

Inside Catering,
the Food World's
Riskiest Business

HOTBOX

Matt Lee
and
Ted Lee

Henry Holt and Company New York


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Hotbox *is dedicated to everyone who labors*
so others might celebrate.

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“You’re only as good as your last soufflé.”

—SEAN DRISCOLL

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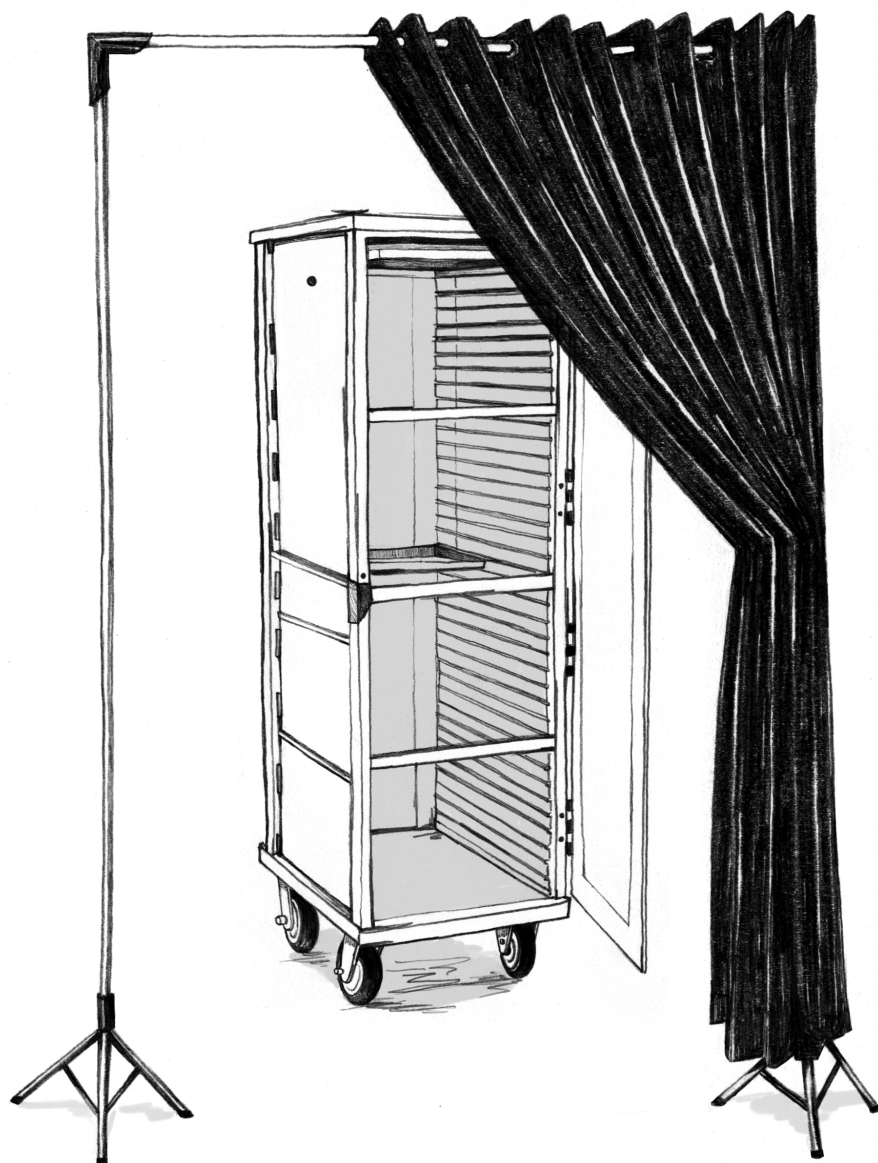
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Introduction

We Know What You're Thinking . . . Catering? Like, rubber-chicken dinners?

We know you're thinking this because we were once like you. Not so long ago, we considered catering the elevator music of the culinary arts: when a chef scales up the numbers of plates into the hundreds and thousands, how could the quality of food not suffer?

So just hear us out. And come along with us, to narrow, tree-lined West Twelfth Street in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. Step inside the tall brick town house—as it happens, a landmark of American gastronomy—where a chance encounter with a trio of catering chefs lured us into their largely hidden world and utterly upended our thinking about rubber chicken and dry salmon.

