

On how running a restaurant is like being in a band



An interview with chef, restaurateur, and punk rock drummer Brooks Headley

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3059 words.

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Your restaurant, Superiority Burger, is best known for a very specific thing: your veggie burger. You've recently been learning to make focaccia bread. Is there a certain restlessness to your creative process, where you master one thing, then want to figure out and master something new?

Yeah, but that's also part of the fun. Superiority Burger is so small and so tight that we basically max out the flat surface area and the cooking area and prep area every single day. But it was also the kind of thing where, with the focaccia, for example, it was like—Why not try to do one other thing that's completely inefficient and ridiculous to do in the space. Why not? We're still practicing it and the goal eventually is potentially to have a place that sells it, but at this point we make a batch every day and analyze it and we all taste it, we all look at it and we ask ourselves: *How can we do this differently with this space? And how can we make it even better, even lighter?*

Having worked as a pastry chef before, I don't think that I've mastered pastry. I just got to the limit of what I wanted to do in a fancy fine dining restaurant situation with dessert. That led to opening up Superiority Burger, which also has to do a lot with the complete bummed-outness of working in a fancy restaurant for so long, where you are only cooking for really wealthy people. That had always been an issue for me the whole time I'd done it.

I'm obviously a product of fancy restaurants and there are things that I learned in that world that I wouldn't have learned in any other situation. But at the same time, the fact that restaurants like that are so expensive that regular people can't eat in them is really one of the main reasons that we opened Superiority Burger—to be able to make food that's thoughtful and creative but also accessible financially. It's about using really good products and good techniques and it's not just frozen french fries.



In the introduction of your new cookbook, you talk about how you don't have french fries because you don't have a deep fryer. Are the limitations of the space something that you find is connected to your process? Do these kinds of limitations make you a better chef, or make you think more carefully about what you do?

The spacial limitations are completely frustrating and effect every single second of every day. But at the same time they're also kind of exhilarating, especially when you're able to

try to nail a salad or dessert or sandwich. So I'm both completely frustrated and totally into the limitations of the space and they definitely affect how we do things. I think having constraints is a good thing... until it's a very bad thing.

There are more and more shows now like *Chef's Table*—shows about restaurateurs and food people and food culture. Do you find that stuff interesting? Or do you avoid it?

I've never done anything like that. I've been asked in the past and I've just skirted the issue or avoided the emails. I'm not particularly into having my picture taken at all, let alone having a camera crew visually document everything I do. That just seems like a drag. A lot of times those shows... they've almost become parody at this point. It's always like there's classical music playing, there's a chef walking through a field, and it's this ham fisted inspirational thing, almost like a condom commercial or something. It just seems totally silly. Maybe there are ways you could do it that aren't like that, but they always seem to skew that direction.

Cooking is just this craft and it doesn't need to necessarily be turned into this thing that's super intellectual or philosophical. Sometimes you're literally just making some soup and that's totally fine. Maybe, instead, the show is just you and a pot and you're chopping up some onions and you're throwing them in the soup and you're like, "Okay, in eight hours this is gonna taste great" and there's not classical music playing. For those shows, it's like there's an over-earnestness to it sometimes that is a little hard to take.

Given the daily grind of running a business, how do you avoid burning out or getting sick of cooking or sick of running a restaurant?

Well, it's funny because the only time I was really on my way to burning out was when I was working at fancy restaurants doing only desserts. That's when I started playing music again after a few years of not doing that. Playing music helped me keep myself in check. I was able to do this other thing that balanced things out. It was also a creative outlet, but something totally and completely different from my job.

Whereas, since *Superiority* has opened, I've only played one show with Mick Barr and that's it. That was three years ago at this point. My whole life is based on coming to this 270 square foot space and cooking food and also just being there to be a part of the scene that I feel like we've created in this tiny little space. This is especially true in summer, since we're basically an outdoor restaurant because there's only six places to sit. So when it's nice outside people just spread out all over Tompkins on planters and on the street and it's just really nice. I love it because no one's drunk. No one's drinking alcohol. It's like a show, but everyone's just eating salad and hanging out and drinking iced tea. There's something ridiculously wholesome about it.

