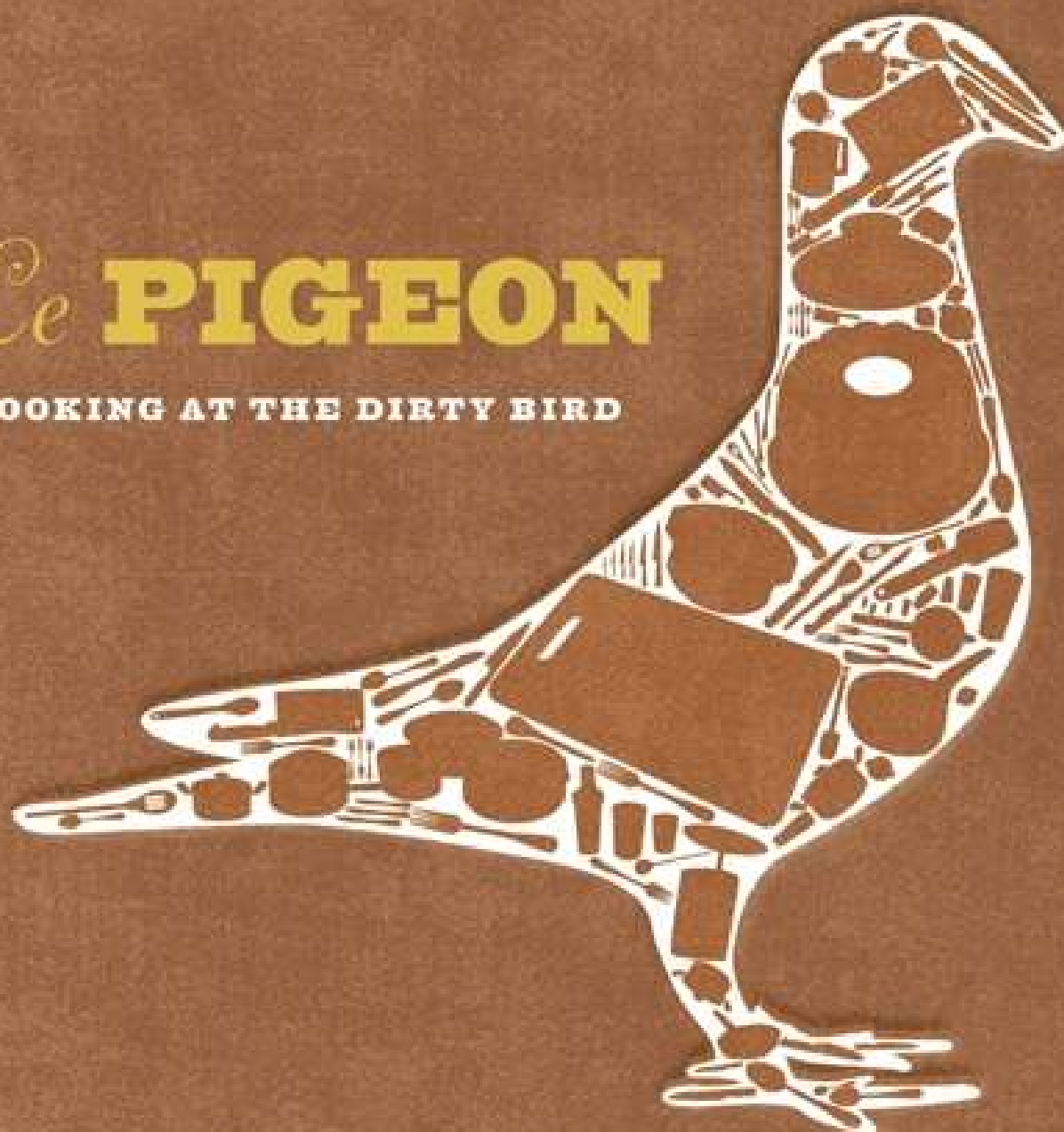


Le **PIGEON**

COOKING AT THE DIRTY BIRD



GABRIEL RÜCKER *and* **MEREDITH ERICKSON**
with **LAUREN & ANDREW FORTGANG**



Le pigeon



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Photographs by **DAVID L. REAMER**



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FOREWORD

BY TOM COLICCHIO

There is a moment in time in the career of a chef that is unlike any that has come before or will come again. You're not yet known. Perhaps you're a sous-chef, bouncing around from restaurant to restaurant. Then you take a risk and open a small kitchen and suddenly you're cooking whatever you want, coming up with four new dishes a day inspired by anything and everything—a wild mushroom you found backpacking over the weekend, a news item about Bavaria from that morning—it's a wild creative time. From early morning until very, very early the next morning, you're working ... and you're having the time of your life. It's a small window of time during which this all happens, after you plunk down the rent on your little space and before *Food & Wine* magazine discovers you and everything changes.