We'd been invited by two friends, restaurant chefs from

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Atlanta's acclaimed Miller Union, to observe a special dinner they were cooking at the James Beard House, the former residence of food journalist, cookbook author, and pope of American food, James Beard. Almost every night of the year, the James Beard House hosts guest chefs from restaurants all around the country, invited by the James Beard Foundation (the food world's Academy, whose annual awards show is the restaurant community's Oscars) to prepare their most impressive dishes for a crowd of eighty food-obsessed New Yorkers and members of the food press. Cooking at the Beard House is a great honor, but no single chef who's worked its kitchen there would say it's a pleasure: the scale of the space is residential, but with hulking commercial ovens and dishwashers the ground floor heats up rapidly. That night was a ridiculously warm one in June.

Knowing well the challenges of the house, our Atlanta friends had recruited a buddy of theirs, Patrick Phelan, executive chef for a top New York caterer, Sonnier & Castle, to help them. And Patrick brought along his coworkers Juan and Jorge Soto. When the three caterers—all in their thirties—arrived in the kitchen, they had a wholly different mien from the Atlanta guys, Steven Satterfield and Justin Burdett. You've probably seen your share of restaurant chefs in real life or on TV, and know they roll with a certain flair, with brio, tattoos and piercings, statement hair (or facial hair), rare Japanese knives, their names embroidered on their chef coats. By contrast, the caterers' affect revealed almost nothing: Patrick, Juan, and Jorge's chefs' jackets bore no names and they wore black polyester pillbox-style beanies. They pulled generic knives wrapped in dish towels from fraying, lumpy backpacks. None of the three had seen this kitchen before the evening they arrived, nor had they ever cooked the recipes

they were about to produce. They blended into the wallpaper, anonymous to almost everyone dining at and even working this event, but something about the way they sized up this unfamiliar kitchen nevertheless conveyed gravitas. These were Special Ops culinary mercenaries, poised for a battle.

Since there was barely room enough for the five chefs, we spent the evening observing the plating up of dishes from the kitchen doorway and ferrying deli containers of ice water into the inferno. Things started to really accelerate when it came time to fire the third and fourth courses, eighty servings each of a sautéed quail and a braised oxtail crepinette (a crispy little puck), both of which needed to be burnished brown and cooked just right—not overdone—and in an instant. For the next half hour the three caterers were everywhere at once, slammed as any restaurant line at 8:45 p.m., but entirely in control. (Satterfield moved to the other side of the serving counter, to expedite and apply finishing touches, and to otherwise stay out of the way.) Without a wasted gesture or motion, the catering chefs worked sheet pans in ovens and sauté pans on every burner—at times sheet pans *on* raging burners, a makeshift griddle!—as gracefully and agilely as modern dancers. Their clipped dialogue was inscrutable to us, the vocabulary unfamiliar, issued at low volume amid the clatter. Hand, elbow, and head gestures were sufficient for most of what they needed to say to each other.

The dinner was a huge success, due in no small part to Patrick, Juan, and Jorge, and the food that evening was everything the restaurant chefs could have hoped for: exquisitely delicious, perfectly executed, on a par with the food Miller Union serves every day back home in Atlanta. (Satterfield has since won a James Beard Award.)

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Afterward we followed the Sonnier & Castle crew to a bar nearby. When we marveled at their virtuosity with an unfamiliar menu in suboptimal circumstances, both Sotos smiled and shrugged.

“*De nada*,” Juan said, laughing.

Jorge turned serious. “You gotta understand. For us . . . ? This is fun.”

“We did—what?—eighty covers tonight?” Patrick added. “These guys can do lamb chops for fourteen hundred. I tell them I need three hundred well-done, three hundred rare, eight hundred medium-rare. I tell them what time to serve-out. And I can walk away.”

“It’s not too hard,” Juan said. “You have to know the proofer.”

