

Home > Magazine Archives > Apr. 30, 2010 Issue > People

The Phoenix and the French Laundry

Thomas Keller's rise from the ashes of failure to create America's greatest restaurant

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On a warm July evening in 1994, Thomas Keller threw open the doors to The French Laundry. It had taken him 19 months to raise the money to buy it, exponentially longer than he'd expected, during which time he constantly dreaded losing it. Some smart chef or real estate investor, he knew, could sweep in and snatch up the 19th-century building where he hoped to create a restaurant and find success at last.

He loved the building in Yountville, in the heart of Napa Valley. At various times in its life it had served as a saloon, a bordello, a residence and a steam laundry. Keller had big plans for it, imagining a great country restaurant in America like the French home of his culinary hero, Fernand Point.

But Keller had failed at his two prior assignments. Despite good reviews, his first restaurant, Rakel, in New York, had closed in 1990 after less than five years, deep in debt. (A lien for \$176,000 in unpaid sales taxes had nearly prevented him from getting a much-needed loan for the new restaurant.) Then, in 1992, Keller was fired from a job as executive chef at Checkers Hotel in Los Angeles.

He could not afford another failure, he believed, or no one would ever take a chance on him again. Flanked on the cooking line by only two talented younger chefs, Ron Siegel and Stephen Durfee, Keller was ready to prove his detractors wrong. But things did not begin well.

"The first night was a disaster," Keller recalls. "People were out in the dining room wondering if they would ever get their food.

I am amazed any of them came back."

"We were all caught off guard," says Siegel, now executive chef of The Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton in San Francisco. "We didn't have any sauté pans, which we discovered only after we started cooking. It was like doing a catering event and realizing, damn, I forgot to bring half the stuff we need."

"I didn't have a sense of what the menu was," admits Durfee, now chef-instructor for pastry at the Culinary Institute of America in St. Helena, Calif. "Thomas would call an order, and then he would have to come over and show me how to make it. We were inventing dishes as we went."

At evening's end, Siegel recalls, Keller collected scraps of polenta left from cutting out small disks of it to serve. He reheated them with some leftover veal and they all sat down to a late dinner. "We figured out what we did wrong, and the next night was fine," says Keller.

We all know how the story ends. The French Laundry eventually reached the absolute pinnacle of American restaurants. Today it ranks with the world's best. Reservations are notoriously hard to secure. Diners plan months in advance and pay \$250 to feast on a dozen courses or more of a refined cuisine based on classical French techniques and impeccably sourced American ingredients.

They come from far and wide for signature dishes such as miniature cornets of salmon tartare and crème fraîche, the whimsically titled "Oysters and Pearls" (a sabayon of pearl tapioca topped with a poached oyster and caviar) and "Mac and Cheese" (orzo in mascarpone topped with lobster). They can plunder a Wine Spectator Grand Award-winning wine cellar and luxuriate in service that seems magically choreographed.

At 54, Keller now presides over nine restaurants, including the similarly ambitious and equally admired Per Se in New York. But he's not all caviar and foie gras. On a half-mile stretch of Washington Street in Yountville today, a tour of Keller's multifaceted approach to dining would include stops for a morning croissant and latte at Bouchon

Bakery and a lunch of raw oysters and roast chicken at the bistro-inspired Bouchon before an evening-long dinner at the French Laundry. Or for something different, perhaps a four-course home-style American supper of fried chicken, pot roast or barbecue at Ad Hoc. Other Bouchons now grace Las Vegas and Beverly Hills. Vegas also has a Keller bakery, and there is a bakery-café down the hall from Per Se.

The chef has built a close-knit team along the way, and launched many chefs and sommeliers to top-flight careers (for a partial list, see "School of Thomas Keller," page TK). One person who has been with him since the early days of the French Laundry is Laura Cunningham. Born and raised in Napa Valley, she had worked at Stars in San Francisco before Keller hired her as assistant manager, promoting her shortly thereafter when the original manager left. She also caught Keller's eye romantically, and within a year they were a couple. Although she officially left the company in 2007, he's backing her plans for an Italian restaurant, Vita, under construction up the street in Yountville.

