On being and staying humble

Chef Juliana Latif discusses the terror of collaboration, staying open to feedback, and how to inspire those who want to be at your level.

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As told to Carolyn Bernucca, 2555 words.

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What does your day-to-day look like?

My day to day looks like checking in on about 65 employees. Everybody has different departments, different roles. The first thing I do is greet everyone, checking in on their needs or any concerns they have. When everyone's good to go, I get my administrative work started, and then I get to the fun part — creating or testing out new dishes, or my favorite part: teaching somebody how to do something in the kitchen.

When did your creative path begin?

I grew up around cooking. I'm one of 11 siblings, and my mother and father have a little shop and restaurant in Connecticut, so cooking was always happening. It was a sure thing, and was such a big part of my life that it just felt like second nature. So it had a lot to do with how I was raised, and it is such a big love language for me. I've been inspired since I was a little kid.

I tried to do other things. I wanted to be a teacher, which actually ties into my job now, so I'm really grateful for that. But I listened to my gut and chose to take the risk of turning something personal into my career, and I don't regret it.

Have you ever questioned this path? If so, what has brought you back?

In all restaurants you have to work your way up. As a cook, you're working maybe 50, 60 hours a week, and you're working for somebody else. It can be exhausting. In those times, I've felt like maybe I should choose an easier job, where I can do a more creative thing on the weekends, or something on the side. But what kept me going were the people ahead of me — sous chefs, executive chefs — doing what I wanted to do, where I wanted to be. So I stuck with it.

What are some differences between your professional creative practice and your personal one?

For my personal creative practice, I am big into painting right now. When I'm painting, I can make a mistake and keep going or just roll with it. Versus when I'm cooking, or at least in the restaurant, when I make a mistake or if something's not right, I have to start over from scratch.

There's more flexibility in my personal creativity; at work, I'm really trying to get it right every single time. When I'm painting, I can just release emotions or frustrations or feelings and let it all go into that piece of paper. It's for me. In cooking, I'm trying to craft something for somebody else.

What were the differences between your experiences cooking in an institution versus at home?

At home, the idea was, ”These people that we love are coming over to eat, let’s make sure it’s really nice.” My mother never weighed anything. So when I got to culinary school, I was like, “Oh, you guys don’t just have a special spoon that you use?” *[laughs]* It was much more from the heart at home, and it’s definitely where I learned about hospitality.

In school, everything was pretty black and white, everything was technical, and it almost felt like a competition. You want to have the best dish, you want to get the best grades, you want to do what the chef tells you to do. That’s where I learned the technical side, how to make sure that my creativity was in line with how to cook.

Does your day job feel consciously creative?

Not all the time, not every day. Like I said, I have a lot of administrative work to do. There are personal relationships and people I have to manage, and that part can feel not so creative. But if someone’s not doing a great job, I try to remember why I started this path — because I love to cook — and think about how I can inspire them to feel what I feel about this restaurant or about cooking. Offering that piece of myself is a really small way to feel creative.

Do you feel like a creative? Do you identify as one?

I think so. In the back of my head, there’s always something going on. “I bet this would taste really good,” or “I bet that would look sick on this plate.” I’m always catching little thoughts and ideas that come up. It’s constant, and it’s those ideas in my brain that make me feel like a creative. Even if I don’t get to do it every single day, or every hour of my day, or even if I go a whole week without creating something, that’s okay. I still feel like I’m a creative.

When you’re formulating a new dish, where do you start?

I start from the craziest part of my brain — I try to just let it fly, and then I factor in what people actually eat, what people are interested in, what I’m capable of doing, and how it ties into the restaurant. I don’t really put any limits to myself, and I have no shame in making a really bad dish and starting over. I think a lot of people get scared like, “What if it’s not good enough on the first try?” But for me, that’s fine. I always joke that by the time you’re done with a new dish, you should kind of hate it. That happens every single time I create a dish. *[laughs]*

How do you balance the “objectivity” of your formal training with the subjectivity of being a creative with your own unique experiences of food?

There are a lot of techniques that [cooks and chefs] lean toward initially, because it’s what they know. But like I said, I don’t really like to limit myself — I like to just whip something up. I prefer cowboy cooking, just shooting from the hip and doing things that aren’t really classical or technical.

For example, I made this roasted carrot dip and I coated it in honey, and I put it above our wood fire grill to smoke. Then we blended it up, and it was delicious, and the reason was that smoke sticks to honey — a technical detail that I wasn’t really even focusing on. Sometimes in cooking, the technical stuff just gets figured out — I’ve learned that, because of both my training and my own experience, by the end of the dish, everything usually ties together and makes sense.

Bringing it back to recipe development, how do you know when a dish is done?

That’s a great question. Initially, I’ll have about six people taste it and beg them for notes and to tell me what they don’t like about it. I get a lot of people’s feedback. I really want to know what different kinds of people like, because that’s who I’m serving, other people. It’s not about me. Our company’s chef partner is very

experienced and very, very talented, and I also get to bring dishes to him, and we collaborate on what it needs or what it's missing. When the majority of people agree that it's a delicious dish and it could thrive at our restaurant, that's when we know it's done.

What are some foundational learnings that you've held onto as you've progressed in your career?

