
TASTE TEST **GRANT ACHATZ**

It is a Sunday morning in late October 2007. I reach over and knock my cell phone out of the cradle, pick it up and fumble with it until I find the button to silence the alarm. My head nestles back into the pillow and I argue with myself about whether I should pull myself out of bed or drift back into a dream. Slowly I wake up. Forcing my eyes open produces a dull throbbing in my head, and my mind begins to grasp how much I have to do—how I have to get out of bed, even though the fatigue is sitting on my chest like a gorilla. I lumber down the stairs, my legs not exactly following the orders fired off by the brain—they are stiff and don't bend well. I wonder if someone smacked me across the back with a baseball bat while I slept.

But it's no cause for concern. How I feel on this Sunday is how I feel on any given Sunday when I wake. I'm seventy-five hours into the work week at this point, most of that time spent standing in the hot kitchen, bearing the stress of the pursuit of perfection required to run the best restaurant in the country. As I head out the door I can't help but grin. I realize I feel exactly as I always do. Two months ago I began treatment for stage IV cancer of the tongue. I'm still here, I'm still me, and I am winning.

I'm the chef/owner of a restaurant named [Alinea](#) in Lincoln Park, Chicago. Some call Alinea the best, some call it strange, and all call it forward-thinking. I call it my passion. I have been cooking since I was 5 years old. It began as I watched my parents at our family's casual restaurant in a small town in Michigan—I watched them work hard and find satisfaction, and as I tagged along and helped out, I eventually fell in love with the craft. Fresh from high school, I headed to the Culinary Institute of America and began devoting myself to cooking. I promised myself that someday I would be the best there was; my goal was clear and I focused on it aggressively.

When I was in high school I told my friends that I would have my own restaurant by the time I was 30. Alinea opened May 4, 2005—I missed my mark by nine days. The period surrounding the opening was filled with energy and excitement, and there was no time to deal with the little white sore that had appeared on the side of my tongue. While sleeping four to five hours a night and pushing as hard as I could to make the restaurant a success, I blocked everything else out. Finally the pain made it difficult to eat, and sometimes to talk. All of the dentists and doctors I visited told me I was biting my

tongue. I wasn't drinking heavily, or smoking, but I was stressed—so I must have been gnawing on my tongue during my few hours of sleep at night. By 2007, several years and several more misdiagnoses later, the symptoms had become too severe to ignore.

The oral surgeon, a young man in his own right, entered the darkly lit waiting room with his head down. It was Friday, July 13th and the place was empty. They had not taken any patients that day, likely heading out of town early for a weekend of family time or golfing. The fact that they brought me in meant the results were time-sensitive, and his lack of eye contact told me I was in trouble. "It's not good," he said. I shrugged, gesturing a question, not able to talk due to the pain. "The biopsy is positive. It's cancer. You need to go to the ENT right away and get this looked at. I will call and get you an emergency appointment."

Wait. Did he say cancer? No--that can't be. And if it is, just clean it up—do what you guys do to fix it. I'm a busy guy; I don't have time for this.

Two days later the ENT confirmed the diagnosis as Stage IV. The cancer had taken over half of my tongue and spread into both sides of my neck. Recommended treatment was removal of three-quarters of the tongue, the lymph nodes in the neck and, depending on further scans, any other areas of the body that it may have spread. What the hell is this? I immediately got mad at cancer—mad like when someone cuts you off while driving. It was pissing me off; I'd throw a punch at it if I could. Give me a break, I thought. I am a chef; you can't cut out my tongue!

I went home from that appointment and lay down on my bed. For the first 10 minutes it was quiet. I realized that in addition to the anger, I was scared and confused. I had a few minutes of self-pity, then put my headphones on and blasted some music. Something shifted, snapped. I sat up, walked to the bathroom and threw some water on my face, and went to work.

The cascade of events that took place at this point included several consultations at different institutions that led to the same diagnoses and treatment protocol: surgery, chemo, and radiation. Eventually I found a group at the University of Chicago that approaches medicine with the same innovative approach that I try to take to cuisine. They proposed a treatment regimen that included aggressive chemotherapy and radiation in an effort to shrink the tumor and render surgery on my tongue minimal—or even unnecessary. This organ-preservation approach came with a higher cure rate than the other doctors quoted, so I signed up and started treatment the next week.

The doctors told me that the treatment was going to be extremely difficult. They warned me the side effects would be debilitating at times, leaving me fatigued to the point of interminable exhaustion. I could become depressed, and could suffer from memory loss and mental cloudiness. Hair loss, weight loss, and rashes were a given. And as for radiation, "Imagine the worst sunburn you have ever had—with blisters and peeling skin—and imagine it in your mouth and down your throat. You'll *lose all sense of taste*, and swallowing, even water, will be near impossible."