Soon there will be more expectations from the press and from the food industry. You suddenly realize that you're now responsible for the livelihoods of a lot of people who are counting on you to keep this thing going. And all these considerations begin to encroach on your ability to create, to make decisions based solely on what you want to do with food. You must begin to not only allow these decisions to influence the food you make, but also to take up time that was previously devoted to creativity. Now there is a lot more to your work as a chef than simply getting into a kitchen, banging around a lot of pots and pans, and being creative. There's no going back, and you need to find new ways forevermore to remain relevant.

I think this process happens for people in any creative field, by the way. It's ironic that the very thing that will sustain your ability to create—a modicum of recognition—often leads to growth that then, in turn, inhibits your ability to create. Business factors aside, you start becoming self-conscious and more deliberate. It's important to recognize this shift so you can figure out a way to preserve the playfulness and fearlessness of that time when all you had to do was bring yourself—all of yourself—into the kitchen and play.

Gabriel Rucker is living in this moment and loving it. Le Pigeon has provided a showcase for Rucker's daily inspirations for the last five years, and through this book, we get a front-row seat to the evolution of a chef—and a restaurant—on the cusp of very big changes. The wild creativity that happens during this period in a chef's career is often fast, furious, and unpredictable. That Gabriel has managed to put these first few years of recipes down on paper is a feat by itself and a spectacular benefit to Le Pigeon and Little Bird's legions of loyal fans. It's great when you can actually recognize that you're living this moment while you're in it. Gabriel does, and that's what he's celebrating in the cookbook. It's clear that he has found a way to keep his food irreverent and fun.

But there's a sub-story here, too. One that starts with a scrappy fifteen-year-old who showed up in my kitchen some years ago, insisting that he wanted to work with me for the summer. He seemed bright, and so I gave Andy Fortgang a chance. He was bright. He was also hardworking, trustworthy, and not at all shy about taking initiative. Andy worked in my restaurant kitchen over summers and vacations throughout high school and post college, after he realized that he'd found his calling in the

front of the house. When Andy told me that he had an opportunity to be part of something new in Portland, I was sad for me and excited for him.

I wasn't surprised to learn that Gabriel hired Andy over the phone and put him to work at Le Pigeon the very first day they met. I suppose Andy just has that effect on chefs. And it's to Gabriel's credit that he recognized in Andy the other half of the equation that equals a successful restaurant (two ... and some day, maybe more). Andy has created the structure that allows Gabriel to focus on the food. And along with that structure, he brought along his talented wife, Lauren, who became the past chef at Le Pigeon and Little Bird.

Gabriel and Andy have been going through this crazy time of round-the-clock uninhibited inventiveness together: Andy is the Packard to Gabriel's Hewlitt, the Orville to his Wilbur, the Jerry to his Ben (the Stimpny to his Ren? Fill in your own partnership—you get the point), and they've chosen to preserve a luscious, frenetic, passionate snapshot of it. You're holding it in your hands.



INTRODUCTION

FIVE YEARS OF LE PIGEON

Andrew Fortgang and Gabriel Rucker met through Craigslist. True story.

As Gabriel tells it: It was 2007 and I had been running Le Pigeon (aka LP) for a little more than a year with my partners in crime, Erik Van Kley and Su Lien Pino. Each day was a marathon, starting with brunch and ending (later and later) at the B-Side bar next to LP drinking Powers Whiskey, exhausted and staring at each other with disbelief that we had pulled off another night of ninety-plus covers (we’re tiny, only thirty-five seats). The phone was ringing nonstop and local and national press were beginning to descend. But I was so busy I hardly noticed.

I posted a manager position in the “Casual Encounters” section (or maybe it was under “Food and Hospitality”?). Either way, I was completely desperate for a manager. Leif Sundstrom, who had been the manager until that point, was leaving. He had helped build Le Pigeon, but he wanted to get into the wine business, and I needed someone to tighten the service. Le Pigeon has a small dining room with an open kitchen, and I could actually hear the waitstaff asking, “Who’s got the chicken?” as the plates plopped down in front of the guests.

I didn’t have time to deal with seat numbers (which tell the servers who ordered what); we were constantly packed. Just as we were recovering from brunch, the lines were beginning to form for dinner. I knew the nonstop work-party-work-party-work-party approach had an expiration date, and that it was near approaching. I needed a Mr. Wolf for my restaurant clean-up duty. I needed the Jerry to my Kramer.

Andy had just visited Portland, and unbeknownst to me, had eaten at Le Pigeon. He and his wife Lauren, were considering a move to the West Coast because they wanted a more relaxed life than they had in New York. Two days after arriving back in New York (where he was born and raised), Andy saw the Craigslist posting. We talked on the phone a few times over the next couple of months, but the first time we met in person was his first day as manager.



