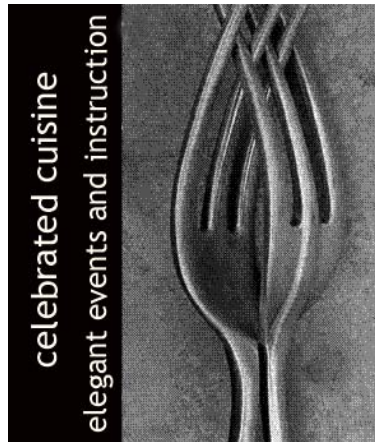


Women Chefs and Restaurateurs
Scholarship Journal: Greens Restaurant, San Francisco
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As Experienced By Laura Slama
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"Garden"

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First night, restaurant is open, and I am "on the line". Well, working it anyway. I have been assigned garde manger with JP, an extern finishing CCA. My task tonight is to plate one salad and to plate desserts, about 150 times. At first I felt like I was only in the way. My salads needed to be "fluffed" (don't ask), less lettuce, more fig, less fig, more lettuce. By the fifth salad, Tai Do, the chef, stopped saying anything, so I was either doing better, or he got tired of asking. I'll focus on the former.

Nothing like putting yourself outside your comfort zone to make yourself feel like you know nothing at all. I arrived at Greens a few minutes before 3 on Saturday. After a quick tour by tonight's chef, Tai Do, introductions to the staff and a briefing on tonight's menu, I was asked to prep green onions for the corn salad (champagne vinaigrette) and cucumbers for the tasting plate. My knife skills are immediately critiqued, I am shown a new way to cut on the bias ("more bias, more bias" I am told), and I see a demonstration of the fastest way to prep a pomegranate (why haven't I learned *that* before?). But I am here to learn, a student again after teaching for the last few years, another line cook, not a caterer, anonymous in the kitchen, putting out desserts.

Anonymous? No way. There's Ulysses on sauté that makes wild mushroom ravioli, the most popular dish tonight, seem effortless. Cyndi is pushing out Indian curry plates faster than Tai Do can ask for them, and Karen is plating the prettiest dish of the night, and the most labor intensive, given its delicate presentation, the roasted vegetable gratin served with rapini and cipollini onions. I watch, and I learn.

Dessert tickets start rolling in and I catch on much faster. The plating here is not picky, but specific. Three fig quarters, three raspberries for fromage blanc cheesecake, a dollop of vanilla bean crème fraiche with the berry cobbler, a smattering of espresso caramel for the ice cream sandwich nestled between two hazelnut meringue cookies, or three scoops of sorbet. They're pretty, taste wonderful, and expected in the window in less than two minutes. "Dessert runner, please" I whisper the first time, my voice getting stronger with each plating as my confidence returns and my comfort level grows.

Day 2. Sunday, October 3.

At high noon I return to *Greens*, ready for day two of my adventure. I meet Victoria, the primary chef responsible for *Greens*, who is busy expediting food and calling for runners. Next thing I know, without warning, I am expediting, too. To expedite well, it helps to know the menu, which I haven't seen yet. It also helps to know the code each ticket prints out. "Portabella" for the portabella sandwich, "pasta" for the pasta du jour - those were easy. But "pinnacles"? I quickly learn that it was similar to a Mexican scrambled egg dish, served with a ladle of black bean chili, tortilla, sour cream, fresh salsa and a scoop of avocado. Expeditors also garnish, so I find myself quickly jumping in to scoop up healthy portions of roasted potatoes with garlic, onions, salt and pepper for the chanterelle omelets, or rice for the tofu stir fry, garnished with black and white sesame seeds, or brushing butter on walnut toast to accompany the frittata. That was the easy part of my day.

Victoria pulls me off the line to start the prep for the private function that afternoon - a wedding for 80. The first thing I do is cry. Well, don't you cry when cutting onions? A green papaya salad served in butter lettuce leaves with Thai basil chiffonade, crisp tofu, my onions, peanuts and lime chili sauce is an appetizer (think glorified lettuce wrap). I finish the prep of red onions (thinly sliced, I am told - when I was done you could see through them) and begin the task of making butternut squash soup for 80. I am psyched - I love to make soup - but I am, after all, making someone else's verbal recipe, so not a good time to take culinary license.