"We kept it quiet for a while," Cunningham says with a smile.

"I had issues with dating someone in the workplace, and certainly someone who was my boss. I didn't want it to tarnish my ability to excel at my job." Cunningham certainly did her job well. She took classes in accounting and human resources, and she picked the brain of every sommelier she could find, making the front of the house at French Laundry as impressive as the kitchen.

Although he will not divulge revenue figures, Keller says the nine operations in Thomas Keller Restaurant Group employ nearly 1,000 people and served 1.6 million meals in 2009. By any standard, it is an impressive culinary empire.

Standing 6'2", Keller appears rangy and athletic, but he speaks quietly and thoughtfully. He can charm with a warm smile or fix his expression into one of intense concentration. That focus can manifest in unexpected ways. Ordering coffee at the Four Seasons Hotel lounge in San Francisco, he specifies, "a double espresso, with just a little steamed milk, like a macchiato but without the foam." That attention to detail, knowing exactly what he wants, goes a long way to explain his success.

Keller did not set out to be a chef. He never attended culinary school or took a cooking class. He got work in kitchens when he could not as a carpenter. And when he did start cooking, he failed as often as he succeeded. But in retrospect, his early life story reveals a series of building blocks and turning points that inevitably aimed him toward what he became.

His father, a Marine sergeant, divorced his mother when Thomas, the youngest of the brothers, was 5 years old. His mother raised five children while managing restaurants to earn a living. "She made me understand the importance of discipline, and an appreciation for aesthetics," says Keller.

After the divorce, they moved from Southern California to southern Maryland, and later to Palm Beach, Fla., where Keller peeled vegetables and washed dishes in restaurants his mother ran. A series of jobs in local restaurants followed, but "at that time it wasn't about cooking," he says. "It was how I could earn some money. And maybe meet girls."

Just out of high school, he got a job cooking at the Palm Beach Yacht Club. His brother Joseph, 18 months older and already cooking professionally, taught him to boil a lobster, roast prime rib and make hollandaise sauce. Thomas then spent two summers in Newport, R.I., where he first tasted French cuisine. Fired from the second-year's position, he got work at the Dunes Club cooking staff meals.

Unlike cooking for unseen guests behind a kitchen wall, he now had an audience, and the chefs told him exactly how well he did. "There they are, they're talking to me, saying that's good today, that sucks. The feedback made me elevate the quality of the family meal for them. And the appreciation for that was meaningful.

"That's where I learned what cooks actually do," Keller notes. "We nurture people, we nourish them. I thought, what's more honorable than that?"

The chef at the Dunes was Frenchman Roland Henin, who became Keller's mentor. Henin extolled the famous French chefs, and sent his young protégé back home to Florida with copies of *The Great Chefs of France* and Fernand Point's *Ma Gastronomie* under his arm. "He taught me that what they accomplished was not about a career. It's about their desire. It's about that commitment to what they do."

Back in Florida, enamored with the elevated French cuisine in the books, Keller hired on to open his first serious restaurant. The Cobbley Nob got positive reviews, but it failed. "Of course we went out of business," he says, "because we tried to be too fancy, too upscale for Palm Beach in 1978."

The next job worked out better. He spent three summers in the Catskills cooking at a small inn called La Rive, where he was the only one in the kitchen. Winters, he cooked at Maurice, the French restaurant in the Parker Meridien hotel in New York, where he encountered the top echelon of chefs. The renowned Alain Senderens was the consultant, Christian Delouvrier was the chef and Daniel Boulud the sous.

Wanting to travel to France and apprentice at some of the great restaurants, Keller asked this glittering crew how he should do it. "They're all saying, just go, start knocking on doors," Keller recalls. "Not me. I had to have a job lined up." He got one in a small inn in Arbois, in the remote, mountainous Jura region. The job involved bringing in coal for the stoves at 5 a.m., but no serious cooking. He lasted three days.