But let's rewind. I was twenty-five, and this was not supposed to be my trajectory.

I grew up in Napa, California—not the French Laundry, wine-guzzling, home-to-millionaires Napa—but blue-collar suburban California. And I loved it. So much so that when I failed math in junior college and was told I should “learn a trade,” I happily took on a year of cooking school. I dropped out when I got my first cooking gig at the age of nineteen at the Silverado Country Club doing banquets for hundreds of people a day. I was a sponge and learned a lot of the basics, but I was bored with my hometown.

My next stop was the Southern Exposure Bistro, a run-of-the-mill joint in the coastal town of Santa Cruz that served lasagna, filet mignon, and mashed potatoes piped from a bag. The restaurant wasn't much, but it was during this time that I began to understand cooking on an intuitive level. The customers didn't have high expectations, but I did, and I started to push myself. I would fall asleep at night reading *The French Laundry Cookbook* (which had just been published) and replaying the evening at the bistro: what had gone well, what had been a disaster, and what I wanted to cook the next day.



This was at the tail end of the rave era, and my two years in Santa Cruz passed quickly in a haze of techno music, in-line skating, baggy jeans, and fourteen-hour shifts at the restaurant. I wanted to move to a bigger pond and desperately hoped it would be San Francisco, but I couldn't afford the city. My friend David Reamer, a funny, eccentric guy from New Jersey who also cooked at the bistro (and who

took the photographs in this book), suggested that we move to Portland. We visited PDX one weekend, found a really shitty house in the southeast, and moved the next week. Looking back, it's amazing how quickly it all happened.



When I arrived in Portland, I noticed a few things (that are the city's calling card now): the jeans were tighter, rent was so affordable that young people not only owned homes but also owned businesses, and, most importantly, people knew how to eat. Through complete happenstance, the first job I landed was at Paley's Place, one of the first restaurants in Portland to focus on local products and farmers. Although I was thrilled, I didn't realize what a coup this was at the time. The food was well above my level of expertise. I was nervous before every shift, worried about my skill level and convinced that my *poseur-dom* would be revealed. But we rotated stations regularly, and I was so completely engaged that the nervousness would subside simply because I didn't have time to think about it. It was at Paley's that I learned the beauty of shellfish stock, how to work with bone marrow, how to clarify a consommé, and to how to slow down and just *make food well*.

Paley's was the cooking school I never finished.

Within two years I hit my stride, and I was so thankful to be left in charge when Vitaly Paley and the sous-chef, Bennie Bettinger, were out of the restaurant attending or cooking at events.

By this time it was 2003, and I was cooking alongside Jason Barwikowski (currently the chef at Woodsman Tavern), a talented friend with a quiet intensity. That year Jason and I went to a Christmas party where we met Tommy Habetz, a fellow cook who had just come to Portland after working under Mario Batali in New York. Tommy and Naomi Pomeroy (from Beast in Portland) were working for a now-defunct restaurant group and asked me to come on as sous-chef at their new project, Gotham Tavern. I remember that I was wearing a cream-colored leisure suit at the time; the fact that they still offered me the job should have been an ominous sign.

For many reasons (including, perhaps, that I was drinking a bottle of Pernod every night, thus being knighted "Pernod-chio" by my peers), Gotham failed. But it was while working at Gotham that I learned how to manage a kitchen, work the line, expedite two hundred covers per night, and run (and *not* run) a business.



After that, I wandered the PDX streets like a lost mutt, but Cathy Whims was kind enough to take me in at Nostrana, where I made pizza but mostly just licked my wounds from Gotham. One day I received a call from Paul Brady. Paul is truly a Portland character, a Mr. Fix-It, computer whiz, flamenco singer, and Burning Man regular. He had experienced a financial windfall and decided to sink the money into a small restaurant on East Burnside, a gritty strip across the river from downtown. At the time, the prostitutes and drug dealers working the neighborhood were less than subtle. Paul was also on the rebound, as the restaurant Paul acquired was more of a cook's fantasy wonderland than a real, operating business—there were KitchenAids in every color, each meal was made to order, and the dairy came from the artisanal Norris Farms—you get the picture. Paul gave me three months to turn it around.



First, we needed a name. One day Tommy and I were hanging out at the new space, and we looked down at the cacophony of tattoos on my arm: a flock of birds, a gnarly shark, and the words *le pigeon*. The birds brought to mind a calming aviary vibe, which was somehow better than a bloody-toothed, poorly drawn shark. Tommy said, “Le Pigeon, that’s it.” And it was.



Paul then called his friend Ian Lynam, an amazing graphic designer, and begged him to help with the logo. Ian came through with the killer one you see [on the cover](#) of this book. For staff, my first call was to Erik Van Kley, who still hadn't found a home since Gotham; he joined as sous-chef. Another Gotham alum, Su Lien, came on next. The tone was set; it felt like the band was back together, and this is when we really started writing hits. We broke even in two months and filled the restaurant almost nightly for the next year.