Patrick explained: the proofer is another word for the hotbox—an upright aluminum cabinet on wheels, lifeblood for caterers—that conveys the partially cooked food from the refrigerator at the caterer’s prep kitchen to the site of the party. So those lamb chops for fourteen hundred would have been seared in advance at the caterer’s prep kitchen, just enough to get perfect coloring on the outside, but more or less raw inside. Then they slide on sheet pans into the proofer. The proofer rolls into a fridge to chill until it’s time to move them onto the truck for the ride to the venue. Once on-site, the hotboxes are emptied and transformed into working ovens, with each sheet pan of lamb placed over other sheet pans that hold only lit cans of Sterno.

“*Sterno*?” we protested. “Isn’t that for keeping chafing pans of rubber chicken warm on a hotel buffet?”

Not in catering at this level, he explained. All hot event food consumed in New York City gets heated and finished

in this way. “The side dishes for that lamb, the quinoa, roasted parsnips, whatever. Even the bread and the plates. All of it comes out of a hotbox.”

“You have to watch,” Juan added, pointing to his eye. “Feel,” he said, rubbing his thumb between his forefingers. “And listen.” He tugged an earlobe. “And organize. Always organize. But if you do, you can get it right.”

We were certain we could *not* get it right—neither of us has the sensory knowledge, the mettle, or the wits. But the more we listened to these catering pros, the more captivated we were by their strange world of food-crafting-in-the-field, unlike anything we’d ever seen go down in a home or restaurant.

Patrick prodded Juan to tell us a horror story, about the time a hot proofer got too close to a sprinkler head at the New York Public Library and the plating line—food, chef, kitchen assistants—got soaked in a rust-water rain and still managed to serve dinner to three hundred people oblivious to the back-of-house disaster. You had to be cool, calm, and, especially, resourceful, whatever situation you were dealt, whether it was being conscripted from the kitchen to translate Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez’s Spanish into English for Oliver Stone, or discovering, only at the moment when she stepped into the yacht’s kitchen afterward, that you’d cooked an intimate thirtieth birthday dinner for Kim Kardashian.

Juan and Jorge Soto gathered their bags, said they had to get back to the Bronx. They were facing a 5:00 a.m. call time the next day. Patrick signaled for the check—he was headed back to the prep kitchen to get ahead of two events the following evening.

Walking to the subway, we peppered Patrick with questions, spooling out hypothetical nightmares at a giant party.

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“What if all the hotboxes won’t fit on one truck?”

“We rent another.”

“What if two—or ten—chefs don’t show up the night of the party?”

“Won’t happen.”

“What if the truck breaks down on a hot day? Is there ice in the proofer to keep the lamb chops chilled until it’s time to heat them back up?”

“Good question.”

Anyone who cooks professionally knows the first principle of food safety is the danger zone, between 40 degrees and 140 degrees Fahrenheit, within which bacteria such as *Clostridium perfringens* are happiest and able to multiply exponentially. It’s why you want to keep raw food below 40 degrees until the moment you cook it and cooked food above 140 degrees until it’s time to serve. A common cause of food poisoning is from leftovers that lingered too long at room temperature before they went back in the fridge. This hotbox rigmarole the Sonnier crew had described seemed to add an extra cycle of heating and cooling to the lamb chops, but also another calculus of time and temperature in transporting the food to the venue.

“Look, we’re monitoring our temps every step of the way,” Patrick said. “But I’ll be honest: if you work in catering, you’re gonna spend a lot of time in the danger zone. If you can’t get comfortable in the zone, you won’t survive a day on the job. Next question.”

We had so many more questions for Patrick, and that’s how we ended up in his prep kitchen.

* * *

Even if you've never been a guest at Kim's birthday party or a charity gala for fourteen hundred New York swells, likelier than not you've attended a catered event: a wedding, a holiday party, a *quinceañera*, a reception. Maybe you wondered how it all came together: *What's happening behind that black curtain?* The thought might have been sparked by a moment as fleeting as seeing a server strain to lift a chafing dish (and may have disappeared just as quickly, your mind drifting back to your grandmother shuffling around the dance floor). You measure a party's success, ultimately, by how much it focuses attention on the enjoyment of celebrants and guests, by its apparent effortlessness. Obscuring all toil, and *especially* the stories of the people who made the occasion happen, is the caterer's ultimate goal.

But not ours.