Into a huge stockpot go about eight pounds of yellow onions, where I sweat, they sweat, until I begin to get some color (the onions, too). Carrots next, about 5 pounds, then celery, garlic and salt and pepper. When the vegetables show signs of slight caramelization, in goes 20 pounds of butternut squash, enough vegetable stock to almost cover and a lid. I let this baby boil about 45 minutes with the occasional stir until everything is so soft it looks like it could melt. I am taught to use the world's largest blender, guaranteed to blow if not handled right. So, with care and speed, I puree the soup first in a blender, then through a food mill to ensure the smoothest finish. Into another stockpot and I get the ok to season it myself. A little orange juice (freshly squeezed, naturally), some salt and pepper, and I present my spoon to Victoria. She tastes it and gives me an

enthusiastic nod - I pass inspection. Later I am told the guests were licking the soup bowls. That was worth every minute of soup making.

Of course, one cannot remain idle while soup is cooking, so in the interim I clean enough sweet 100 and sungold cherry tomatoes to equal 30 cups, I blanch and shock haricot verts and yellow wax beans for the watercress side, I shave manchego cheese for the salad, I blanch and shock 4 pounds of linguini, and I prep crepes with Cindy. 200 of them.

Each crepe gets two tablespoons of roasted vegetable filling: summer squash, red peppers, yellow peppers, butternut squash, roasted tomatoes, fennel, leeks, Asiago, thyme and basil. They are then folded and placed on a sheet tray, brushed with heavy cream and placed in the walk in. This is the main course, served with the watercress side and roasted chanterelle mushrooms. The sauce, cream reduced with rosemary, carrots and thyme, then strained, is seasoned by me and placed in a bain marie until service.

200 crepes later, we are ready to begin the plating process for dinner. Plates are lined up everywhere and, given the plate, people are assigned food items to distribute. I place shaved Manchego for each mixed salad, following the lettuce man and the tomato man. I am the dollop-er for the soup - drizzling crème fraiche over each bowl, sprinkling it with chopped parsley and cleaning the rim before pushing it out, and I am the rim cleaner for the crepe entrée - final look before it goes to the dining room.

All of a sudden, we are done. To go boxes are available to staff to pack up leftovers and I realize I haven't eaten more than an apple and a sample here or there all day. So, I collect a few crepes for my hosts and me, as many chanterelles as possible without embarrassing myself, and the leftover figs from the appetizers and go on my merry way - schedule in hand for the balance of my week. It seems they do want me to come back tomorrow. Whew.

Day 3, Monday. I have to keep track, because I keep thinking it is Tuesday. My body schedule is thrown off - I don't go to bed until 11pm and I am waking up after 7. I have always been a morning person, and working here

has not necessarily changed that. I go for a run this morning, right to the Golden Gate Bridge. It's rainy, foggy and a typical San Francisco day.

I arrive at my scheduled time of 1 pm. Today I am doing dinner prep with Victoria, the chef who has been here 12 years and is an excellent embodiment of the original vision of Greens. I enjoy learning from her given her no nonsense style, balanced with her ability to give her staff room to experiment and grow - just not at the expense of the restaurant. As soon as I arrive, Victoria hands me a sheet listing the soups for the week, and the dinner menu for that night in a broken parlance meant to be understood by insiders. I quickly decipher the list and get my assignments: boost the flavor of the vegetable stock by adding more onions, carrots, celery, thyme, garlic and parsley; sauté enough spinach for pizzas in canola oil, garlic and white wine and leave it to drain; blanch and shock four pounds of fresh bucatini pasta (some of the best I've tried); get lost in a vat of potatoes.

