

WAGYU FUNGO

SOON WILEY

I hate when customers order their steak well-done. We cook *wagyu* steaks at my restaurant. And don't give me any of that shit about real *wagyu* beef being illegal to import because of new trade restrictions with Japan. I go to a butcher in Little Tokyo where they bring it in for the few reputable restaurants in L.A. that don't sling that half-breed "faux-be" beef to the wannabe foodie-masses. This is the real fucking thing: steaks with marbling so wide and white that you swear you could dive right in and swim through the channels of luscious, supple fat. I'm talking about steaks so beautiful, you'd give yourself a black eye, just so you could slap a raw one on your face.

I hate seeing these parentheses under the order: well-done. It's a sign of disrespect; not to me, this isn't about my ego. This is about the meat, the cow, the feed that cow consumed, the rainwater that cow drank. Sometimes I wish I had a live, black *Okayama* cow on-hand, just so I could trot it out the double-doors of my kitchen, down the sloping hallway into the dining room and show it to the customers. "Look at this spectacular animal you are about to eat," I could say. "Look at what you are asking me to cook to death." Then I could ask them where the sirloin comes from. I could ask them to point out the flank and brisket cuts. These people – they think steak comes from Styrofoam plates wrapped in plastic. They think medium-rare is raw.

I only have twelve steaks tonight, like every night. And I

already have to char the life out of two of them. On the ticket it says they're meant for table ten. I want to get a look at these people, see who I'm committing this culinary crime for. I give the steaks to one of my line-cooks. "Leave them on until they're black," I say. He looks at me, worried. He knows what well-done orders do to me. If these people want well-done I'm going to cook these steaks until they're tougher than a bull's neck. They're going to think they just bit into a truck tire. I want their teeth to crack into chalky dust when they try to chew through their excuse of a steak.

It's only six-thirty and the restaurant is nearly empty – except for table ten – a young couple, maybe mid-twenties. I should go over there and say something. Who the fuck eats a steak this early on a Friday night? That's what I want to know.

I need to learn how to detach – back away from the moment and gain some perspective – that's what my shrink keeps saying. Can you believe that – a chef who needs a shrink? I started going to him after I had my first fainting episode in the kitchen, brought on by a single order of eight well-done steaks.

The guy really isn't that bad. He's up in Beverly Hills. He's probably used to dealing with all sorts of fucked up actors and actresses, celebrities recovering from their latest indoctrination into Scientology or Kabbalah. Not me. I was his first non-celebrity chef, or so he said. I wasn't suffering from PTSD after getting my ass kicked on *Iron Chef America*, or considering turning in my knives after failing to transform a basket of shit into something delectable for the "judges" on *Chopped*. Nope. I just had this "rage" problem; that's what he called it at least.

"Try to articulate what it feels like when you have to cook a steak for that long," my shrink said to me. I was sitting in his office, trying not to ask him how he liked his meat prepared.

"Can you make that thing any louder?" I said, pointing to the noisemaker by the door.

He shook his head – all gray, curly hair and gold-rimmed glasses.

"It's like taking your brand new Aston Martin to a Jiffy Lube for a tune-up. Does that articulate it any better for you?" I said.

"It's interesting you would assume I drive that kind of car. Do you make assumptions like that about your customers as well?" he said, picking at the heel of his shoe. It was this tick he had. He did it when asking stupid questions. It made me sick – just thinking about all the germs underneath his fingernails.

"They aren't assumptions – just facts," I said. "Sometimes I feel like I'm enabling all these people to eat overcooked food. I mean, I'm committing a crime, you know? I have this guilt for days afterward, where all I can eat is beef tartare. There's this Korean joint below where I live that serves the beef cut real thin, like *sashimi*, with an egg cracked over it. And that's the only thing I can eat, for breakfast lunch and dinner. It's the only thing that takes away the guilt."

He scribbled something in his notepad then put the pen in his mouth. He just licked the bottom of his shoe, I thought. "And this Korean restaurant – they serve you this raw beef three times a day?"

"Yeah. I mean. They think it's fucked up and tell me I'm gonna get sick, but they still serve it to me."

"And eating this makes you feel better?" he said. "Emotionally better that is."

"It does until I get sick, and then the only thing I can think about when I'm on my knees over the toilet puking my guts out is how I'm cooking for a bunch of culinary philistines. It's like my customers sucked on a bunch of hot pokers, thinking they were lollipops, and burned off all their taste buds. They could eat cardboard for dinner every night and they wouldn't care."