In Paris, he got on the telephone, sent letters and knocked on doors, looking for someone who would take him on as an apprentice. "The responses came back, no, no, no," he recalls. "I still have all those letters from all those chefs." Then he got a tip that a young chef from Connecticut would not be coming for his stage at Taillevent, the grand restaurant with three Michelin stars at the time. Pretending to be from Taillevent, he phoned the prospective apprentice to confirm, and raced over to apply for the vacant spot. He got it, spent three months there and then eight more months in Paris at Le Pré Catelan, Chiberta and five other restaurants.

"It was probably a great thing I didn't go earlier," he notes thoughtfully. "The younger guys were overwhelmed. But I didn't have to go to France to learn how to make a stock, how to make a sauce. I could focus on the details. I could see that it was the products that made the difference. Taillevent bought its asparagus from one farm exclusively. Another restaurant, which got its asparagus at the market, was good but not as good as Taillevent."

Skills he picked up in France immediately gave him a leg up back in New York. In 1984, as chef at La Reserve, he earned a reputation for his fresh foie gras torchon, something he learned to make at Taillevent. "[Purveyor] Ariane Daguin came in with the first American-grown fresh foie gras," he recalls, "and I knew what to do with them." But after 14 months, La Reserve fired him. "I deserved it," Keller admits. "I was arrogant."

At Restaurant Raphael, where he worked next, he reconnected with Serge Raoul, who had met Keller at Maurice. They partnered on a new restaurant, called Rakel. It was a good restaurant, but not a world beater. It closed in 1990, after a run of less than five years. "We didn't have a strong manager," Keller says, "and financially we were lost."

Bill Wilkinson, who owned the Campton Place hotel in San Francisco, knew Keller from the New York food scene and hired him to open Checkers, a sister hotel in Los Angeles. That gig didn't last long, either. Wilkinson sold the hotel six months after Keller got there, and the new owners had no interest in developing a star chef.

"I am grateful they fired me," Keller says now. "If they hadn't, I wouldn't be here today."

One good thing to come out of the Checkers experience was Keller's first signature dish, the salmon cornets, created for the opening party. The light went on when he ordered a cone in a Baskin-Robbins ice cream shop, and saw it sitting upright in its chrome frame. Says Keller, "I immediately visualized a scoop of tartare on a little cone made like a tuile, served in a Lucite frame."

Eighteen years into his career, Keller had enjoyed some brief successes and suffered a series of failures. Reflecting on his path, he wanted his next restaurant to be something different. He imagined a place in the

country, close to the farms, like Fernand Point's great La Pyramide in Vienne, France, where refined food, fine wine and elegant service could flourish in relaxed surroundings.

Before Napa Valley became a megadestination for wine and food, Don and Sally Schmitt had converted an old stone building in Yountville into a restaurant. Don, the mayor of Yountville, hosted. Sally cooked in the tiny kitchen. From the day they opened in 1978, they served a fixed menu of good, home-style dishes that changed every night. They called it The French Laundry because a French family had once operated a steam laundry there, and that's what everyone in town called the building anyway.

Hearing on a visit to Napa Valley that it was for sale, Keller drove past. It was closed, but he and his girlfriend at the time walked around the property, peering through the windows. He saw possibilities. The Schmitts wanted \$1.2 million. Keller signed.

Then came the hard part, raising the money. The bank refused his application for a loan because of the sales tax lien left over from Rakel, but eventually Raoul paid it off, clearing the way. The next challenge was to convince enough investors to back a chef who had failed more often than he'd succeeded.

He showed two friends a 12-page memo describing what he wanted the French Laundry to be. One, whom Keller will not identify, patiently explained 10 ways it could fail. The other, vintner Bob Long, who was in real estate before starting Long Vineyards, thought it looked promising. Keller wrote a 300-page business proposal, maxed out his credit cards and drained his checking account to pay for the legal documents he needed.

"I woke up every morning in a cold sweat," he shudders. "I was cold-calling for investors, which I hated, getting people to come up weekends for an open house. We would do a slide show, I would make my cornets, Bob Long would donate some wine." Meanwhile, Keller earned what he could cooking private dinners in Los Angeles and peddling imported olive oil.

