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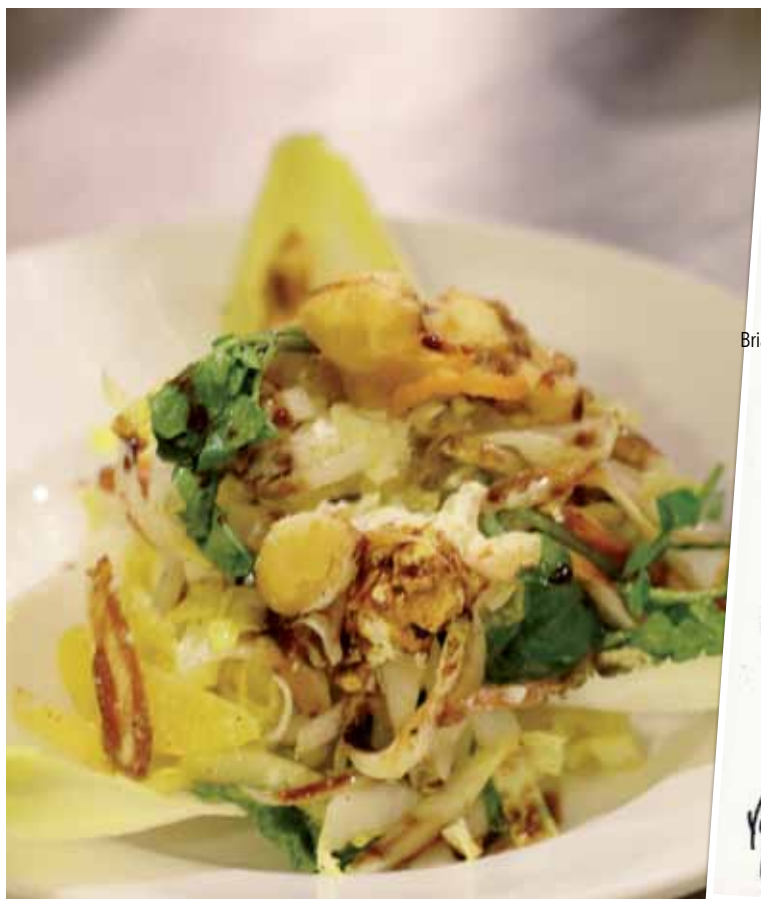
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The Second Skill

Maine's star chefs find creativity beyond the kitchen.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

THE DARK LEGEND of the restaurant world—according to Anthony Bourdain—has it that once the grueling dinner service is over, herds of hard-working chefs seek oblivion in hipster bars, tossing back high-octane booze long into the night. This cliché doesn't seem to hold up here. Turns out, our thoughtful, talented chefs recharge their batteries chasing other challenges beyond the kitchen, not shots of Patron.

SCREAMING GUITAR

For **Brian Hill**, chef/owner of Camden's **Francine Bistro**, the “violin” is a guitar. His theory about why serious cooks pursue serious passions outside the kitchen is simple: “We kind of have to. We can't all just sit around discussing *foie gras* all night.”

After high school—he grew up on a dairy and goat farm in Warren—he headed to Boston in the mid-'80s and started up a rock band, the **Heretix**. Hill was lead guitarist. “I was 19. We were just kids, but somehow the band took off. We won the Boston Rock & Roll Rumble in 1988. We got signed by Island Records. We got to extend our ad-

olescence into extra years, into the '90s—I was so lucky.”

Boston star-chef **Todd English** of **Olives** and **Figs** fame was a Heretix fan. Hill asked him for a job. “I started at Figs as a baker in 1993. I moved to sauté and pizza, and later I was head chef.” Hill eventually returned to Maine to open his much-acclaimed Fran-



Brilliant Disguise

The French call it **le violon d'Ingres**, meaning possessing another skill **beyond** what one is famous for. It refers to portrait painter **Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres** (1780-1867) whose passion was playing the violin when away from his easel. Avant-garde artist Man Ray (1890-1976) paid homage to Ingres's 1808 portrait of a turbaned, nude bather, **La Grande Baigneuse**, with his own famous 1924 photograph titled **Ingres's Violin**, showing the back of the nude, turbaned model Kiki de Montparnasse as a violin.

HUNGRY EYE



cine Bistro in 2003. In the ensuing 14 years he's received eight James Beard Award nominations for Best Chef /Northeast, including this year.

The Heretix endure. "We had a 30-year reunion in 2015. The Dropkick Murphys invited us to open for them at the House of Blues in Boston on St. Patrick's Day."

These days, Hill plays an acoustic 12-string to relax. "It's a good late-night challenge. It takes my mind off the burns on my hands."

He's a top chef with cherished rock memories. "I got to tour with the Clash, with Aerosmith!"

GREEN THUMB

Consider **Melissa Bouchard**, executive chef at **DiMillo's On the Water**. The Eastport native's "first career goal was to become a registered nurse. I received a degree in Medical Assisting from Andover College in 2004." She was paying the bills meantime working in restaurants. "The DiMillos really took a chance on me. I wanted to know more and perform better." Eventually, "I was given creative freedom, and I found joy in that. Staying current in this extremely competitive culinary scene keeps me busy. I'm competitive by nature. That being said, I

love to garden. It's just me, the plants, and my thoughts. There's nothing more satisfying than nurturing something from seed—it's a quiet you can't experience in a busy kitchen. Depending on my schedule I grow what I can when I can. My vegetable garden is still in the making, but I grow tomatoes and peppers every year."