Not exactly what anyone wants to hear, especially not a chef.

At first they probably thought I was crazy in the radiation department, or simply had a poor wardrobe. I would show up everyday wearing the same clothes. Black pants, white t-shirt, black socks and clogs. After a few sessions they realized I came to the hospital in the clothes I would later wear at work. It saved me time. After all, I had to get Alinea as quickly as possible. In the waiting room I would edit recipes for my then upcoming cookbook and work on the online component, alineamosiac.com.

I would glance at my watch and feel relieved when they called my name. The wait was over and I would be at work soon. I would strip down, place the mouthpiece in my mouth that held my tongue in a certain position to ensure maximum radiation exposure, and lie down and let them strap my head to the table with a Hannibal-Lector-looking mask. The machine would rotate and pulse the beams into my mouth and throat for about 20 minutes before I was free to go, the skin on my face and neck bright red from the invisible cancer killer. This all took place around 8 am. I set up the schedule to best accommodate work. You see, this was only part one; I had to come back for another round five hours later.

I would race to Alinea after the first session. I would arrive at the same time I did six months previous. The first one in the door -- it is my favorite time in the restaurant. The entire kitchen is mine; it is quiet, and I can create freely. The cooks would file in a couple hours later; many of them would just look at me with strange disbelief on their faces. I never knew if they were evaluating my physical appearance -- 30 pounds lighter, no hair, skin riddled with the rash from the chemo drugs, face burned red -- and wondering why I was here working, or contemplating their own mortality as they watched a young, otherwise healthy man who they looked to for leadership facing a struggle for his life. I guess it didn't really matter. I was there and I was winning.

That was until three pm, when I had to leave to head back to the hospital for session two. And so it went for six weeks. Two sessions of blistering radiation five hours apart; I worked in between and after. I couldn't let the 52 people that devoted the better part of their time to the restaurant down. They knew the most supportive thing they could do for me was not a hug, or a pat on the back -- it was to work. To act like nothing had changed, nothing was in jeopardy, nothing was lost. They didn't know it, but they were fighting the battle with me. Together we rose to a level that was unthinkable. The cancer didn't have a chance.

I could not let it win. And I fought back with the fiercest weapon I had. The one thing that cancer could not compete with, the very thing it feeds on. Life. I fought back by living my life exactly the way I did before this all started. Stand up.

Chef Grant Achatz is one of the leading visionaries of modern cuisine. His humble roots in his family's Michigan restaurant instilled in him a love of the kitchen, but could not

portend the extent to which he would excel at, and even revolutionize, the craft. Today Achatz's Chicago restaurant, [Alinea](#) is widely recognized as one of the best in the world, and as the home of American avant garde fine dining.

Achatz was working as a cook by the age of 12, learning the basics and developing the skills that would set the foundation for his career. He enrolled at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, NY immediately after high school, and after graduation worked with Chef Steve Stallard in Michigan and briefly for Charlie Trotter in Chicago. His next move was to The French Laundry in the Napa Valley, where he spent a sum total of four years working with and learning from his mentor, Thomas Keller. Between stints at TFL, Achatz spent a year working as an assistant winemaker at La Jota Vineyards in California.

In 2001 he left his sous chef position at TFL to become executive chef of Trio in Evanston, Illinois. Achatz flourished at Trio, garnering accolades for his inventive menu structure, service pieces, and flavor combination. While at Trio he was named one of *Food & Wine's* "Best New Chefs" (2002), and "Rising Star Chef in America" by the James Beard Foundation (2003).

The Alinea opening in May 2005 was one of the most anticipated and hyped in recent American restaurant history; Frank Bruni of *The New York Times* dined there opening night, and it was nominated by the James Beard Foundation as Best New Restaurant in America that same year. Alinea was declared the "Best Restaurant in America" by *Gourmet* magazine's twice-per-decade list in 2006, and has received 5 stars from the *Mobil Travel Guide* from 2006-2008, as well as 5 diamonds from AAA. In 2007 Alinea joined *Restaurant Magazine's* list of the "World's 50 Best Restaurants," and Achatz was named "Best Chef Great Lakes" by the James Beard Foundation. This year the restaurant received an IVY award from *Restaurants & Institutions* magazine, and Achatz was named the James Beard Foundation's "Outstanding Chef in America."

Grant's forthcoming book is due to hit shelves in autumn of 2008. Find out more at alinea.com