

Gourmet

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THE GOURMET COOKBOOK CLUB: NATE APPLEMAN PROFILE

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The co-author of our January 2009 Cookbook Club selection reflects on his unexpected success as a fine-dining chef.



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Nate Appleman, the chef and owner of the Italian restaurants **A16** and **SPQR** in San Francisco, says he would want to be a butcher if he wasn't a chef. This small-town Ohio native already looks the part.

He has a solid build, a cue-ball-shiny shaved head, tattoos everywhere, and an easy smile that says, "Here, let me trim that roast for you." And butchering is in his family, if not in his blood. When he was five, his father was remarried to the daughter of a butcher. Appleman was too young to work with his new grandfather, but he loved watching him make sausage. His grandfather would grab a handful of freshly ground and mixed sausage meat and taste it—raw—to check its seasonings. "He was a manly man, you know?" Appleman remembers, "A real butcher."

Despite his down-to-earth nature, it's hard to know whether Appleman would really want to be behind a humble butcher counter given his recent success as a fine-dining chef. Appleman is as young as he looks (29), and has already achieved what many veterans of the business still strive towards: successful and critically acclaimed restaurants, and **a cookbook** to boot. But he's quick to remind you that he was never voted "most likely to succeed." A self-proclaimed "hell-raiser" in high school, he claims his parents thought he'd never amount to anything. But they were the ones who researched future options for him and found **The Culinary Institute of America** (CIA) in Hyde Park, New York—the most prestigious culinary school in the country—and sent him there after high school.

When Appleman arrived at the CIA, something clicked; he got an A on his first culinary math test. "Getting an A was something that I had never done before," says Appleman. "Going to the CIA drove me to focus. I had never been studious, but cooking gave me a love of learning." Appleman returned to Ohio for his internship requirement and landed at Maisonette, a fine-dining French establishment. Perhaps the most important lesson Appleman learned there came from sous chef David Falk: "Why don't you shut your

f—g mouth? You might learn something.”

Upon graduation, Appleman returned to Maisonette for six months, then moved to Seattle. He found a job at **Brasa**, where the wood-fired French-Portuguese cuisine had a delicious rusticity that he loved, and an apartment down the street from **Salumi**, the artisanal cured meat shop of Mario Batali’s father. Appleman stopped by Salumi every day and begged Armandino Batali to teach him. And every day, Batali declined, explaining, “This isn’t cooking; this is alchemy.” So Appleman moved to Italy to learn charcuterie. While there, he also cooked at a local restaurant and quickly graduated from the antipasti station to pasta, as significant a move as ascending from office assistant to senior executive. Appleman returned to Ohio completely broke and determined to cook at an authentic Italian restaurant in America.

But it took a few years. Appleman moved to San Francisco and was offered \$12 an hour to oversee **Campton Place**’s meat station. “Twelve dollars an hour seemed like the greatest thing ever,” Appleman recalls. After focusing on the food for a few months, he finally asked out the server he’d been eyeing from day one. They soon became engaged and moved north to Napa Valley so that she could attend the CIA at **Greystone’s pastry program**. Appleman became sous chef at **Tra Vigne** in St. Helena and says, “I *hated* it. I cooked a lot less because the operation was so big, but I did learn how to run a huge kitchen and manage a staff.”

While there, Appleman was promoted to executive sous chef and began talking to Christopher Hille, a good friend from Campton Place, about opening the restaurant that is now A16. He had reluctantly moved to Napa and was eager to get back to San Francisco and continue building his career. He joined the A16 team as *chef de cuisine* and became chef and partner when Hille left for New York City two years later. Although he continued focusing on regional Italian cuisine, he also established in-house butchery and embraced the sustainable food movement, building a network of local suppliers.

Appleman was telling me his story with the energy and rhythm of a chef dicing vegetables—a sustained *fwup, fwup, fwup* of words—detailing each stage with superlatives and stories of best friends and amazing food. When we sat ourselves at the **Jean Georges** bar in New York City, he offered me the stool facing the double-height windows that framed Christmas lights arranged to inspire holiday magic. I soon realized that he wanted the other stool, the one that faced the expansive open kitchen, gleaming with its own wondrous light.

As we spoke, Appleman kept glancing past me like a bad blind date and occasionally lost his train of thought. “I’m sorry,” he said, “It’s just that that guy’s my hero.” He nodded towards **Jean-Georges Vongerichten**, who was in his white chef’s coat, directing cooks in the kitchen. “The guy’s a genius. And look, he’s here. He’s at his restaurant.” When I asked if that was the sort of career he envisioned for himself, to become the chef and owner of countless restaurants around the world, Appleman quickly replied, “No, no. I don’t want an empire.” After a second, he mentioned that, in addition to A16 and its casual counterpart SPQR, he is opening a restaurant in Tokyo as part of a licensing agreement with investors to replicate the A16 pizza and pasta concept.

Still, Appleman says he doesn’t want to take on too much because he wants to be around for his family. When I inquired about his wife and son, he whipped out his iPhone and scrolled through photos of them in matching blue shirts emblazoned with “I love food.” When he’s not at work, he’s at home with them. He admitted, “It’s hard to balance time at home with two restaurants.” And then he talked about the third he’s opening in San Francisco this spring.

His newest restaurant, which will feature regional Italian food from Le Marche on the Adriatic side of the country, signals an important expansion. Appleman and his partners Shelley Lindgren and Victoria Libin are building this restaurant from the ground up. With the freedom to carve out the space, Appleman plans to

create an area large enough to butcher whole cows. (He already butchers whole pigs and lambs at A16.) His new place will allow him to centralize his butchering operation and provide freshly cut meat for his three local restaurants. At the thought of his future meat station, Appleman glowed, “I love breaking down a 320-pound steer into a perfect little filet.” He cupped his hands into the shape of hockey puck, imagining the beauty of an expertly cut steak. It seems Appleman will be able to butcher his meat and cook it too.

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