OK, I'll extrapolate on the last. The restaurant serves "potato griddle cakes" nearly every night. Think potato latke, the traditional Hannukah pancake eaten with applesauce and sour cream. Now, to borrow a phrase, bump it up a notch and add goat and fontina cheeses, scallions and chives, crème fraiche and eggs and milk, et voila! Griddle Cakes. Why the vat? Because I am making twenty pounds worth of potatoes and considering that each cake is about an ounce, and there are three per serving, then that is 160 servings. The apple compote with dried Michigan cherries is a wonderful complement. I fry up individual cakes three separate times to get the ok from Jason, Victoria's right hand tonight, each time adding more flour to keep their shape. I finally get the go ahead, and move product into two bains - the container the restaurant uses to hold product during service.

Potatoes done, it's on to mincing buckets of herbs: mint, Thai basil and parsley, all for garnishes tonight. I take over for Jason and dice nectarines for the nectarine chutney to be served with the Indian curry and pistachio basmati rice. Little do I know that dish will become my new best friend in a few short hours.

I toast peanuts for Thai salad and pistachios for the rice. Five o'clock and I am given a break, grab some food (on a plate, for once) and head upstairs to call my family.

When I return from my three-minute break (it's boring to eat in a small room alone and the line was busy), Victoria tastes each dish the restaurant will serve that evening. I am invited to taste with her and listen closely to the changes she recommends for each dish. Presentation is not king, but it definitely ranks so the gratin that keeps melting into a puddle is re-plated in a dish to help it hold its shape, at least long enough until the guest has plunged their fork into it for the first time.

Griddle cakes (my babies) have passed muster, yet the line cook complains that they don't have enough flour to keep their shape. Given that the flour is below his feet, I don't understand why he just doesn't add some, especially since the suggestion is made to him. I have watched him for several days at work and choose not to give him rock star status like several of the other cooks. I wouldn't hire him.

I am assigned "cold" with Daniel, a very nice, but intense, young man who knows his way around the kitchen. I will be plating curry (two heaping scoops of basmati rice, sprinkled with pistachios, a small spoonful of chutney and a heaping ladle of curry loaded with cauliflower, carrots, peppers, squash, potatoes, snap peas, all simmered with tomatoes, coconut milk, lemongrass, ginger, chilies and Indian spices); making the Garden salad (butter lettuces and watercress tossed with pear vinaigrette, garnished with French butter pears, toasted pecans and pomegranate seeds) and desserts.

A half-hour into service and I am on my own on the station. Daniel has gone to do more prep for tomorrow so I am learning the lingo and the timing, intent on improving my speed so no one is waiting on me. It goes smoothly for an hour - my salads are pretty and my curry plates are full. Then, I become paranoid and continue to look over my shoulder - continuously. The dessert tickets quietly exit the machine, waiting for me to grab them and plate desserts. But the machine is so quiet that I have to keep looking, even when my back is turned making salad or plating curry. I now know what Nixon may have felt like during Watergate. After awhile it becomes rote, and I am plating a salad, a cheesecake, cobbler and a curry like I was born to do it. Before I know it, it is nine o'clock and Jane comes to take me home. I am quite pleased with my performance - giddy perhaps. Of course, I am still

on the easiest station, but I have only been here three days and the kitchen has begun to treat me like a peer, not a pariah. That's a good thing.

Day 4. Oh, what a difference one man can make. I return to the kitchen at 2:30, after spending a lovely morning exploring the Farmers' Market at the Ferry Building. Cheeses, olive oils, organic produce of every kind, dried mushrooms, fresh mushrooms, breads, nuts, dried fruit, smoked salmon (and granola). Note to self: Farmers' Markets are a perfect place to visit when you are out of town and don't have a kitchen (or time, in this case) to cook. Slightly painful to leave empty handed (though my belly was full from all the samples), I am looking forward to more learning at Greens and putting what I have learned to good use.