I know the photos in your cookbook are fairly recent, but somehow the vibe of them strikes you as something from the '60s.

We really wanted to get a point across that all of the people that are pictured in the book are our regulars. We did a couple of photo sessions where we just basically emailed everyone that comes in all the time and asked them to be a part of it. We have tons and tons of regulars of all different backgrounds, too. It's not just punk kids that come and eat. We really wanted to show that this is this place where anybody can eat. You can come and spend \$6.53 and get a burger, or you can spend 50 bucks and get a whole big plate of food that would be enough for several people. There's absolutely no elitism of any kind involved with this. I'm working 90 hours a week to make sure that we have the coolest, most delicious food that we can sell for as cheaply as we possibly can.

SUPERIORITY BURGER COOKBOOK

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BROOKS HEADLEY

As with any restaurant there is a balance of things that are less expensive and more expensive. The burger itself is actually fairly inexpensive to make, so that's a big profit margin, which means I can go to the market and buy the same chicory leaves that the fanciest restaurant in New York City buys, the exact same product from the exact same farm. But I sell them for \$7 in a salad as opposed to \$30 a salad or as a part of a \$100 or \$200 tasting menu or something. That jazzes me so hard and I think that is part of what attracts all sorts of people just wanting to come check the place out.

Also, having only six seats means that there's a certain commitment from the person that's gonna be a regular at Superiority Burger. If it's five degrees out or it's raining they might not get a seat. Where are they gonna eat the food? Are they gonna take it home? It's obviously gonna be better if they eat it right away, but are they willing to go with what we've got in order to be a part of what we're doing? And that's why the pictures of the people that are in the book, those are the people that eat here all the time.

One of our regulars comes almost every day. Our barometer of if we're really pushing things or doing our best is: "Do we have something new to give him that he didn't get yesterday or the day before?" Maybe it's not totally brand new or maybe it's something we haven't had for a while, but if we can do that for this guy who comes in every day, then for someone that's only going to come once a month or once a year, we're gonna be able to give them an experience of a tray of food that they're just gonna be totally psyched about. I mean, that's the plan. That's the idea.

If someone wants to get into cooking or follow a similar path that you followed, what do you tell them? I know you didn't necessarily have formal training, so do you think you're an exception to the rule or do you think people can find success as a chef just by learning on their own?

I always think of it in terms like this: if you're going to be a doctor or a dentist you have to go to school, but if you're gonna be a cook you can do it without going to school or getting any formal training. It's just gonna be harder for you and you have to be way more psychotic and intense about it in terms of how you learn to do these things. Are you gonna learn how to do these things by going to work for very little money at a restaurant where you know you can learn stuff? And that doesn't always work out the right way you think it will. Sometimes you're like, "I really want to learn how they do stuff at this place." And then as someone who's on the bottom of the hierarchical chain, maybe you're just picking micro herbs for eight hours straight. You're not actually learning what's going on.



Or maybe you will, but only after five years of working there. Another option involves going to cooking school, which is totally fine, too. But at the same time, if you're just going to cooking school like a loser like me went to high school, you don't necessarily learn that much unless you do enough extra curricular work around it. So, you can do it both ways. It's really just a matter of really, really loving food. And also really loving people's reactions to food. It's not the same as it is with, say, music. I love bands like No Trend or Flipper, bands that are intentionally supposed to put off the person listening to it, even if it's someone who likes that kind of music.

But cooking isn't like that. You have to make people happy with food. Food is supposed to make people happy, especially food that you're buying at a restaurant—whether it be fancy, non-fancy whatever. There's a difference in that. So, there's a sense of hospitality. I'm gonna make vegetarian chili and I'm gonna make it as good as I possibly can and better than other crappy vegetarian chili that I've had for however many years I've been eating crappy vegetarian chili. I'm taking something as ludicrously stupid as vegetarian chili and making it into something where people will say, "Wow, this is the most amazing thing I've ever had!"