It took 19 months to get a bank loan, a Small Business Administration loan and 51 investors to pay the Schmitts, do some basic renovations to the restaurant, buy some equipment, and get it open. After that rocky opening night, this time everything worked. The reviews were ecstatic. Foodies filled the tables.

The tipping point came in early 1995. In those days virtually everyone in the Bay Area read San Francisco Chronicle columnist Herb Caen. His two-paragraph review, which followed an item on cabbies using dog whistles to scare off deer, rhapsodized over the food and Keller's clever names, pronounced him "a no-nonsense guy," and concluded: "The Guide Michelin awards three stars, its ultimate accolade, for 'worth a special trip.' Keller gets five from me. But phone first."

Keller remembers the aftermath of that mention as having "the single biggest impact on our business of anything anyone has ever written about me." As usual, Caen not only got it right but revealed a certain prescience. When Michelin finally published a guidebook to San Francisco and environs in 2006, French Laundry was the only one of 330 restaurants in the book to be awarded three stars. And it's still next to impossible to get a reservation. Phone ahead indeed.

Isolating what makes Keller's cuisine special poses a puzzle. Is it nothing more than classic French cuisine with American ingredients? Then how to explain innovative dishes such as Oysters and Pearls? You won't find savory pearl tapioca with mollusks and caviar in Escoffier. Nor does any French gastronomy tome list "Knuckle Sandwich," a miniature brioche filled with the nugget of lobster meat from the part next to the claw, dressed with an herb salad. More recently, "Scharfe Maxx" offers a witty answer to the ubiquitous pork-belly-as-main-dish trend, combining braised Hobbs' bacon, roasted romaine lettuce and tomato compote for a nonsandwich BLT.

But while an earthy sense of humor and a penchant for word play inform the French Laundry's menu, and to a lesser extent Per Se's, there's nothing slapstick or slapdash about the food. Impeccably sourced, deftly executed, it vibrates with flavor and always feels elegant. The same can be said of the traditional French bistro dishes at Bouchon, the pastries and breads at the Bakery and the fried chicken at Ad Hoc.

"We tend to overanalyze cooking, make it more than it is, and people can become intimidated by it," Keller asserts. "At whatever level, it's product and execution. French Laundry is fine dining, personality cuisine. Bouchon is a cuisine of heritage and culture. Ad Hoc is simple, approachable. We call it family dining.

"Execution is about individual skills, the team skills. The tools, whether it's the knives, the cutting boards, the sauté pans, the blenders or the stoves. The French Laundry is a complex facility. It has all the equipment you can possibly need to make whatever we want to produce, and a high level of skills. It has suppliers, products from all over the world, and we grow our own products.

"At Ad Hoc, we have five people in the kitchen. The standards are the same. The difference is style."

Keller's approach at French Laundry and Per Se relies on his theory of diminishing returns. He believes that the first taste of something has the "wow" factor, and after a few more bites, that's gone. "We want you to say, 'I wish I had one more bite of that,' and then the next plate arrives and the same thing happens, but in a different way, a whole new flavor and emotion."

Expanding on his classical French roots, Keller borrows ideas from Japanese cuisine, occasionally serving richly marbled slices of bluefin toro sashimi on hand-carved wooden boards. He embraces sous-vide cooking, which seals food in plastic pouches and cooks them at precise temperatures. Although his chefs freely adopt some of the techniques of the so-called molecular cuisine, such as foams and seaweed-based thickeners, Keller has reservations about this approach to cooking.

"My food is not intellectual, it's emotional," he says. "I want to touch someone, serve a carrot right out of the garden that is so sweet. Or glaze an onion perfectly to where there's no resistance to it but it's still intact, and you get the sweetness and the saltiness."

The French Laundry grows vegetables in its own 3-acre garden across the street, and takes all the fruit from Jacobsen Orchard, about half a mile away. That's one reason the food can taste so pure.