So what difference can one man make? How about frustrating a visiting scholarship student to the point of requesting a schedule change? If you remember Tai Do, the chef from the first night who wanted more bias on the cucumbers and the scallions, it was painfully clear that he was not overjoyed to see me walk in. Was it the wonderful assignments he gave me that clued me in? Slice bread in 1/8 inch rounds for crostini, dice heirloom tomatoes for the polenta, sauté cous cous in butter (one in oil for vegans), or toast and chop nuts - I'm sorry, I came here to learn more about technique, new recipes and how to run a restaurant, not constantly to approach the guy and plead what I could do next. When I see Victoria, who runs the place and understands why I am here, I request, and get the schedule changed. Wednesday and Thursday I will work from 9-4, doing the lunch and prep for the next day. Can I tell Tai Do to "bite me"? No, that would be highly unprofessional, and it turns out, unnecessary as the other women in the kitchen advise me not to take it personally, that this is how he treats all women. Poor, unenlightened soul.

So, after my fun afternoon of chopping, slicing and dicing, I am assigned the colds station again, so I prep for the night. Garden Salad, this time prepared with little gems and watercress (by the way, little gems for this particular leaf lettuce is a misnomer, the leaves are gigantic), fuyu persimmons (the orange fruit which has a star inside when you cut it), pomegranates, toasted walnuts and pear vinaigrette. Can you say "dovetail"? Curry is back, same presentation as the day before, but the chutney today is

pineapple mango. Basically about 6-8 mangoes, 2 pineapples, a red jalapeno or two, siracha sauce, salt, pepper and either cider or sherry vinegar (I think). Desserts are set up and ready to go.

Once orders start to come in the dynamic changes again. I enjoy the company of Cyndi, Somya and Karen, and Daniel is back, this time on grill, all of them rock stars all over again. But I can't understand Tai Do's accent, or his rhythm in the kitchen, so I manifest myself to him as incapable. Everyone shares with me in their own time how many months it took for them to understand him. When you ask him a question, I think he purposely turns his head the other direction and whispers with his accent, just to make you feel incompetent. My food is on time, clean and pretty, but I know better than to ask for some type of acknowledgment. I am counting down the hours to when I can remove myself from his presence.

My paranoia regarding desserts continues tonight - Garden Salad being made, look over shoulder for dessert ticket, plate up curry, look over shoulder for dessert ticket, garnish potatoes, look for dessert ticket. Then, disaster - there have been no dessert tickets for about 10 minutes when one of the servers, looking for desserts realizes the machine is jammed. We open it up and there are four tables of desserts! Of course, Tai Do sees this (for now I am personally responsible for the mechanics of these machines), and I work with Cyndi and Daniel to rip out the desserts - "dessert runners, please - Rush!".

After that, my paranoia has me constantly checking the feed on the machine between plating "curry, extra spicy" and "garden, light dressing, no persimmons, nuts on the side"... I may never order my dressing on the side again, with my newfound appreciation for colds station.

Last order rolls in at 8:45 and I am plating the final desserts at 9:30. The crème fraiche ice cream has proven quite popular tonight, but my hands are raw from scooping sorbet, a dry ice concoction that crumbles the minute I place my scoop in it. I am dying to go to the dining room and threaten anyone else who orders sorbet. The dessert that blows me away is the chocolate marquis. Made with vanilla soymilk and chocolate, it is molded in rounds and chilled until solid on a pecan crust, served on blackberry sauce.

It's decadent and vegan - no butter, no cream, no eggs. I need to get the recipe for this one - a perfect kosher dessert!

I do breakdown with the rest of the team, transferring product for the next day into clean 5 and 10-cup containers, labeling, wrapping and stocking. About 10 pm Karen suggests I take off since I am coming in at 9 the next day. Nothing could make me happier than to depart Tai Do's kitchen in anticipation of returning to Victoria's. I decide to walk home, enjoying the fresh air and the freedom from the stale energy in the kitchen. Restaurants, like schools and corporations, are impacted by their day-to-day leadership. The Greens I left tonight was not the same as I had been in yesterday, that much is certain.

Day 5. What a difference a day makes. I arrive this morning at Greens and am greeted by Victoria, Yolanda and Jane, the team responsible for lunch and initial prep for dinner. Yolanda is the shift lead and Jane is her indispensable right hand. Currently a student at California Culinary Academy (CCA- and who isn't?, in San Francisco it would seem), Jane has achieved rock star status in her own right. She looks about 15, but has had a lifetime of experience: two years at Cornell Hotel Management program, a year as Banquet Coordinator for Hilton New York, two years backpacking around the world. Born in Germany, raised everywhere, her confidence in the kitchen is inspiring. Look for her on Food Network when they broadcast the culinary competition occurring in two weeks at Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas. Jane is representing CCA, having won that competition recently.

