

The Skenes Scheme

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Just like a baby born outside the sacred bond of marriage, the article you are reading is also a “love child”.

At the end of a long, troubled pregnancy, it nearly did not see light due to a forced miscarriage that followed a collective email sent to all members of the dysfunctional GELINAZ! family; involuntary accomplices of a failed conception.

Danny Bowien’s tone in New York was final. “The language used in chef Skenes’ email is unacceptable. I will no longer be participating in this. Andrea, call me. “The Accused? San Franciscan Joshua Skenes, star of the Saison restaurant. Charged with and guilty of a racist slip of the tongue when sending the names (intitule) of the four dishes created with Bowien for the sold-out WALK WITH US performance scheduled to take place in San Francisco the following week. Skenes word play had been poorly received “Duck egg with chong-ching condiments”. Scandal and disgrace in the cradle of Political Correctness.

Everyone took a stand: “I’m with Danny. Not ok”, stated Daniel Patterson. As if to say, the whole operation and months of preparation were going down the drain. The typographical excuses invoked by Joshua Skenes were basically worthless: “Sorry Danny, Chong Ching the city, man. I would hope you know me well enough to know it was a typo”. Results would have been slightly more convincing if he had sued Apple for the iPhone 6plus treacherous keyboard (with the cursed spell-check that always gets in the way). Faced with Bowien’s angry silence, even Skenes’ autobiographical plea did not reap full consensus. As when he asked, for example, if racists like he were all married with a Chinese girl. “Interestingly enough, I was driving while dictating to my wife while she transcribed. Even more interesting is that my wife is Chinese; and I really doubt she would purposely write something demeaning to her own heritage”. It was only thanks to the intercession of journalist Tien Lon, an expert of the most remote areas of China that the situation returned to the pre-storm phase. In her words, “having traveled extensively in this area and covered it as well, I just wanted to note the spelling should be Chongqing, should this go on your program”. Chongqing as the city of “Chungking Express” directed by Wong Kar-Wai. Only after Tien Lon’s intervention did Danny Bowien finally respond with a terse part peace-offering message “Sounds like an honest mistake. Talk soon”. Sigh of relief. Only then to witness the two fool-around-like brothers on the day of the performance. Danny Bowien had the last word before the epilogue of the introduction: “If you ask David Chang, maybe he will not respond officially. In private, however, he will tell you that according to him Joshua is undoubtedly the best American Chef”.

The Skenes mystery. When making his entrance in tennis shoes, XXL sweatshirt and basketball cap worn backwards, you would never have believed that Skenes is a three-star chef. He has heavy accent, half-white boy half 'redneck with backhanding hands and abrupt gestures. Not the hands one would think well suited to make delicate creations of wild leaves and vegetables. Creations displayed on glossy magazines and blogs aimed at the few lucky ones who managed to find a seat at his eternally sold-out Saison before us. If you do not believe us, ask the executive chef at Mission Chinese Angela Dimayuga and ask David Zilber, chef at Noma, exceptional photographer and lecturer at a conference for mega-brains with whom he broke bread that evening. In this case, no less than 500 grams of caviar for three simply to flavor a web-like flan in pure Japanese style. "What they told me about Danny & Chang is really true," says Angie, the voice of truth. "Skenes plays at the highest level between the cream of luxury and that of naturalness". In his kitchen, Skenes uses only products from his two vegetable gardens hidden from public view in the California's hills, one in Marin, the other just above Sonoma. And, also, the meat and fish he unearths during his morning outings. This confirms Saisons website's unyielding statement. Yes there is a Tasting menu (22 courses, \$ 395 plus wine, tax and tip) but, be careful! prices vary greatly depending on what the season offers. So, if daredevils rush in, dressed in their Sunday best, to Saison when white truffles disappear like hotcakes, the most cunning customers ask instead how the rattlesnakes are faring this year.

This is no joke: "Live from right outside my home, I shot it yesterday morning! Look at this almost two-meter long beautiful rattlesnake" says Joshua scrolling through the pictures on his iPhone. You can see Joshua immortalized with his arm extended holding the Diamondback, far more heinous for Ophidiophobics in the snapshot than when served up in the delicious dish. A Japanese-like perfectly lacquered plate where the rattlesnake looks like a want-to be transgender eel. Will the day ever come when Michelin inspectors put the Rattlesnake on the list of delicious products that should always be present in a three-star menu next to the lobster, foie gras and pigeons?