In *Hotbox*, we're taking you with us behind the pipe and drape—trade lingo for that black curtain—into a world engineered never to be seen, populated by individuals you're never meant to hear from, performing deeds you can't help being curious about (even if you kinda don't want to know). In truth, our early analogy—the Special Ops team—was underdeveloped since that night at the James Beard House our Atlanta restaurant pals had made things easier: they brought the prepped rabbit and oxtail, and their kitchen was a fully equipped location with its own refrigerators and natural gas-powered ovens. Hot and cold running water! Event caterers aren't just chefs, they're haulers and builders, too, since they're not only transporting the food to a remote spot, but also fashioning a kitchen out of thin air (oftentimes on sites as blank as a grass field or a cement loading dock), and there's rarely ever running

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water. As such, they have more in common with MASH, a mobile army surgical hospital, than Special Operations—or a restaurant, for that matter. The tent campaign of loading and unloading the kitchen infrastructure and the delicate, squishy food involves so much travel, a factor that rarely disturbs the tight calculations of a restaurant chef, comfortable in her own familiar kitchen. In “off-premise” catering (as distinguished from banquet-hall catering or corporate cafeterias), there’s the expanse of actual miles—over minutes—the food must traverse: packed from the prep kitchen into rolling hotboxes, coolers, milk crates, and plastic bins, and onto the box truck for the journey to the venue; then unloaded from the truck onto elevators or carried up staircases to whatever hall or back room is designated the “kitchen.” Just as important, there is also the cognitive distance separating the minds of the kitchen prep crew that par-cooked and packed the food from those on the team receiving it in their makeshift party kitchen, unwrapping and setting up everything, finding every item—or not, forcing the dreaded (and inevitable) re-run.* And lastly, there are the servers, the cater waiters, those warm bodies from staffing agencies, typically freelancers who may work for a handful of competing firms from one night to the next, entrusted with moving and handling the food once it’s left the kitchen, to be presented to the guest. With rare exceptions, a catering chef hands his food to a total stranger.

All this discontinuity and travel geometrically multiplies the hazards standing in the way of a catering chef aiming to

* Ordered by the executive chef, a return trip of the truck to the prep kitchen to pick up something that’s been either left behind or hopelessly lost at the site.

serve what was originally intended, that perfect plate, whose stunning flavors and stylish presentation clinched the deal at the client tasting many months prior. And in this context, time becomes a presence as tangible, fungible, and daunting as the weather—more so when the scale of the event is factored into the equation. While an epic fail at a restaurant table might cost the house a few customers, when there are eight hundred hungry guests on the event floor waiting for dinner to be served, havoc-wreaking scenarios—an electrical brownout blows power to the fryers and the stage lights; the host's toast runs twenty minutes too long, condemning the lamb to overcooked toughness; a server faints and takes down with him a jack stand* of 120 plated desserts—may become apparent only at the moment they happen, and have greater consequences.

True, the stakes for the caterer are not nearly as high as for the army surgeon, but the vast majority of events that top New York firms cater to are pretty significant—charity galas, weddings, product launches, milestone birthdays, annual board meetings, political debuts, and movie premieres in one of the biggest, richest, most competitive cities in the world. As the minutes tick down to the serve-out of the first hors d'oeuvre, there's more at risk than just the hundreds of thousands of dollars a client may have spent on the evening's food, booze, and labor; there are the emotions of a bride and groom on their big day, the reputation of a top movie studio, or the longevity of an esteemed, hundred-year-old nonprofit. There are the memories of people celebrating some of the most momentous nights of their lives.

* A tall but compact four-sided metal stand on casters, for holding and moving large numbers of completed plates.

Considering all that these catering chefs are up against, and regularly conquer—their nerve-rattling tightrope sprints through A-list celebrity territory, the exquisite food torture, a season’s worth of MacGyver-y kitchen rescues that throw propriety, food safety, and convention out the door because “we have to make this work *right now!*”—the fact that they don’t get the attention or respect afforded restaurant chefs is astonishing. There’s no James Beard Award for them, yet the food that catering chefs create is often every bit as succulent and dazzling as what’s served at the gastronomic temples of the nation. And they’re cooking with handicaps a restaurant chef couldn’t fathom.