Which brings us back to Andy Fortgang: a straight-talking New Yorker who should have been a lawyer but was discovered by (one could also argue, *lost to*) Tom Colicchio. He did his time at Gramercy Tavern and then Craft. During our first phone call, I could already tell that Andy was dedicated to service, was adamant about balancing books and keeping order, and was all in all the front-of-the-house ninja we desperately needed. When Andy first started, I was utterly shocked by his professionalism. I constantly worried that he wouldn't find our place to be professional enough and would leave. The same was true with his wife, Lauren Fortgang, who was (and is) one of the best pastry chefs I've worked with (you can see her handywork for yourselves in the desserts chapter where Lauren takes over the recipe controls).

Andy understands that you can maintain a relaxed vibe while still providing service at a high level, giving more to our guests without making a show of it. He also understands the importance of looking after our staff; within months of his arrival, he made sure we were providing health insurance to our employees. Although Andy's hand in Le Pigeon may not be obvious or exciting to outsiders, without him we would all be lost.



Andy has really enjoyed his transition from New York to Portland. He may be the only guy in Portland who packs his linen slacks away when Labor Day rolls around, but he is also oddly comfortable sitting around a dive bar drinking Miller High Life while wearing seersucker pants with his shirt tucked in.



And that reminds me ... everyone at Le Pigeon has a nickname.

One day I was calling for a runner to bring food to a table, sternly saying, “Pick up, pick up, someone pick up, pickles, pickles.” Instead of the runner, Andy walked by and picked up the food. “That’s it,” I said, “your nickname is Pickles.” He glared at me, as only Andy can, and claimed that “Pickles” lacked gravitas. And so it became “Mr. Pickles.” That’s the name by which people both inside and outside LP know Andy: Mr. Pickles. A funny name for a straight guy—and that’s why it works.

A lot of people thought Le Pigeon would fail. We were broke to start; Paul was even offering coupons in the phone book those first few weeks. We had unmatched china, the music was way too loud, there was a club upstairs (see [“The Basement Tapes”](#)), and we had zero credit with purveyors (see [“Gabriel’s Love Letter to Plymouth Valiants”](#)). We were known as an offal den back then, but that wasn’t the image we were *trying* for. Honest to god, we were pushing offal so hard partly because

of inspiration from guys like Fergus Henderson, but mostly because those are the cheap bits, and cooking things that most people throw in the garbage was the easiest (and most creative) way to ensure we would have enough money to stay open the following week.

Still, those first three years were really a golden time at Le Pigeon. We were shooting from the hip with our wild finds and the hits were coming nonstop: [Rabbit and Eel Terrine](#), [Buffalo Sweetbread](#), [Duck Nuggets](#), [Lamb Tongue Fries](#), [Rabbit Spanakopita](#), and [Foie Gras Profiteroles](#). Erik was constantly pushing me and coming up with Pigeon legends, such as [Jacked Pork Chops](#) and the [Lamb Belly BLT](#). It was during this period that LP went from the tiny underdog on a rough street in Portland to a nationally recognized restaurant.



When you own a restaurant and have the great fortune to work with someone like Erik, who is amazing both in and out of the kitchen, at some point you end up with a metaphysical gun to your head: do you let him go, or do you build another place for him to do his thing? For me, the answer was clear. Our team was growing and becoming too big for the nest on East Burnside. In 2010, we built Little Bird right across the river from LP on 6th Avenue, and the “A” team shifted there. I brought in a new motley crew for LP, with big talent and fresh nicknames: Taffy, Fistopher, Chavez, and the rest. And although we flirt with the fantasy of opening a chicken shack or a tiny taco stand, I can tell you straight-faced that an empire we will never be.



As we write this book, it's six years after opening night, and Portland is now known for its restaurants as much as its "Put a bird on it" motto. LP has changed a bit, but really not much. We're still serving our cracked-out mountain food, but with a (slightly) refined edge (for example, [Be Cheeks Bourguignon](#), is still on the menu, but instead of heaped fried potatoes, it's served with cocotte of gratin with a side of black garlic and carrot salad). The music is probably still too loud, there are still freaks in our back stairwells, and the communal table ensures you will wind up talking to the stranger beside you.



And although I still feel like the kid who started this place, the truth is that Andy and I both have kids of our own now. With the five-year anniversary of the restaurant behind us, we thought it would be a good time to look back, to get all nostalgic and shit about the early days, and to get these recipes down on paper before we forget them—a challenge for me because “winging it” isn’t just a bad pigeon reference, it’s actually how I come up with new dishes. Along with the recipes, we wanted to tell some fun stories and introduce a few of the interesting characters we’ve gotten to know over the years (lo

sample content of Le Pigeon: Cooking at the Dirty Bird

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