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Gastronomy/

WILING OUT WITH WYLIE DUFRESNE

THE JAMES BEARD AWARD-WINNING CHEF AND OWNER OF WD-50 WALKS US THROUGH CHINATOWN, AND TELLS US HOW AN OVERCOOKED PIECE OF FISH IS LIKE A MISSED LAY-UP

by HOWIE KAHN *photography* GEMMA AND ANDY INGALLS

“Clinton Street is sinking,” says Wylie Dufresne. “It can’t handle the traffic.” Forty-three and dressed in a Day-Glo orange shirt and shorts with many strategic-seeming pockets (“I look like a park ranger,” he says), Dufresne is heading out from his 10-year-old restaurant, WD-50, on its sagging street, and into the city that defines him. While his food is often said to belong to the school of “molecular gastronomy,” Dufresne, who has lived in Manhattan since the age of five and has recently, after 10 nominations, been named the best chef in town by the James Beard Foundation, explains his intentions differently, not exactly giving into the restrictions of the lab-loaded term.

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31 DEC 69

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“It’s New York-based cuisine,” he says of his ribbons of pickled beef tongue with nuggets of fried mayonnaise, of his popcorn soup, of his signature noodles made from shrimp and meat glue. “My food is informed by the street,” he says. “The way I put food on the plate is informed by the geography and the geometry of New York.” Dufresne turns left on Delancey. “It doesn’t feel inauthentic,” he continues, “to make a French-style consommé and infuse it with *mole*. Those two things would never happen on their own, but those two places co-exist in New York.” Dufresne’s food, then, is really about untangling the entropy of the city and creating harmonious solutions from set-upon-set of these uniquely urban clashes and possibilities.

“THE WAY I PUT FOOD ON THE PLATE IS INFORMED BY THE GEOGRAPHY AND THE GEOMETRY OF NEW YORK.”

Perhaps that all sounds more like a high-concept press release from a Chelsea gallery than it does like the sworn mission of a chef of the streets, but walk into Chinatown with Dufresne, as I recently did, and it’s more than evident as to where his enthusiasm lies. While Dufresne’s cooking has been, without argument, at the vanguard of culinary creativity here for well over a decade—he’s one of the first New York chefs whose own point of view succeeds *precisely* for the way it transcends existing traditions—he’s also deeply aware of matters of heritage.

“My dad had a sandwich shop,” says Dufresne. “It was in Providence: Joe’s, like an ordinary Joe, the idea being anybody could go and feel comfortable. It was seminal.” WD-50 has always existed in a more rarefied realm. “It’s hard to get to,” says Dufresne. “It’s not really near subways. Well, it’s near the F and the J, but they’re not near anything. And it’s a tasting menu-only restaurant, so you’re committing to a couple of hours at least and, also, to a certain dollar amount. For us, WD-50 has always been a break-even proposition. At its worst, it’s been a lot worse than that.” Dufresne is currently breaking new ground, and has also recently opened a new restaurant, Alder, which is all the things WD-50 is not: conveniently located, a la carte, and ruled in conjunction by both appetite and auteur.

On Hester Street, Dufresne eagerly slips into the Hong Kong Supermarket. “Wandering the aisles in here can be very useful,” he says, “just for the sake of creativity.” Sure, Dufresne hits the Green Markets, but, for him, cooking in an urban environment means the definition of locavorism needs to be broadened. The packaged specialty goods you’d be far less likely to get elsewhere matter just as much to him as the



ramps and the heirloom lettuces. “For example,” he says, pausing in front of several dozen varieties of packaged leaves, “What the hell is jujube tea? You wonder and then you ask yourself, ‘OK, can you poach a fish in that?’”

Further into the market: “You want an example of something that’s been a homerun for us?” says Dufresne. He grabs a blue can wrapped with a matte photo of ovular pearlescent orbs that seem to be multiplying. “Palm seeds in syrup,” he says. “These are beautiful, they look like little jewels. I just bought them one day, not knowing what the hell they were.” When Dufresne tasted them, he found them far too sweet. “So we rinsed and rinsed them and then we’d start pushing other flavors into them, like hibiscus or Angostura bitters, using our vacuum packing machine. They have the texture of a piece of candy. Once we got a lot of the sugar out and the other flavors in we started serving it with beef tongue. It’s all about keeping your head and your eyes open. You’d be surprised how often you can find an opportunity.”

In a cab uptown, heading toward Dufresne’s other urban pantry, the Curry Hill spice mecca Kalustyan’s, he riffs on the similarities between cooking and sports. “I’ve been cooking for 21 years,” he says. “I



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Casey Neistat takes us inside his tricked-out studio

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think cooking is a team sport. All the life lessons are there. We have star players, supporting players, managers, coaches and owners. There's practice during the day and the game at night. And there's redemption at every opportunity. You miss a layup? You have to take 200 more layups. You overcook a piece of fish? It's not great, but it's not the end of the world. You get to do it again. Cooking is redemptive."

"IT'S ALL ABOUT KEEPING YOUR HEAD AND YOUR EYES OPEN. YOU'D BE SURPRISED HOW OFTEN YOU CAN FIND AN OPPORTUNITY."

There's no possibility for redemption, however, without enough ingredients to get you through the night, and many a night at WD-50 has depended on items sourced from Kalustyan's. The place is a veritable Stefon skit of edibles. "Kalustyan's makes my brain explode," says Dufresne. "This whole wall is only chili powders: Chipotle, Chimayo, Ancho, Sri Lankan. I've bought tubs and tubs of shit in here just because I'd never heard of something before and had to try it." Dufresne pauses in the tight, spice-stacked aisle. "Like that," he says, grabbing a bag and reading its label. "Persian Spice Mix. What's in that? Coriander, cardamom, cumin, lemon peel and rose. That sounds fantastic. That would be great in a cocktail. Or you could make a consommé and poach a scallop in it."

For Dufresne, a place like this is as valuable for its inspirational qualities as it is for its food. "It's not like you can say, 'It's Tuesday, let's be creative,'" he says, getting ready to head back downtown for double-duty dinner service. "It doesn't work like that. It has to always be happening. My mom said, 'It's not linear.' You can't plan to be creative *today*. You have to be aware it could happen at any moment—at the movies, at a museum, listening to music, eating, reading, sleeping. It could happen here."

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