And how about Portland restaurateur/chef **Jay Villani**? He was a metal sculptor moonlighting in New York restaurant kitchens before moving to Maine to found four of Portland's enduring hotspots: **Local 188**, **Sonny's**, **Salvage BBQ**, and **Bunker Brewing**. His original credo was "eat, drink, art," and he sticks with it. Look for his wrought iron work in Local 188 and fine art in all his establishments.



Melissa Bouchard and her sizzling Lobster Pot Pie at DiMillo's.

Polymath on Wheels

"I came back to Maine in 2012 for a graduate degree in social work at UNE," says Birch Hincks. "But I couldn't find the job I really wanted in the social work field."

She's behind the counter at her **Flying Fox Juice Bar** on Washington Avenue, feeding kale and other vegetables into a daunting-looking steel juice machine. It's a sunny little storefront with a hardwood floor, colorful stools, and charming light fixtures she made herself from wire fruit-pickers. "So I quit and waited tables for two years at Eventide Oyster. If you can wait tables there, there's pretty much nothing you can't do." Eventide's staff is a notoriously tireless, cheerful bunch of nonstop, lightning-speed multi-taskers.

"I opened Flying Fox last July," she says, and she's been happily whizzing up juices and smoothies of unusual and tasty combinations using ingredients like pineapples, parsley, ginger, apples, lemons, carrots, and natch, kale.

And to recharge her own juices? "My fiance and I love mountain biking. It's my outlet. I got my first bike here at the USM bike swap, and that was it." Favorite trails? "Around Portland we like Blackstrap, Bradbury Mountain, and Winnick Woods. Gould Academy in Bethel has awesome trails."

DRIVEN TO ABSTRACTION

How about a chef who paints? **Stephen Lanzalotta**, owner and executive chef of **Slab** and creator of the legendary Sicilian Slab pizza that has seduced the Forest City for years, had an epiphany at the Nickelodeon Cinema in the year 2000.



Stephen Lanzalotta plasters the walls at Slab (above), the restaurant named for his eponymous pizza slice (below).



"I was inspired after seeing Ed Harris as [abstract painter Jackson] Pollock. I went out the next day and bought tube colors and cheap Masonite to paint on."

Go ahead and call him an abstract expressionist. "The broad, easy sense of that classification spurred my painterly motivation and best sums up the simple, no-nonsense, gestural approach I take by painting with a carpenter's drywall knife. Abstraction is as pure an expression of nature as any act—a handprint colored onto a cave wall, or its ephemeral predecessor, a footprint in the sand."

Portlanders may remember seeing Lanzalotta's work at The Clown, the spacious art gallery/imported home wares/wine cellar on Middle Street. He also used his bakery/café, Sophia's, on Market Street as his own gallery, by hanging his paintings on the walls. "Pollock gave me inspiration on how to save Sophia's during the low-carb, Atkins Diet years by creating a gallery space with eats."

"Creatively, painting provides an outlet that cooking cannot. While the exact same drives and parameters exist for me whether I have a skillet or a tube of oil-color in my hand, I'm always quite conscious of the difference."

These days, he thinks of Slab's distinctive interior as his art. He plastered and painted the earth-tone walls himself, "with the same dry-wall knife."

RAMEN REDEMPTION

"When I was a producer, cooking was my outlet," says **Kei Suzuki**, executive chef/

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Kei Suzuki's traditional Japanese calligraphy embellishes ceiling tiles at Ramen Suzukaya.



owner of **Ramen Suzukiya**, of his hobby-turned-profession. He spent 30 years as a New York City-based news producer for Japan's Fuji TV network. It was a fast-paced job involving travel and crazy hours. In his precious leisure time at home with his family, Suzuki cooked the comfort foods of his childhood in Japan. "I cooked to relax."

Then one day he chucked the TV biz, moved to Maine to be near his now-adult children, and opened the sleek little ramen café overlooking the Eastern Cemetery on Congress Street in 2015. Since Suzuki and his team make fresh stock and noodles every day, cooking no longer qualified as a pastime.

So he found a new creative fulfillment in traditional Japanese calligraphy. "Whenever I have time, I take out my black ink. It makes me calm. You have this piece of white paper. You can draw a large or small character, leave a space. There's balance."

HUNGRY EYE



The Otherside Deli's Daniel Bushman fulfills his carpenter's soul.

Look for his work overhead in the restaurant. The white ceiling is a grid of wooden tiles, and some of the squares contain Japanese characters in bold black brush strokes. Suzuki points and translates—"That's 'hope,' and 'friend,' and 'soul.'" He explains, "It's not just the words, but how you write, sometimes with just a soft touch."

WOOD WHISPERER

Minnesota native **Daniel Bushman** came to Portland in search of a new place to call home. Trained at the Cordon Bleu cooking school in Mitchell, South Dakota, where he learned to prepare game birds like pheasant and big-game caribou and elk, Bushman landed a job at Central Provisions. Chef/owner Chris Gould eventually introduced him to his friend, the chef Pete Sueltenfuss. Today, Bushman now runs the second of Sueltenfuss's two **Otherside Delis** on Vaughn Street. The pair share a passion and skill for butchery and charcuterie.

The story doesn't end there. Bushman's "violin" is carpentry, learned in the Midwest. "I made the seven-foot pine bookcase and cherry lamp in my apartment. I felled the trees and milled the wood myself." Now that he's a city-dweller no longer stalking the forests for lumber, "I'm joining the Open Bench Project on Thompson's Point," where members share work space and tools. Bushman's latest frontier: "A series of coffee tables." ■

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