This book is our report from having steeped in the culture of catering and special events for four years, getting to know the business from the inside out, what makes it work, and what kinds of people choose to dwell in it. While reporting and writing this book, we worked as kitchen assistants, prep and party chefs for catering firms in New York City and in Charleston, South Carolina. We researched the business and its history extensively, and interviewed everyone we could: the denizens of catering kitchens, the chefs, and the kitchen assistants, or “K.A.s,” but also workers and leaders in every corner of special events, from the founders of influential catering firms, to salespeople who sell the menus, to the supporting industries, like lighting and rentals, to the party planners and event directors for whom catering is just one of a constellation of services they’re buying that adds up to a special event. It’s a realm where you find remarkable, often downright eccentric characters, working in extreme conditions, under insane stress, with the highest of expectations, mostly in lamentable spaces.

Their goal is to make tonight appear special and intimate, unique and ephemeral. And then they do it again the very next day.

When we were working as catering kitchen assistants, most of our colleagues were aware we were studying the industry, taking mental notes. It didn't seem to raise suspicions or matter much to the boots on the ground—except insofar as we were slow working and green: how you perform is everything to your character in catering. As for the people in the executive suite upstairs, they were a bit more circumspect, but ultimately cool with us working there as well. The catering business depends upon eager, nimble workers, and especially embraces ones inquisitive about the best way to get the job done. And when you're comfortable employing a kitchen brimming with mercenaries, who flow almost seamlessly from firm to firm, you're necessarily less concerned with revealing institutional secrets. Our usual journalistic strategy always has the two of us collaborating and doubling up on any interview or experience, but for this project we mostly worked different days in the prep kitchen and in the evenings, as our assigning chefs dictated. Sometimes we worked the same gig on different parts of the job; other times, we were across the prep table from each other. We shared our field notes, photographs, and thoughts with each other on a daily basis and we worked so many hours on so many similar assignments, for the same firms, that our observations and discoveries overlapped and became interchangeable.

To avoid shifting points of view, we adopt a first-person singular perspective—you could call it the royal “I”—throughout the book, calling out which brother is narrating

at the head of each chapter, even if the other brother's experiences may have informed it. And while that might seem odd, it's actually quite natural: most people we encountered in catering thought we were the same person due to our similar age, build, baldness, and skill level. (We're brothers, but not twins.) And in fact our kitchen nicknames, conferred by a lead chef in that absurdist way sobriquets typically are, were the same: "Virginia." (He knew we were from the South, and he'd cooked there once, at a wedding near Richmond.) When it's appropriate to do so, we snap back to the plural "we."

Regarding naming: in cases where we worked alongside people in the trenches, we will introduce a person's full name initially if we knew it in the course of the working relationship, but otherwise we use only the first name, or nickname, which in the collaborative working environment was the only moniker that mattered. For historical figures and subjects we interviewed with pad and pen or laptop, we refer to them by their surname after the first instance.

We begin by dropping you directly into hors d'oeuvres preparation at one of the largest parties on New York's fall social calendar, the Park Avenue Armory Gala, about two years into our time in catering, and about forty-five minutes before the call for first hors d'oeuvres platters. From there, we gently rewind, taking you back to our first work days, getting acclimated to the prep kitchen. You'll learn along with us the stresses and strains on body—and especially mind—as we adapt to the *cooking interruptus* of catering. We'll take excursions at two junctures in our narrative into the history of moveable feasts, witnessing the rise of the industry over three generations in the modern era. There are some brief interludes sprinkled throughout, including a catering-style recipe for pasta salad

for six hundred, tables of surprising statistics, and a test-drive of a hotbox at home. And as the parties we work become more and more elaborate—the weddings!—the menus increasingly customized, as allergies begin to occupy a greater and greater presence in the culinary world overall, we'll circle back to our initial question: why is catering such a shrouded world? We'll try to answer the corollary questions: who benefits from its invisibility? And what does that say about the way we celebrate occasions today?

We've thrown out a few key terms in this introduction—"hotbox," "jack stand," "re-run." These are just the first words in a whole new lexicon we're about to introduce you to, along with a set of bizarre but effective cooking concepts, and a subculture you may have crossed paths with, that was right under your nose if you'd only known where to look. Our hope is that you'll never attend a party—or even entertain on your own—in quite the same way after reading this account.

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