But although a significant portion of the food at Keller's restaurants comes from local farms, his menus often specify sources thousands of miles away. He happily encourages farmers, ranchers, fishermen and cheesemakers across the country who he believes can do things better and more sustainably, even though he knows it increases his carbon footprint.

"To me, it's not about geography, it's about quality and freshness. Yes, Keith Martin's lamb flies [from Pennsylvania] to us in New York, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Yountville once a week. And yes, Ingrid Bengis' lobsters fly from Maine, five days a week. We get our butter from Diane Sinclair in Vermont in both New York and Yountville.

"But if I stopped supporting those suppliers, what would happen? What about their sustainability? I look at Keith Martin and the protocols he has developed to raise livestock, and he's involved eight other farmers in his area. He's about how we can improve the quality of our livestock not as a finished product but as an animal and giving that animal the best possible living conditions. So, I am willing to balance the fact that I ship it once or twice a week against what would happen if we lose that person."

Keller's culinary approach is notable for its affinity for wine. Flavors avoid spiky or bold notes, aiming for clarity and focus. Keller likes the same characteristics in wine.

Although he has plenty of Bordeaux and Rhône wines, a significant portion of his personal 2,400-bottle cellar is devoted to Zinfandel. He likes the honesty and directness of Zinfandel, and the variety of expressions it can display from different parts of California. At Rakel in 1986 he met Paul Draper of Ridge Vineyards, and as much as he loved the winery's signature bottling, Monte Bello, he could not afford to buy it. So he got on Ridge's advance tasting list and homed in on the Zinfandels.

"Lately I have been enjoying Brunello di Montalcino," Keller says. When the Brunello Consorzio gave Per Se an award, part of the prize was 20 cases of 2000 and 2001 bottlings from different producers. "I fell in love with them."

Although Keller enjoys wine, he does not study it. "Often we just drank whatever was left over at the restaurant, which is a great way to expose yourself to different wines. My palate for wine is the same as my ears to music. I like variety." His new favorite is Pinot Noir. "Laura loves Pinot and we drink a lot of them."

"I look at wine as another way to share the experience of the table," he says. "It's part of the equation."

As such, he would rather not plow through a long wine list to find the wine he wants at a restaurant. He thinks of a big list as "a pissing contest." Too often, he sighs, it's about several wine aficionados at a table dueling over who can order the most impressive wine. "When I go out to dinner now," he adds, "I let the sommelier choose something for me. I always want to try something new."

Yet he understands why a restaurant as luxurious as French Laundry or Per Se should have a deep cellar. In the early days, when Cunningham served as both manager and sommelier, she focused the list mostly on collectible California wines. Although that made sense for a destination restaurant in Napa Valley, she says, "We needed to start building an all-world wine list to keep up with what the kitchen could do."

The list grew significantly under the restaurant's first full-time sommelier, Bobby Stuckey, who came to Napa in 2000 fresh from winning a Wine Spectator Grand Award at The Little Nell in Aspen, Colo. Then Paul Roberts was lured away from the Award of Excellence-winning Café Annie in Houston in 2003. By then, French Laundry was established as a great restaurant, but it still lacked the breadth and depth in the cellar that would put the wine list on the same level as the food. At the same time, Keller was about to open Per Se in New York and another, much larger version of Bouchon in Las Vegas.

"We had Marcassin and Harlan. But our guests also wanted to drink Pétrus, Sassicaia, DRC, the great wines of the world," says Roberts. "I told Thomas that yes, we should have a California focus to the French Laundry, but we were going to need the great European wines in New York. And if we opened up the French Laundry to Europe, we could have something great."

When French Laundry closed for a major renovation in 2004, Keller and Roberts added significant extra storage and beefed up the list. The restaurant earned a Grand Award in 2007.

Originally, Keller had no plans to expand beyond the French Laundry. But in 1998, a restaurant down the block became available. "Ron [Siegel], Stephen [Durfee] and I had no place to go late at night," he explains. "Nothing was open in Yountville. We wanted to eat oysters and drink wine late after we finished our work."