I think the biggest thing I've carried with me is to just focus on what's in front of me, both when I was a cook, getting ready to work a station and cook other people's food, and even now, being given the opportunity to create my own dishes. I can't get sidetracked. I can't think about, "This chef is doing something cooler than I am," or "This person's thriving more than I am." I just have to pay attention to where I am, and that keeps me on track.

It's all about the small wins for me, that's what's kept me successful and kept me creative. I try not to get too overwhelmed by, "Oh, I haven't put a new dish on the menu in a while," because that's just going to wear down my creativity rather than help it grow. So yeah, that presence is one of the biggest things I hold onto.

How does your work echo that of your teachers, mentors, et cetera? How does it differ?

I think my work echoes some great chefs I worked with who weren't scared to get a little wild when they were creating new dishes, and pushed themselves first, rather than having people push them. No one is going to push me to create something cool; only I can do that for myself.

Another really important thing that I've learned from my mentors is a style of leadership that ensures we all feel on the same level and ground. It helps inspire the cooks and people around me to know that I'm not above them, and that they can do what I do one day.

How it differs… that one's hard. Restaurants are crazy, and chefs are crazy. *[laughs]* Sometimes it's hard to get information from a chef or learn from a chef, because they are so intense and so focused on what they're doing. For me, it's very important to remember that maybe somebody else came into cooking for the same reason I did and it's useful to offer my time to let them know what I do and how I do it, because maybe they'll end up in my shoes one day. I just try to pass on the knowledge as much as possible, because there are other creatives in this restaurant who are looking for the same exact thing that I was looking for when I was a cook.

What is your relationship to creative collaboration?

It is terrifying to collaborate. I always go in like, "Yeah, tell me how much you don't like it," as a defense mechanism, because it is scary to work really hard on something and be vulnerable enough to ask somebody for feedback. I struggle a lot with imposter syndrome, and that can make it difficult for me to feel like anything I create is good enough. Sometimes I'm like, "I should just do what they say," and push my ideas to the side, because I already think they're not good enough.

After creating a lot of dishes, I am a little bit more confident. There are other days where I can be completely on the other end of the spectrum, like, "Well, they don't know what they're talking about," or "Don't tell me how to make my dish. This is my dish and it's awesome." So it's really a fine line — I have to remember that I don't know everything, and that a lot of other people have really good ideas that I couldn't have come up with, including people not "on the same level" as me. I have to be open and humble enough to accept that in order to get better.

What are the most valuable resources to your creative practice?

My biggest resources are definitely going out to eat, and my mother — going home and visiting her, because sometimes I forget how simple food and cooking can be. I live in New York City, so I get to go to restaurants that are doing really creative things, and that actually sometimes stunts my creativity, or makes me think that I could never do something like that. But going home and re-grounding myself, eating the same exact meal that my mom's made me since I was a little kid, I remember that my ideas don't need to be the coolest or newest thing out

there. They just need to be true to me and true to what I want to create.

How do you spend your downtime?

The biggest thing is going out to eat and having that experience in a setting [other than work]. I love going to restaurants and bakeries — a really nice pastry is very inspiring for me. I also spend a lot of time either reading cookbooks or looking at other chefs on the internet through Instagram or other outlets, seeing what they're doing and getting inspired by them.

How do you cope with burnout?

I'll let you know when I figure that out. *[laughs]* For me, coping with physical burnout is a lot easier than coping with my mental and creative burnout. I'm really grateful to be the chef and be able to set boundaries. I meditate, and I also like to listen to a ton of music to help me reset.

But the creative burnout is something I'm working on. Figuring out how to navigate feeling like I have no ideas, or I don't have time to make anything new, or where I'm at doesn't allow for me to create anything new. Lately, in those moments, I try to bring it back to the teaching aspect of my job. I'll think about a dish I made a year ago and get back to the basics. I'll try to remember when I was creating that dish, and walk other people [in the kitchen] through it when they're making ingredients for that dish. I try to re-fall in love with something I've already done before. It's this nostalgic trick I play on myself.

Visual arts get my mind going too, whether it's color palettes or this shape on this shape, and thinking about it in a food context — "How can I make a dish look like that? How can I make food look like that?"

What are the rewards of your creative practice? How do these rewards show up outside the context of your work?

Teaching the cooks that work with me, and seeing them grow, is the biggest reward for sure. Because a lot of times they're growing, and they don't even see it. They don't remember, but I do. I'm really lucky to experience that, and to get to feed people something they've maybe never had before, and give them a whole new experience and a new memory. People will tell me, "We were celebrating something and we had this dish of yours, and it's been on my mind for weeks now." Being able to impact somebody's life through food is so intimate.

I feel very complete outside of my job. I don't really need to look for anything else, because I get to do what I love as a job and I have that creative outlet. I get to just enjoy being alive, being myself, and figuring out what else I like to do, instead of working at a job that I don't love and then having to cook on the weekends or when I get home. I just get to explore what it means to be living.

Juliana Latif recommends:

Do not disturb mode on your days off

Unreasonable Hospitality by Will Guidara

Motivational speaker Eric Thomas

90% of Trader Joe's

El Paso Del Gigante by Grupo Sonador — gets the blood flowing

Name
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Vocation
chef