We immediately sit down for a meeting (first real one I have had here) and discuss the tasks that need to be done. Recipe questions are answered and I am given a choice with whom I wish to work. I pick Jane given the varied nature of her tasks and my desire to be brushed with some of her fairy dust. Turns out, good choice.

I spend the morning preparing New Mexican border stew, roasting butternut squash, red and yellow peppers, and yellow finn potatoes, blanching broccoli and braising turnips. We make a sauce of caramelized plantains, mashed then combined with grilled yellow onions, cumin, cinnamon, ancho paste, pureed

tomatoes, fire roasted diced tomatoes, chipotle paste and a touch of sugar for sweetness. Trust me, this sauce rocks. I could eat that alone as a soup.

We make cous cous in champagne vinaigrette for the Mediterranean sampler plate which also includes filo turnovers with leek, fromage blanc and thyme, grilled figs with arugula and a garden cucumber salad that reminds me of my cucumbers the first night. This is served with a sweet/spicy tomato jam with hints of ginger and cumin.

I blanch Sedani rigati for the pasta dish. This is served with Italian butter beans that are fresh that we cook in less than an hour in vegetable stock. They melt in your mouth. Combine that with garlic breadcrumbs, shallots and herb chili butter and you have a flavor combination that literally explodes in your mouth. Later, when tasting everything I literally remove that from my sight in fear of consuming the whole plate and leaving nothing for staff.

We make a vat of brown rice that we combine with wild rice to serve with the mesquite grilled brochettes. Beautiful skewers, but please don't ask me to cut corn in 1 _ inch chunks again for a while - my hands are still sore from the pressure of pushing the knife through the cob. What we won't do for the sake of presentation!

Before I know it, we are setting up our lunch stations and I have been "promoted" from colds to hots. Promoted is a stretch, as hots is easier at lunch than at dinner, and colds is a non-stop circus of salads, samplers and desserts. I think I'll stick with my two menu items. The first is the cheese plate with Mount Tam from Cow Girl creamery (a 60% brie type cheese), Knoll Farm figs, my sustenance for the week as they are large, juicy and flavorful, ambrosia melon (think sweeter than cantaloupe, but looks the same) and warm almonds. I choose rosemary to garnish the plate.

My other plate is the Grilled Crimini and Portabello mushroom sandwich. If I could only eat one thing again for the rest of my life, and not worry about cholesterol, fat or calories, this would be it (I am actually making it sound worse than it is for my own protection). Two thick slices of rosemary herb bread made by Acme Bread slathered with sautéed crimini and portabello mushrooms. Torpedo onions, and asiago cheese, pressed together, then brushed with clarified butter and grilled on the flat top, which to you non-restaurant workers is the largest griddle you have ever seen. Later, when I

"staff" the extra sandwiches (put them out for staff to eat), the 24 quarters from six sandwiches are literally gone in 2 minutes. Yep, that good.

I plate this palate pleaser with roasted potato salad, simply roasted potatoes tossed with roasted peppers, capers, parsley and watercress tossed in red wine vinaigrette. Simple, but good.

Lunch goes without incident. I perform admirably, and am relieved to be between Yolanda and Victoria on the line, just in case I get behind. But I hold my own. Between 12 and 1 we are so slammed with orders that I don't think the hour ever happened, then it slows so dramatically at 1:15 I realize it had. I am given my 20 minute break for the day, go upstairs and sit down. 15 minutes later I am back, as I find the break boring compared to the rush of the restaurant.