In partnership with his brother Joseph and 28 of the original investors in the French Laundry, Keller made Bouchon (French for wine cork, a common term for bistros in Lyon) into a traditional French bistro, with a menu of quiche, salads and roast chicken. New York-based restaurant architect Adam Tihany designed it, the first of a series of spaces he has built for Keller. It also offered wines by the carafe, a program that continues to this day, selecting local wines specially blended for Bouchon. And it stays open late.

Joseph left after two years to open his own restaurants in Las Vegas (now closed). Later, Bouchon added a bakery to produce bread for both restaurants, and a storefront to sell to the public, an idea Keller has repeated in Las Vegas and New York.

Several friends in the Las Vegas food and wine scene had been urging Keller to get involved there for a while. He and Daniel Boulud, who had become a star in his own right in the years since the two had met at Maurice, approached hotelier Steve Wynn before his Bellagio opened in 1998 about doing all the restaurants there, but Wynn decided to recruit star chefs on his own. (Boulud eventually partnered with Wynn for a restaurant in the hotelier's self-named hotel. Daniel Boulud Brasserie opened in 2005 and closes this month.)

A full-scale Las Vegas Bouchon opened at The Venetian in 2004. "I loved the location," says Keller. "It wasn't near a casino. It had that beautiful courtyard. It was more like a freestanding restaurant. I felt we could be different from most of the other restaurants in Las Vegas." Last November, just short of five years later, a third Bouchon opened, this one in Beverly Hills in a new building a block up the street from Spago. Keller admits that part of the impetus for it was to exorcise the ghost of Checkers.

The bigger demons, though, involved the failed Raket. So when the group behind the new Time Warner Center in New York approached Keller to partner with them on a restaurant there, he realized that it could mean a triumphant return. Despite a kitchen fire that closed the restaurant for several weeks shortly after it opened in February 2004, Per Se became an immediate success, and now ranks among the top tables in New York.

In 2006, a building in Yountville that had long housed a diner came up for sale. For years, Keller had wanted to do a burger bar somewhere, and this spot seemed perfect. He bought it, and while planning the burger bar, installed a temporary restaurant serving home-style American food on a prix fixe basis. He called it Ad Hoc. But Ad Hoc was a hit from day one, and the burger bar idea has been shelved.

Ad Hoc at Home, a cookbook based on the restaurant's family-style, home-kitchen recipes, came out late last year. (For a menu based on these recipes, see "Simply Delicious," beginning on page 59.) It was Keller's fourth book, and his fourth best-seller, all of them written by Susie Heller and Michael Ruhlman (Amy Vogler joined the team with the second publication). The first, *The French Laundry Cookbook* (1999), detailed the popular but complex dishes from the restaurant. Though it carried Keller's byline, *Bouchon* (2004) featured classic interpretations of French standbys from Bouchon's then-chef Jeffrey Cerciello. The other book, *Under Pressure* (2008), delves into sous-vide cooking, and is aimed at professionals. The recipes in Ad Hoc are those of Dave Cruz, the chef there.

Keller at first resisted doing more books after the first one. "The French Laundry Cookbook is truly my book, although I had a great team around me," he explains. "When it was a success, the publisher said, let's do a sequel. At first I said no, then I thought maybe I was being irresponsible. Susie wanted to write another book. And I realized, just because I didn't want to do something, that's no reason to turn it down."

Cerciello had been the chef at Bouchon in Yountville since it opened, and Keller wondered, "'Why can't it be Jeffrey's book?' We had a whole team that had written a successful book that could do it with him." The sous-vide book that followed was by Jonathan Benno, then chef at Per Se, who convinced Keller that they had to be the ones who wrote the definitive book on the subject.

Keller's other enterprises are also collaborations. The knives by MAC and the signature dinnerware by Raynaud and Christofle were all designed for his restaurants to his specifications; those manufacturers then wanted to market to the public. For a while, he and Cunningham made a small quantity of Cabernet Sauvignon-based Napa Valley wine called Modicum, priced at \$200 a bottle in the restaurants.

"Without the team there is no Thomas Keller, and I am extraordinarily proud of it," he adds. "My restaurants don't have my name on them for a reason. Because it's not about me."