"Interesting," he said, going back to the heel of his shoe.

I don't tell my shrink about the nightmares, where all the steaks I've cooked well-done come back to haunt me. They form whole, beautiful, black cows that stand around me in a circle, their eyes watery, like they've been crying. They ask me why I cooked every ounce of juice and flavor out of them; they want to know why their meat was so dry and chewy, why they were burnt instead of seared,

charred instead of loved. I kneel in the middle of the cow-circle with grass stains on my black and white checkered pants. The sun is shining. The sky is blue. "I don't know," I say. "I don't know," I plead. "Please forgive me!" I scream, the circle of cow eyes spinning around me, the sun going wobbly in the sky.

On my way back to the kitchen a waiter scurries past me, eyes down. He's carrying the two steaks, black like thousand-year-old gum on a New York City sidewalk. Back in the kitchen my culinary team sings: knives cut vegetables, water boils, flames bark. The kitchen smells like sweat and fire.

Tonight's specials: *mahi mahi*, poached lobster, the *wagyu* beef, and rabbit. The waiters bitch and moan, complaining that there are no vegetarian options on the menu. I don't understand vegetarians. Ethical reasons, dietary reasons, karmic reasons, they all seem moot. I don't pray, but if I did, I'd pray to Dionysus – the god of wine, the god of ecstasy, the god of desire. Give me a god that promotes the endless quest to quench our most basic yearnings. Poor vegetarians – fools! They'll never taste the briny saltwater of a Limfjord oyster; they'll never smell the buttery aroma of *escargot*; they'll never crack crispy Peking duck skin between their teeth; they'll never know what it means to lose themselves in a bowl of Beluga caviar – a glistening sea of symmetrical black pearls: these are the things that matter in life, not reincarnation or moral utility.

The ticket machine whines and spits out a long strip of glossy, white paper. I stand at the stainless steel tabletop, preparing for the worst, waiting for the dizziness to bubble up inside my head when I hear the order for well-done steak. I look down at my hands, scrubbed and rosy against the swirling grains of my cutting board. I tell myself this will be the one I walk out on. This will be the requested desecration of bovine perfection that makes me quit the restaurant for good.

But then I hear Juan, my *Sous-Chef*, as he slides the ticket down: "Four steaks, rare."

I swear I get a hard-on for just a second, like my heart doesn't

know where to send the blood. "Yes, Juan. Rare!" I say, running to the walk-in-fridge, where I unwrap the steaks from their wax paper and set them on a plate.

"Chef is getting a chubby for the meat again," Juan yells over the dicing of onions. The Line erupts in a chorus of moos.

I wipe down my cutting board and position the steaks next to each other. For seasoning I make a few passes with my peppermill containing *Tellicherry* peppercorns. Then I dust them with a sprinkling of *Iburi-Jio Cherry* smoked salt. Then I flip the steaks and repeat.

The grill is hot and I lay the steaks diagonally, the fat sizzling and spitting, flames licking the red underbelly of the *wagyu*. The kitchen subsides around me as I watch the steaks, tongs in hand. A velvety darkness tunnels my vision as I bend down and watch juices from the steak drip and pop in teardrops of fat. I count the steady beats of my heart like seconds: ninety beats, then I flip them. This is what I live for: the moment when my body is in unison with the creation of perfectly cooked steak. Ninety more beats. I hear myself tell Juan to have plates ready. Then they're done, I lift them from the grill with my tongs and place them, one by one, on the cutting board to let them rest.

"Four steaks, cooked rare," I say, folding the ticket over once and putting it in my shirt pocket. I always keep my "rare" tickets. When I get home I roll them up like miniature scrolls and slide them into a plastic bottle in my medicine cabinet.

Juan lays the plates, one by one, their clean, white surfaces beckoning the seared *wagyu*. Before he goes back to his station, Juan inspects the plates once more, running a cloth around the edges. Dissatisfied with the cleanliness of one of them, he gives it to the dishwasher and returns with another one.

"Ready, Chef," he says.

Juan has been working under me for five years. He's the best *Sous-Chef* I've ever had. In three years I'll send him out on his own. He'll have learned everything I know. Eight years is enough. I'll have

nothing left to show him.