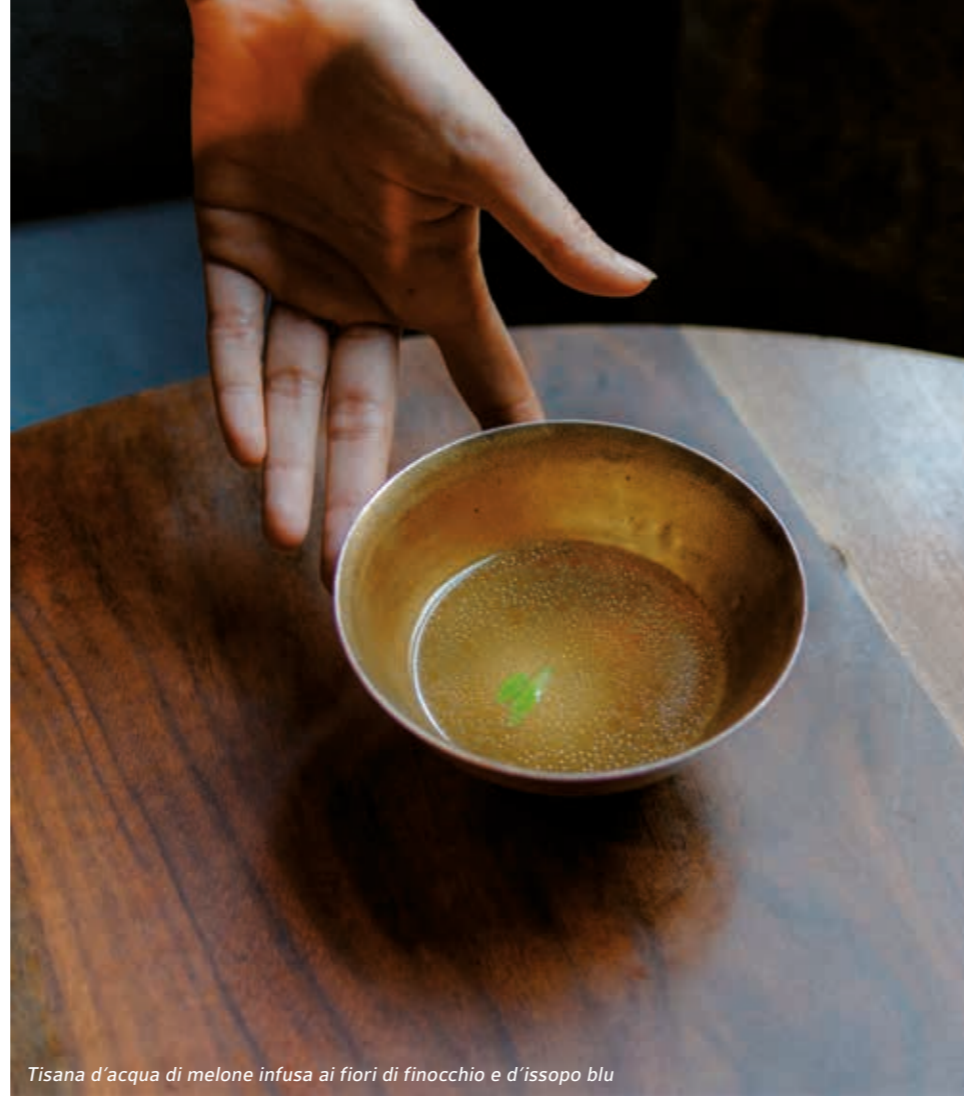
Rattlesnakes aside, the fundamental interest of Saison lies not only in the ethereal opulence of its dishes. Not so much in the huge, unbridgeable gap between an extreme localism and imaginary Japanese-like attitude but rather in Joshua's way of being. "Except for a single trip to China and Egypt for my honeymoon, I have never left the United States. I know nothing of Europe, I have never been to London, nor Paris nor Barcelona or Copenhagen", he vows. Saison is a great restaurant with many luxuries but zero frills, with a cuisine that is softer than clouds of exogenous inspiration. Targeted to the urban hip San Francisco clientele, the reflection of the anthropological mutation of a city that has been deserted by those of more modest means like you and me to make room for the movers-&-shakers migration to the new mecca of Silicon Valley. The upwardly mobile foody executives and developers of Apple, Facebook, Twitter and Uber have elected Saison as their daily canteen.