Keller has achieved what he has in part because he is a brilliant cook, but even more importantly because he realized that he had to sublimate his ego to succeed.

"I am not the star. The team is the star," he says. "Joe Montana could be the best quarterback ever, but he was nothing without an offensive line and receivers to throw to."

He has created a culture in his restaurants that not only values teamwork but finds and nurtures talent. That, as much as anything, has made it possible for Keller to step aside from his various kitchens and pass the torch to others. He likes to quote 84-year-old Paul Bocuse, the iconic French chef who enjoyed traveling. "I respond the same way he did when he was asked who was cooking in his restaurant when he wasn't there," Keller says with a sly smile. "He would say, 'The same people who cook when I am there.'"

Many of those cooks and chefs have gone on to make great careers in other restaurants and organizations (a selective roster appears on page TK). Aside from Siegel, among the most prominent are Grant Achatz of Alinea in Chicago, Chris L'Hommedieu of Michael Mina in San Francisco, Lachlan Mackinnon-Patterson of Frasca Food and Wine in Boulder, Colo., Gregory Short of Masa's in San Francisco and Eric Ziebold of CityZen restaurant in Washington, D.C., all as chefs or chef-owners.

"Thomas was a huge influence on me as a chef and as a person," says Ziebold, first to hold the title of sous chef at French Laundry, when he was there in the mid-to-late 1990s with Achatz and Short. "Thomas was not a yelling and screaming kind of guy. I'm not either. He taught me to put a big emphasis on responsibility. Creating a team is not something every [chef] does well. For Thomas, it means knowing what you need to do, and what the next guy needs to do, and stepping in to help without getting in the way."

Keller's former colleagues paint a picture of a chef who led by example. Those who were with him during the French Laundry's early years recall a hard-working, intensely focused chef who seldom lost his cool.

"I got to see him in the weeds," recalls Durfee, "terribly in the weeds." It's an expression restaurant workers use when they are swamped and hopelessly behind. "He was like a quarterback scrambling out of the pocket to throw a touchdown pass, every time. That was inspirational."

"One thing that really stuck with me," adds Siegel, "was his ability to remain calm and rational, not freak out about things. He was never abusive. And he was interested in us personally. People loved him. He has a lot of loyal followers."

One reason for that is how he treats the chefs working in his kitchens: as collaborators, even to the point of involving all the key players in creating new dishes and new menus. In the beginning, French Laundry offered four or five options for each course in three different menus, and Keller realized that dictating the menu was impossible.

"I needed to have that collaboration," he says. "That made it part of what we did." At first it was just Keller, Siegel and Durfee, meeting after service to pencil in the next day's menu. As the kitchen staff grew, it included the sous chef and chefs de partie. Someone would suggest a new dish, an idea to use a just-arrived ingredient, and the team would refine it.

The expansion restaurants have provided opportunities to promote talent from within. "The kid that's coming in the back door who is the commis today, as you watch their skills increase, their drive, their desires, they move up," notes Keller. "They become the next generation. I know they're not going to stay in one place forever."

That applies right up the line. Even as expansion of the restaurant empire created new opportunities for chefs to move up, Keller did not want to diminish the quality of one restaurant to open another. "That's why it takes 18 months to two years to identify and train the replacement, or find the right somebody new," he says. "Part of every chef and department head's job is to identify a replacement, and train him or her."

When Bouchon in Beverly Hills opened last year, Rory Herrmann, the private dining chef at Per Se, got the chef de cuisine assignment. When Corey Lee left French Laundry in 2009, sous chef Timothy Hollingsworth moved up to chef de cuisine. Benno left French Laundry to work in a series of New York restaurants, but returned to the group to open Per Se as chef de cuisine. When Benno left in January to helm a new restaurant in New York's Lincoln Center, sous chef Eli Kaimeh stepped up. By all accounts, neither kitchen missed a beat.

