in the middle of the night and write down three cabbage dishes. These things still happen. But as I get older and run a business, I find myself going down different avenues. That doesn't mean that I don't still have cabbage dreams, but for now, my creative process has changed.

Do you put pressure on yourself to be creative?

CJ: We have a system. Every Tuesday at noon I put up three or four new dishes. We try to aim for two that will win. So we set in place a sort of schedule of creativity.

But when I was on *Top Chef*, I learned my creative process is spurred and strengthened by being put in a corner. I came alive when I had very little time; my brain worked faster and more accurately when the pressure was on. So I'll make mock situations where I'll come up with a dish by saying say I'm going to use this, this, and this—say, pomegranate, pumpkin, and a protein—and go from there.

You lived abroad. Did that make a big difference?

CJ: My time in Copenhagen changed everything because there was an entirely different flavor profile a kid from Southern California isn't used to. All of a sudden I was tasting cider vinegars, pine flavors, lots of dill, and yogurt. If you focus on tasting like that for 14 hours, it's totally exhausting. But you develop a palate that you wouldn't in any other way.

Do you spend a lot of time looking at your other mentors, competitors, or heroes?

CJ: All those things. Everything around you—social media, farmer's markets, the breeze—they all inspire. You love them, hate them, get jealous of them. I know I'm not supposed to be envious of people, but I totally have that. We're on Instagram now and I spend way too many hours there, mostly looking at chefs. I envy many of the dishes. I'm inspired by many of them. I saw my first pumpkin dish three days ago because fall is coming. It was entirely different than what I came up with.

I'm getting the sense that you're sort of bottom up. You don't think about beating the competition; you design the menu you want to design. Is that correct?

CJ: That's very perceptive. For me, that battle occurs every single day. I think my creative juices want to make something more esoteric, but I like making the customer happy. I like making the business strong. So we have key dishes—things that people come here time and time again for, like kabobs—and strengthen those all the time.

That leaves other places in the menu that we can have more fun with seasonally—to kind of get an ingredient and kind of play with it and see where it fits in the menu mix.

How do you manage the work-life balance? I imagine that's a challenge in your industry.

CJ: That's a very poignant question. During COVID, between 20% and 30% of people who work in hospitality left. I think that's because COVID created a pause. If you have time to think, you ask, "Why am I working so hard if I'm not passionate about it?"

It certainly made me think about my time and place in life. I'm a 45-year-old man, and now I have a fiancé; that came out of this. But I looked at my life and asked, "What do I want?" To be perfectly honest, I don't want to spend the rest of my life in Chicago; I want to be around nature and someplace that has produce year-round. So I'm now making a plan to do that. Obviously, I have obligations here in Chicago; I have two restaurants. So, how am I going to make that work? Where am I going to live? I'm trying to figure that out right now.

Congratulations on your fiancé and getting married. I guess we have to talk COVID now. We're investors, so we're thinking about which industries are more or less impacted by COVID. And it's hard to say what your industry will look like in three or five years' time. The product offered, the way it's consumed, the way it's made—do you think any of these things change as a result of COVID? Or is it just a matter of time before we get back to normal?

CJ: There are so many things coming together. There was #metoo, with the work environment everywhere, especially kitchens, being so tough and requiring long hours. Food also costs a lot; we're experiencing 20%, 30%, sometimes 50% surges in food costs. The whole supply chain is pretty jacked up. How is it all going to pan out? I'm not sure. I think delivery is going to stay strong. I think healthier food will be a lot more prevalent. And I think we're going to see a lot more companies go green; I don't think they're going to have a choice.

I think a lot of that reflects how we're thinking. I want to know a lot more about what I'm consuming—not just not food, but across the board.

CJ: And I hope that all this—seeing how much restaurants have struggled—will communicate the cost of the moment when you go out to eat with your partner, and generate a respect and understanding for how much work is put in the process.

It's such an experiential product, and because of COVID we've all been missing our physical or sensory experiences. When you have something taken away and then you get it back, I think there'll be a greater appreciation.

CJ: Yeah. I mean, it's cool to be outside. But you sit in this weird little igloo thing in the snow, and you're shivering while you're eating your food. Nobody wants that.

I read that your favorite burger in Chicago is from Au Cheval. I concur, and the first time I went to Au Cheval I was blown away by the burger, but I also remember they were playing The Smiths, a great British band.

CJ: And they're playing it reel-to-reel.

Then Stones came on, then David Bowie.

CJ: And it's loud. That's what's so cool. It's that scene.

Exactly. You don't just remember the food; you remember the experience and the music feeds into the experience. So, I wonder how you think about that sensory experience. Is that something you put a lot of thought into in your own restaurants?

CJ: Absolutely. I think it's so important. In some of my favorite places, the ambiance is set by the music. Walking into Au Cheval, you're like, "This is my place."

I'd like things much louder at Aba or Ęma, but it really wouldn't make much sense. Aba is a very large restaurant. We mostly pick songs for beat cadence, so more pop. I could always lobby for a few different songs, but we have a service that does that.

And brunch music isn't the same as 12 a.m. on Saturday music; there are ebbs and flows to music, just like there are ebbs and flows to lighting.

Well, I can't wait to visit your restaurants.

CJ: I'd love to have you here.

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