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Cetriolo di mare con il suo dashi di verdure e chips di pelle di pesce



Tisana d'acqua di melone infusa ai fiori di finocchio e d'issopo blu



It is a question of transparency. The service adopts the barely formalized principles of cool, in total harmony with the open stage of all the tables arranged around the kitchen, with no separation. Operation blocks (the fridge, the fish), the patisserie table and the fire range that sets the tone. One is struck by the theatricality here more than during a live concert from the center stage to the satellite stations, from the exactness of gestures and the harmony between actors. There are no walk-ons; all follow the same choreography painstakingly detailed in its flow and intensity. It is a living ritual but not improvised as in Living Theatre. There is a moment of epiphany that nails stunned customers to their role of Apollonian spectators. Once the last desserts have been served, the cleaning frenzy begins. There are those who wash the floor, those who clean the oven, those who climb to the top of refrigerators, standing on the furniture and reaching into the cupboards, right, left, up, all the way up to the ceiling - in a physical conquest of space. Space parceled out in segments, with each person carrying out consubstantial and independent activities that can evoke the visual drama of certain works of Flemish director Jan Fabre. Or, in a more cinematic style, the multiplication of the focal points of the most beautiful films by Taiwanese Hou Hsiao-hsien. All that is missing is the bursting of spontaneous applause. Immediately silenced by the director himself, who refutes the interpretation.

"It is not about being theatrical," says Joshua Skenes. "If anything, we strive to obtain exactly the opposite: naturalness. We started from the common desire of - how can I say it? - subtraction. Eliminating everything that is superfluous to rediscover through the tribalism of living together that which we felt was essential, doubling the pleasure by being a group. I do not care much for minimalism itself, if not in the manner of some Japanese restaurants that at first glance seem bare-boned, empty, and under-decorated when in fact everything is calibrated to highlight its essentiality. Here at Saison, the first thing to go was the wall, the one that always isolates the dining room from the kitchen. Once the imprisonment of separation had ended, all sensations are heightened by the heat, the smells and the sounds of cooking. Our goal is absolute pleasure. Everything else is superfluous. Digression does not interest me. If anything, I aspire to be head-on. I seek contact, I seek touch. The familiarity with the best raw ingredients and the sensuality of plates, cups and bowls designed just for us, all created with the most exclusive craftsmanship".

In the words of an esthete born in 1979, who for years gave nothing to the kitchen. Joshua for many years has made a career if anything playing on his muscle mass. A champion in martial arts since the age of six, until his 25th birthday he seemed destined to follow his father's example, becoming a professor of the noble combat. He knew little or nothing of kitchens, "I liked being in contact with the ingredients, enjoyed team work, but at the beginning, when I was still a teenager, I saw it as a way to make some pocket money. Then one thing led to another, but I was still undecided. So at one point I abandoned the cooking range completely. Mainly, because working in the kitchen was not compatible with the many hours that I had to devote to my training. Then one day, at the end of the last decade, my future business partner asked me to launch a pop-up in the city,

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Pim Techamuanvivit
chef at the Kin Khao Thai restaurant



exactly at the worst time to open a restaurant. It was at the time of the climax of the subprime crisis, the recession was bursting through the doors”

A victim of his own success, Joshua’s rise was dazzling. Although he is quick to point out that, the first version of Saison housed in a temporary space in the Mission District, was not even a prototype. “The cooking area was outside of the building! For me Saison was born on the first day when we entered here. We are still in the gestation and learning phase. Perfection is our ultimate goal and we are all still learning every day”.

