

On approaching your work with honesty



Chef Woldy Kusina discusses adaptability, learning to cook with his mother and grandmother, how his identity as a gay man influences his recipes, and his goal to create a more positive kitchen.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2645 words.

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We all have to fight against tendencies in our creative work or deal with creative blocks. Do you find yourself getting in ruts with what you're cooking?

I do and I don't. I cook food that I know, and I'm comfortable with, and heavily rely on bold, strong flavors. That guides how I'm going to balance all of the flavors, and that's where I tend to work. I do sometimes make things over and over again and it gets repetitive.

I try to get myself out of redundancy by looking at other chefs or cooks, or even flipping through cook books to see what I'll get inspired by, and infuse my own flavor profiles and my approach to it. I go outside of my comfort zone and try something new, or remember the food I grew up eating and reinterpret that with how I would eat it today, into a more progressive approach.

What I mean by "progressive approach" is I bring in the seasonality, like what I would find at a roadside farm. I live upstate right now, so I incorporate that to keep myself moving forward. I get myself out of the rut by going out to see what's available at the roadside farm, or get inspiration from social media.

Then I do make things over and over again because it's what's good and that's what people like, and every now and then I'll think of something outside of the box and make something new.



We met when I tasted your chili as part of a cook off/competition. You said it was the second time you'd made that

same recipe for a competition. When you make the same thing over and over, does it taste exactly the same to you? Or does it change over time?

The first time around, when I made that chili, I was heavily invested in winning, so there were several iterations that evolved over time. I had to start with how I personally interpret chili: it's spicy, and it's warm, and it's stew-like. Then I communicate the flavors that I tend to lean towards. My take is very South East Asian. Also, there's a bit of Southern California infusion in there because I grew up in Southern California and they eat a lot of Filipino food, Mexican food. I grew up in a predominantly Asian neighborhood so there was a wave of different types of flavors like Thai, Japanese, all the food that I had access to. I bring that into a bowl of chili.

So the first time I made it for that competition, I made it a week in advance and I froze it, and had to go to California for a family funeral, and I flew back, defrosted it, and over time in the freezer it all married together and people were just blown away. When I joined the Soup Shop competition it didn't have that same process. I didn't make it a week in advance and put it in a freezer, so I wrote down all the ingredients that I made into the first one, and tried to replicate that process of making it. Making close to a hundred 32 ounce jars of chili was going to be tricky, so I tried my best to replicate that first one into the second one. So it's all about, for me it's like, I have to remember it from the first one.

If I get close to that, then it'll be fine. And I knew already, I'm not trying to be overconfident here, but I knew already, understanding how the flavors are going to go and work with each other that people would enjoy it. I knew there were going to be textures and flavor and everything's going to balance out with each other. You have crunchiness from the peanuts and the brightness from the salsa verde that will cut through to the stew that's cooked hours and hours, and it'll bring it all together, somehow.

I noticed on your Instagram that you do pop-ups, cooking at a certain place for a certain period of time, then you're cooking somewhere else. Is it difficult to go to different kitchens all the time? How do you adapt?

I quickly adapt. I started cooking professionally as a caterer six years ago. When you're catering, you're going to be working in different settings all the time. I think with those short periods of time as a caterer, you have to work with what you got and make the best use of the surroundings and the environment that you're in. I've dealt with a lot of different personalities in the kitchen, and so you have to maneuver personalities, maneuver your surroundings. Just make it work.



When you're catering someone's specific event, I imagine they give you more input than you would want as a chef. I

can imagine, in a restaurant someone's not going to come up and say, "Hey, can you add more of this or that to this dish." But if you're in someone's party they'd feel entitled to do that.

Yeah, I learned to be patient. I mind that I'm not a patient person, so when I'm catering an event, yes there are a lot of inputs, they're going to be like, "I don't like this, I don't like that." You're in the business of catering, so you are catering to their wants and needs. But as a chef you're making food that you want to make, and you want to serve, and trying to not make any substitutions or accommodations.

I'm now leaning more towards the food that I want to make, and do it well. I've learned being a caterer, it's just practicing patience and working with people and knowing how to communicate with people. Perhaps that makes a person a well rounded person.

There are a lot of bad things associated with being a chef, where it's predominantly male-dominated, or a white-male-dominated environment. I never worked restaurant kitchens, and it's known the industry that this is what happens in restaurant kitchens. But, for me, not having that experience and being me a queer chef, I want to create a better environment that's a safe place for me, where I feel comfortable working with women, minority and LGBTQ people where we should get along and enjoy each other's company, and we're all there for a purpose, a common goal, doing the best that we can, and foster a really positive, uplifting environment and not be domineering and be an asshole. I mean, I can be an asshole sometimes, but primarily it should be a rewarding and inspiring place to be in. My hope is that I be the best I can and be mindful of people, and respect one another, so we can all flourish together.

Right. I immediately think of Gordon Ramsey. There is that archetype of the chef as beating everyone into submission.

Yeah. He plays it very well, he plays that role. He'll probably still be fine but will that archetype be acceptable now where all the stories are coming out? Toxic work environment and harassment and all that. I think there should be obviously a change in perception of what chefs can be, and I think chefs should be leaders and caring. They're managing people and you're in a people business. I think people should be nice, make it nice. We should move forward from that and see what's possible for a kinder, gentle chef.



How did you learn to cook?

I did not go to culinary school. I went to school at my grandma and my mom's kitchen. I was very comfortable being in the kitchen, and being with my grandmother and my mom and my dad who cook traditional Filipino food. I was very drawn to that. Over time, television and Food Network. I started to get invested in learning how to cook and reading cover to cover of *Bon Appetite* or *Saveur*.