Even with veggie burgers themselves... I mean, veggie burgers are kind of dumb. They're sort of stupid. So that's another reason that I like how the progression of the restaurant has

gone because it's called Superiority Burger, but that's only one tiny thing that we sell. It's the thing we sell the most of, but we also sell a bunch of other stuff that isn't like the burger at all.

I also really like that right now there's all these tech firms making fake meat, spending millions and millions and millions of dollars to develop something that basically directly mimics meat. And the whole reason we opened up Superiority was that we're not gonna try to do that. We're gonna cook food-and maybe we're gonna put some stuff on a bun with some lettuce and tomato that gives you the sensation of a burger-but we're not gonna mimic meat. Because number one, we're not smart enough to figure out how to do that. And number two, isn't it always better just to eat real food anyway?

So all that stuff that's happening now is just kind of funny to me because people will always ask, "Aren't you worried about this stuff? This fake meat gonna put you out of business." To me it's funny. Not to sound totally cliché, but it's like the difference between being in a band in the early '90s that goes on tour and plays VFW halls as opposed to a band like, I don't know, Ned's Atomic Dustbin or something.

We're trying to make food that is real food. If you bite into this burger there are nuts and there are grains and there are vegetables. You know what's going on here. This isn't fake meat. I'm not engineering something that's like, "Oh my god, it's so much like meat. I can't even tell the difference." You should be able to tell the difference in our food. And you can.

When you set out to open a restaurant did you know how to run a business? Did you find people you could collaborate with where you were going, "Hey, I'm gonna cook. Can you help me deal with managing the books?"

Of course. I have two business partners that are strictly around. Number one they gave me their money to help open this place up and it was a truly collaborative effort. They can do the things that I can't do in terms of the things involved with running a business that keeps the business open-a business that pays rent and makes sure the trash gets picked up and makes sure everyone gets paid and makes sure you don't run out of soap or c-fold towels and deals with the health department, all of those kinds of things. I'm good at some of that stuff but I'm definitely not good at all of it. Running a restaurant fully feels like a band in a lot of ways, everyone has their part.



We've talked about the things that have gone well and the things you like about having a place like Superiority Burger. What have been some of the biggest difficulties? Or things that maybe didn't go as planned?

Of course, there were things that have been hard or didn't work. There's the failure of, "How do you make a six foot restaurant not lose money with a fairly large staff in the month of January?" Stuff like that. We just came out of five very, very cold dreary months, which is not good for any business, whether it has six seats or 60 seats. How do we get people in the

door if we don't have one of those horribly dorky canvas vestibule things on the outside to keep people warm while they wait? Think about it, those things are terrible. I hate them. But also if I go somewhere to pay money to eat I don't want to be freezing when I eat. So we've never gotten one of those and we've always just kind of crossed our fingers and hoped we could get through the next winter that way, which we just did...again.

So now we have the next few months of nice weather to make up for that. But yeah, there are always little failures, whether it be specific dishes or things we've come up with that just totally didn't work and we scrapped and started from scratch. Also, I'm 45 years old. I'm no spring chicken at this point, but this is the first thing I've ever even owned, really. And I love it. I love every second of it. I love cooking the food. I love the aesthetics of it. I love everything about it. But not every person that I hire is gonna necessarily share that enthusiasm that I do.

There's a learning curve when it comes to how do you keep someone happy and also make sure they have free time to hang out with their wives or hang out with their husband and also be in a band? I had so many jobs throughout my life where I would ask for three weeks off to go on tour and I would always really think about how I was gonna ask to do it and make sure it was OK because I really needed the job when I got back because I wasn't gonna make any money on tour. So how do I make myself irreplaceable so that they'll give me three weeks off? Because at any job getting three weeks off is kind of ridiculous.

So when people have done music stuff that have worked here it's sort of like, "Hey, can I have off? I'm playing in Kentucky." Well, of course you can have off. I will work an extra 20 hours that week because I know you have to go do that even if that means you're going to Kentucky to play a show to nobody. Because I've done that before and at the time I knew I had to do that. So, there you go. See you later. Have fun.

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