Keller no longer cooks in his kitchens. He trusts the chefs to run things the way he would. He counts on the desire of each member of the team to push their talents as high as they can. "Everyone takes ownership of their restaurant, every chef, every dining room manager, every sommelier," Keller asserts. "They know that what they do has a meaningful impact both in their own department and for the restaurant as a whole."

"That's what allowed me to do Per Se in New York with a sense of confidence that with the right team in place we would be able to execute at the same level of quality that we did at French Laundry. It's because of that culture and collaboration."

If his days of quarterbacking a line of hard-working cooks in real time are over, Keller has managed to accomplish something rare: Despite the nine restaurants, four cookbooks and various culinary products, he has maintained and even enhanced the reputation of his original restaurant.

Does he miss the adrenaline rush of the kitchen? "I'm getting too old for that," he laughs ruefully. "Yes, I miss it, but I stay away from my restaurants' kitchens. Maybe I need to be there to inoculate a new team, underline the positives, correct the negatives. What I do today is to give people the opportunities."

He goes one step further than Bocuse, who shrugged off criticism by noting, accurately, that the same people were cooking in his kitchen whether he was there or not. Says Keller, "If my presence is needed, I haven't done my job."

Making Movies Delicious

At the climax of the 2007 animated film *Ratatouille*, the hero, a talented rat named Remy, impresses a tough restaurant critic by cooking him a transcendental rendering of the classic French vegetable dish. The *ratatouille* you see on the screen is Thomas Keller's preparation.

The animators at Pixar asked Keller to make an elegant version of the dish for their cameras, so they could have something to work with. He knew exactly what he would make: *Confit Byaldi*, a version of traditional *ratatouille* made from the same zucchini, tomato and eggplant but sliced thinly and arranged in neat rows.

At Keller's house in Yountville, Calif., the crew set their two cameras rolling. "And I [had] no idea how I [was] going to plate it," Keller admits. "In the restaurant, it was never the main element on the plate. I pick up one row, and it starts to coil in on itself. At that moment, just before I put it on the plate, it came to me."

The final dish, spiraling around itself, made audiences gasp and an animated critic swoon.

The Bay Area-based Pixar had contacted Keller to teach their writers and animators how a French kitchen works. He let them film in the kitchen at The French Laundry, something they had already done at *Guy Savoy* in Paris. "But we were closer, so they could contact us to answer any questions," Keller recalls.

It wasn't the first time Keller had consulted on a Hollywood film. For the 2004 romantic comedy *Spanglish*, director James Brooks needed a real chef to advise him on the script, and work with actor Adam Sandler on how to portray a star chef. That opportunity came after Brooks flew the cast of his previous film, *As Good As It Gets*, to Napa Valley for a pre-Oscar dinner at French Laundry.

"We became friendly, and over the next three years, he's coming up and he's talking about this next movie," says Keller. "He asked if I would help him with the food side of it."

One night Brooks called just before midnight, in the midst of writing a scene about the chef making a great original sandwich. Keller was in the kitchen about to meet with his chefs and discuss the next day's menu. "I asked all the chefs what they make when they go home," Keller recalls. "[Eric] Ziebold says a BLT. One guy says fried egg, another guy says ham." In the end they suggested a massive sandwich using all three. It's in the movie, and it makes your mouth water.

French Laundry is absolutely spectacular. The French cuisine is both beautiful and delicious. The wine list is incredible, and the sommelier is truly a gem. Be prepared for very rich food. Wow, what an experience! The French Laundry is absolutely something to be experienced, as I feel no words can do it justice. The service was impeccable and the food was phenomenal. A must try! The French Laundry. Bouchon Bistro. Bouchon Bakery. When the French Laundry opened in 1994, its menu cost \$44 for four courses and \$49 for five. Since then I've visited chef-owner Thomas Keller's restaurant each year, following the progression of the food and the surroundings. Over the last 24 years, the restaurant has evolved from one with a beautifully rendered but comparatively modest menu into the Bay Area's first Michelin three-star restaurant, awarded when the guide first published its Bay Area list in 2006. Today, the 12-plus courses will cost you \$310 (including service charges). But the most recent dramatic development is in the restau