I learned how to cook for myself and started cooking for other people, and I built my cooking confidence over time, as I became more comfortable with myself as a queer person. I think it takes time. So as you get older, you get more confident in your own craft. Did I wish I'd gone to culinary school? I don't know. I'm not saying that culinary school is bad, but I think some of the courses are somewhat antiquated. I'm lucky enough that I learned braising and grilling from watching my grandma, watching my dad, watching my family, they're really good at braising, and they're making a stew, they're frying and baking.

Someone else I've interviewed for the site was Brooks Headley, who founded Superiority Burger. He didn't go to school to learn how to cook. He was in a punk band and started bringing food on the road because he was vegetarian and didn't like the food he got at the rest stops. That's how he learned how to cook. He ended up becoming the pastry chef for Del Posto and winning a James Beard Award. But he figured it out on his own, which is a great way to learn.

I think people who didn't go to culinary school, if you enjoy the process of it, you keep going and you keep making and you get better at it each time you do it, so it's part of that journey. That's how it's going to shape you as a chef or a cook.

I'm pretty sure Brooks didn't feel comfortable being called a chef, because like, "I'm a cook. A home cook." Then people start calling you a chef and you're like, "Oh okay," you start to believe it. You might be suffering from impostor syndrome. Like, "I didn't go to culinary school, I didn't work for one of those Michelin star restaurants." And I respect and admire the people who did it and have gone through that process, but that was not my journey. So sometimes you do question, am I a really a chef? I just know I'm a cook and I know what I like to make. Everybody has their own journey of how they get to where they are.

You were saying your cooking developed as you became more comfortable as a queer person. That was part of your journey. Part of what I liked about the chili you made for that competition was that you called it "gay chili." As we discussed earlier, you'd made it once before, for a specifically queer chili cook-off, and there was a story behind it.

Yeah, bakla, it's a Filipino tagalog word, in the Filipino language, and it means gay. Interestingly, there is a Filipino queer chef in Philadelphia who DM'd me and said it was a triggering word. I said, "I apologize that it triggered you." It's a triggering word for me as well, like the word faggot. So I think me as a queer person, and knowing that this chili came in a space that was surrounded by queer people to be voted by queer people, I thought that as a Filipino queer chef, I wanted to give it the name to this dish. I felt like bakla would be a perfect term for it, how it started, and also owning that word. I'm going to take the word where it's not going to be triggering for people and make it a word that's empowering. That was why I named it that. It's a celebratory thing for me. It's sweet, salty, everything that you can think of what a queer, salty, Filipino chef would be... which is me. Salty, spicy, sour all at the same time. So, I felt like the word bakla was definitely the right name for that dish.

Do you give different names to all your dishes? Or was that specific to this one because it was for the competition?

That was specific for that. In the future, I don't know if I'll name a dish, but I think maybe I could start naming dishes. For this particular one, I wanted people to ask, "What's bakla?" and get them curious. Hopefully the people who order it will be able to be on the journey of what this word is and what it means, and hopefully somebody will say, "Why did you name it that?" I can just tell them, explain to them the whole story of why.



Do you ever want to open your own restaurant?

There's something percolating. My wish is, yes, to have an actual restaurant. When I started my career in cooking and catering, that was like, "Well, this is going to be my road to getting there." Doing pop-ups and seeing the reaction of people's response to my food gives me confidence that I think I will be able to have a restaurant.

How did the pandemic shift things as a chef? You're a social, gregarious chef, and you couldn't really cook for people in person in the usual way.

I had a lot of opportunities that were happening in 2020, and those didn't pan out when lockdown happened, so I was very fearful and scared of my livelihood going down the toilet. I hated the feeling of self pity and feeling helpless, and so at the time of lockdown, Eric [Seel], myself, and Lani [Halliday]'s shared Bushwick kitchen quickly became a relief kitchen, and we started making meals for homeless, LGBTQ+, and healthcare workers. We were putting together groceries from people suffering from food insecurity.

I did quite a bit of shopping for my family, just pivoting after pivoting. Landing on consistently doing pop-ups was the way to keep my dream alive, and to share food with people. If that's still going, then I'm still living my dream.

I think in this pandemic time, it's also trying to communicate the food I want to make, and explain to people what I'm trying to do, which is modernizing Filipino food. It's a very layered thing. As long as I'm cooking somewhere, I'm still doing what I love. There's a lot of things that came out of the pandemic. Obviously a lot of good and bad and the ugly. As a human being, your level of resilience comes into play. That's what this whole

pandemic has shaped.

I think about what you were saying about trying to make the kitchen a different kind of kitchen. I can imagine when you open your restaurant people will say, "This is a very positive person. I'd want to work for this guy."

I would hope so. Right now the labor market for people working at a restaurant seems very low, but you know, in my kitchen, you can talk to the other chefs that I'm friends with, I'm usually dancing and singing, and they're laughing because I'm dancing and singing. It's supposed to be fun. I mean, yes we should be serious, but I feel like there should be a sense of fun into it. I do hope when people are in the environment that I hopefully create, it's a fun and inspiring one, and I want everyone to feel welcome. That's my hope.

Woldy Kusina Recommends:

The top 5 songs to dance to in the kitchen

"Tempo" - Lizzo featuring Missy Elliott

"Dancing with a Stranger" - Sam Smith & Normani

"Dancing on My Own" - Robyn

"Rhythm Nation" - Janet Jackson

"Vogue" - Madonna

Name

Woldy Kusina

Vocation

Chef, caterer

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