I was watching a documentary on this sushi chef named Jiro who owns a restaurant with three Michelin stars in Tokyo. He's eighty-five and still kicking. This guy's son – poor bastard – is fifty years-old and still working under his old man. Can you imagine that? In the movie he said it took him a year just to learn how to toast the seaweed – then another year to perfect making the sushi rice. But that's the Japanese; they're on another level when it comes to patience.

They have a word for it, the Japanese, *nagekomi*, or something like that – it's the repeated practice of a single action: mopping a floor, de-boning fish, fielding groundballs – that whole “wax on,” “wax off” shit. I was reading an article about this baseball drill they do in Japan where guys have to field 1,000 groundballs in succession. It's called the fungo drill. After a while, when you've reached exhaustion, your body just takes over, the mind shuts off – it's all muscle memory – a kind of meditation. The record for successfully fielded balls during the fungo is 900 by Koichi Tabuchi in 1984. Now that's the guy I want cooking my steak.

Two more orders for rare steak come in, and just when I think I'm in for a perfect night in the kitchen – I get the order – six well-done. It feels like someone skinned me alive, made small incisions behind my ears and just peeled the skin right off me, my muscles pink, red, and twitching.

Juan doesn't say anything. The Line doesn't say anything.

I try to remember what my therapist told me – what exercises he said I should try to calm myself down, but all I can think about are his dirty fingernails and his saliva dimpled mouth sucking on the end of his pen. My stomach weakens, it feels like old cheesecloth ripping apart, letting my innards spill onto the floor. I wonder if the Korean place will be open late tonight. I wish I knew how much raw beef I had to eat to absolve me of my sins.

The order is for table fifteen, and I hand my tongs over to Juan and tell him I'm going to the dining area for a moment. I need

to see the people who think it's acceptable to desecrate something so sacred. The waiters give me nervous looks as I walk by and scan the room, trying to remember which table is table fifteen. I think about the cows in my dream, and their watery, round eyes. I roll up my starched, white sleeves as I weave my way through the dining room. All around me patrons talk and text, their heads bobbing from their phone screens to their dates. I pass a table of two eating the rare steak I just cooked. The sight lends me some solace until I see them dragging the meat through globs of brown A.1. steak sauce on their plates. My head hurts and I feel like I've got a cow tongue in my mouth – thick and swollen. To my right, four men share a platter of raw oysters. I watch in horror as they drench the delicate bivalves with horseradish, cocktail sauce, and lemon, popping them in their mouths like fat kids at an all-you-can-eat jellybean buffet. I try to remember where table fifteen is; I stumble on. My ankles feel swollen, like I'm walking on balls of mozzarella. The floor moves under me. The last thing I see before I fall is a girl cutting off all the edges of her steak and pushing them to one side of her plate. "I just really don't like the fat parts," she says.

Then I'm falling forward. I see the hardwood floor coming up to greet my face.

Two strong arms are underneath me, grabbing my damp armpits, the floor zooms away and I'm standing again. Someone is leading me outside with the promise of fresh air.

The Scottish bartender Louie sits me down outside on the curb, gripping my shoulder, like he's afraid to let go.

"What were you plannin' on doin' there, Chef?" he says, his brogue making his words sound like they've been soaking in molasses.

Sports cars cruise past us on the strip, women strut by, their dresses cut narrow and short. Above, palm trees don't sway so much as lean with the breeze. It's amazing that this whole city is in a desert. It never rains, never snows, the seasons are forgotten out here.

"I was just going to talk to table fifteen," I tell Louie.

"No, mate," Louie says, letting go of my shoulder and joining me on the curb. "I know what you were gonna do. You were gonna ream them about your precious steaks."

"Maybe," I say. Outside the kitchen my vigor is gone. It's all fire and brimstone when I'm behind a stove, wielding my knives and tongs. But out here under the starless sky, where all I can see are billboards and office buildings burning up the skyline, I feel tired and weak.

"Stay here mate," Louie says, patting me on the back. "I'm gonna get you some *agua*."

I think about standing, but I can't manage to face my clientele and witness the defilement of my cuisine just yet – better to sit and wait for the water. Two motorcycles rev their engines at a stoplight, calling out to one another. The light flips green and they're off, squealing down streetlight-speckled lanes. My head feels heavy, and I think that if I just lie down on the sidewalk for a moment I'll be better. No one will bother me – plenty of homeless guys in L.A. – even chefs.