The rest of the day is spent prepping for the dinner shift or putting away lunch items and replenishing the shelves. I refill two of the oils used by pumping them from large barrels into plastic bottles. When I say large barrels, think beer vats that hold high quality olive oil with Italian written along the top - that big. Before I leave, Victoria calls me into her office. She won't be in the restaurant tomorrow; it's her day off. So we chat a bit about my experience and I am handed a Greens t-shirt as a souvenir. I think Victoria is great - a wonderful guide to my tour, a great leader in the kitchen, and an inspiration to those who come to Greens and want to experience the original vision. I am disappointed my last day won't include her - I was hoping to make soup with her!

Think I'll get a picture of me with one of those vats of oil today before I leave - after all, I am off for Day 6, my last day here at Greens.

Day 6. I am writing this on completion of my scholarship at Greens, Thursday, October 7. In the background, as I write, are the foghorns of San Francisco, the sounds reminiscent of the oboe when warming up before a Broadway performance. The once sunny day is quickly turning gray as I pack my bags, signaling the end of a memorable week.

Today was almost anticlimactic after 5 days of intense activity. I meet with Yolanda, Jane and Jeff for a quick huddle, really just a distribution of the menu and assignments. I will be making the same stew as yesterday, the New Mexican Border stew on my own. I feel like I have graduated. I toss butternut squash, red and yellow peppers, and zucchini with garlic oil and sea salt and roast them until lightly caramelized, then set them aside. I lightly sauté the turnips, and then braise them in vegetable stock until tender. Broccoli is blanched, then shocked when bright green and al dente. I make the sauce without using the recipe - after all, it has been less than 24 hours since the last time. I mash the plantains, and then add the grilled onions. Oops - they needed to be rough chopped and I put them in long and stringy. Jane's solution? Scissors. I spend 10 minutes snipping onions in a large rondeau already filled with plantains, cinnamon and cumin. Hey, it gets the job done. I'll remember that one for future use. Tomatoes in, I adjust the seasonings and let it simmer.

Next I grab fuyu persimmons and French butter pears for the colds station, slice up yellow finn potatoes for the stew, slice red and Peruvian purple potatoes for the sandwich side, which I toss with garlic oil and roast until a little crisp. I pull them out of the oven and set them aside until service. I set up my station, prep six of those decadent mushroom sandwiches, and prepare one cheese plate for evaluation. I look around for more to do.

Service starts and it is sloooooowww. I have six sandwiches just waiting to be ordered and can assemble the cheese plate in my sleep. This is not the same restaurant as yesterday. They cut a few servers loose to go home early. I take my break and spend 20 minutes talking to my fellow caterer back home, eating black bean chili and a piece of bread.

When I return to my station, I cut bell peppers and corn on the cob for brochettes. I have altered my technique so I can cut them more quickly and with less pain in my hand - kitchen towels are so versatile. I look around for more to do but the kitchen is unusually quiet. I ask Yolanda if I can leave a little early today, and she tells me I can go when Jane is back from break - it's 1:30.

So, after many goodbyes to the crew that has become so familiar, and a restaurant that I have finally learned my way around, I walk out the same

door I entered on Saturday. In some ways, I feel that I started as a kindergartener and left a college graduate - more confident, accomplished, valuable. I have learned so much in a short time that had I not been documenting each moment I may have forgotten too much too soon. I am eager to apply my newly acquired skills to my own business, enabling my clients to benefit whether as diners at one of my events or students in one of my classes. I have tasted, touched and plated more vegetables, sauces and grains in one week than in the last six months, reinforcing my original belief as written in my scholarship essay:

"Vegetables are not the afterthought, nor are they merely the garnish. As an intern at Greens, I hope to further develop my capabilities in the use of organic produce and the appropriate utilization of seasonal high-quality ingredients. I hope to learn new flavor combinations that dance on the palate and delight the eye, since "presentation" and "fine-dining" are not mutually exclusive terms.

I have been fortunate to learn techniques and procedures from wonderful and experienced chefs. To learn more about the creative art of vegetarian cuisine, I can think of no other place than Greens. Simply put, as a culinary educator and a chef, I am passionate about opening new doors for my students and my clients, opening their palates (and thus their minds) to healthful and fabulous flavors."

Mission accomplished!

Thank you all for sharing this journey with me.

Chef Laura Slama
October 2004