Few people actually know Joshua. Skenes is certainly shy. He does not mix in professional circles. Although he could wear the gentlemen’s pin linked to the luxurious Relais & Chateaux of which he is an honorary member, you are more likely to meet him on the street or at work wearing his sockless Vans than with polished patent leather Gucci shoes. As the saying goes, come as you are. Here is Joshua walking around town with a made to measure hunting knife in plain view hanging from his pants. Or he might freeze everyone in the middle of the GELINAZ! performance by brandishing a one and a half meter axe: that certainly instilled respect, to use a euphemism. “If you do not know him well, he may seem weird, strange. Moreover, he certainly does not make any effort to be friendly. Quite the contrary,” states Pim Techamuanvivit, the talented San Francisco chef at the Kin Khao Thai restaurant. Some people show up in the kitchen only rarely. Not him. He smiles at the memory of the ready-to-use axe that flabbergasted many - a fleeting cold smile that can compete with that of Christian Bale playing Patrick Bateman in “American Psycho”.

Joshua Skenes is a ruthless killer in front of the Eternal Father in his own way. As for example, when he is conceiving the 22 steps of his menu, which in other circumstances might be similar to an interminable Way of the Cross. A tension & release of waves of sensations, surprises and rational insights. The herbal tea of melon infused with fennel flowers and blue hyssop seamlessly reinterprets the “Tea and Sympathy” by Vincente Minnelli offering a counterpoint to a chalice of vintage Krug. Both perfectly complement the sashimi lobster with silky wasabi with pincers cooked in miso sauce and pure meat jus concentrate. The turnip cooked in clarified butter maintains a marvelous crisp acidity. A perfect introduction to the rarefied intensity of grilled Sea Cucumber served with a vegetable dashi and fish skin chips. Halfway through the journey there is nothing to prepare you for an instant classic that Quincy Jones would have liked to place on the First Place Billboard until the eve of retirement. The Food Porn of the decade is this Tartelette in full identity morphing: façon pain perdu lightly caramelized bread literally covered with slivers of Californian sea urchins, more than meaty and sweet enough to express a subtle sense of salinity. The tautological doubling of the glazed effect with a liminal semblance of jus de volaille providing the coup de grace. The most addictive plate since the times of Ulysses when he had to bind himself to the mast to withstand the temptations of the sirens (and for us, after the encore, the temptation of third portions).



Indeed, nothing could prepare the customer for the following triptych - a surprise of surprises - on a bed of leaves and red petals, crudités on crudités. A bed of meat tartare (Lamb? Ram?) topped with a just hint of cream. Then comes the second dish, rosé Tournedos in their jus, with just a refreshing hint of chili to take away the initial greasy feeling in the mouth. Never two without three: but what meat is it? Conjectures thrive, each more extreme than the next (Bison? Asks Angie Dimayuga) savoring a fleshy dashi made from the bones of the same mysterious beast. The secret is revealed only when the owner, Joshua, takes us on a tour of his restaurant as if we were the Michelin assassins, opening drawers and closets, ovens and refrigerators. "This is the meat you ate tonight," says Skenes displaying the trophy kept in the cool: the head of well-horned ram that is stiff competition for both Paul McCartney's eponymous album cover and that of the Rolling Stones depicting the soup. "I hunted it at the end of last month. It just needed time to hang and tonight it was perfect to a T," he says with a wink. The next morning a cool and levelheaded Skenes confirms what we knew already "If all goes well, next summer I am going to open a new place, something that will certainly be written up as unique. A place where I can cook side by side with the customer, as there will be only one table for eight. In addition to rooms to sleep. Not so much a restaurant as a table d'hôtes, at the top of the mountains, about forty minutes from here, very close to where I live. A place where my cuisine will be extremely connected with surrounding nature. Obviously it will be a parallel venture to the life of Saison in his city version that I will be able to follow you even better than before".

Mens sana in corpore sano. Deer Hunter version Skenes now open to the public. Meet the chef in his own element. Among the four cardinal points of his obsessive imagination of the wild as an existential condition. Contrasting with facts the old diktat of the tasting menus, which at Saison will change not only with the change of seasons. "A menu here is never the same. The same dish with the same ingredients that are hunted or gathered in the vegetable garden in different days, with different maturation and at different times will always be changeable. A salad, a tomato, a cucumber full of water and dew, if harvested in the early morning light, is the opposite of what is gathered at sunset. It is nature's musical score, the ever-changing music of all that surrounds us". An incessant mutation, a palette of flavors in perpetual evolution. A hymn of which the cook is now a devout servant. Whether in an apron or in hunting clothing, this is the Skenes scheme. The small music of the daily micro-in-between seasons stemming from the season's harvest. A revolution that is worth a lot more than many of avant-garde breaches.



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