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CHEF

Ink

TALKING TATTOOS
WITH DECORATED CHEFS

by LESLIE DINABERG

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CHEF Ink

PETER CHAM

EXECUTIVE CHEF, FINCH & FORK

Initial ink: “The first one is probably my least favorite,” said Cham, who has four tattoos. “It’s a Damascus chef’s knife on my forearm. I was 22, I think.”

Tattoo #2: A Cambodian monster, inspired by folklore about a yeak who was the half brother of a prince. In order to become king, the prince has to defeat the monster by overcoming his internal battles and flaws until he is strong enough to take over his kingdom. “For me, it’s just a reminder to always keep pushing myself and take the time to self-reflect and see what I can change in myself to achieve larger goals in my life.”

Parents’ response? “Both of my parents are quite conservative Asian Cambodian parents. When I came home with my first tattoo, I don’t think my mom talked to me for an entire month straight. But she came around and got used to it. In her upbringing, it was for the outcasts and the unsavory people to be getting tattoos, which says a lot about chefs.”

Other tattoos: A Native American tomahawk. “I have no Native American roots whatsoever, but I was inspired by some artwork when I was traveling cross-country,” said Cham, who also sports a “really crappy tattoo” of a cactus desert scene that he got during a bachelor party in Reno. “We all got the same tattoo. It was a great time with a bunch of my really close friends. It was stupid, but it does mean a lot to me.”

Tattoo reflections: “As a chef, you are judged by your food, not by the way you look or your appearance, as opposed to other professions where you have to dress a certain way or look a certain way to be taken seriously.”



BOB OSWAKS

PROPRIETOR/BOULANGER, BOB’S WELL BREAD

Initial ink: Of his three tattoos, the family crest incorporating his wife’s and daughter’s initials was first.

Tattoo #2: Started out as a red baker, but the ink bled. “Ten years ago when I started baking, I thought it would be really cool to get a tattoo of a baker on my arm; it would just be me embracing my new path. I spent 30 years in the television business, shaving and wearing a suit every day and being a real corporate executive. I felt like I was going in a different direction and I could embrace that.”

Tattoo #2 re-do: The red baker has been reimagined by artist Pat Fish as a cornucopia of bread. “When I first approached her, she said, ‘Nobody really likes to fix someone else’s mistakes.’ But she came around and did a really good job. If you saw the original and saw what she did, you would be really hard-pressed to say there was something there before.”

Tattoo #3: The Bob’s Well Bread logo, which is his great-grandmother’s Victorian-era bread fork. “My mother gave it to me as a gift when I started baking.”

Mom’s thoughts? “She loves the fork being used as a logo. I don’t think she really takes issue that I got it as a tattoo. Growing up as a Jew, tattoos were really frowned upon, but I think that’s a different generation.”

Tattoos for you: They have temporary tattoos of the logo at the bakery in Los Alamos. “I keep them at the front counter, and little kids love them.”

Why so many kitchen tats? “It’s creative self-expression, and a rebelliousness is part of it. Working in the kitchen is intense. Every day is a marathon kind of thing, and you’re working under extreme conditions. I think that, somehow, it just goes with the territory.”



TALKING TATTOOS WITH DECORATED CHEFS FROM LOS ALAMOS TO COAST VILLAGE ROAD

The tattoo has officially replaced the toque as part of the uniform in today's professional kitchens. Knives and ink now go together like salt and pepper, and many, if not most, of Santa Barbara County's chefs now wear their hearts on their sleeves in the form of tattoos. (Indeed, when one chef — who isn't featured here but does sport tattoos — was told of this story, he quickly replied, "You should do a story on chefs who *don't* have tattoos!")

by
LESLIE DINABERG
photos by
PAUL WELLMAN

Curious about the stories behind their body art, I reached out to a number of these culinary wizards to learn more. What I found was quite a mix of motivations and meanings. From edible inspirations and Buddhist blessings to marking rites of passage and drunken bachelor party souvenirs, every piece of art — and every chef — has a uniquely different story to tell.

As Chef Drew Terp of Pico explained, "One of the best things about being a chef is that you're like every other chef, and you're also unlike any other chef."



MICHAEL PATRIA

EXECUTIVE CHEF, FOUR SEASONS RESORT THE BILTMORE

Tattoo rundown: "On my left arm, I've got a half sleeve. I asked the artist to do something kind of Renaissance style-ish, with a focus on fruits, vegetables, and wine, with the intention of doing my other arm more in the direction of meats and game and fish, and probably ale and whiskey, that kind of a motif. I want it done in more of a Dutch still life kind of style."

Initial ink: "I had a small one on my back that I got when I was 18 years old. It's an emblem that Michelangelo used to use to sign some of this artwork. It kind of stays in that Renaissance motif. That's always been an era that fascinates me, how we had this time period with so many phenomenal artists, philosophers, and so many of the artists were so well versed in so many different forms of art."

Tattoo tip: "Figure out what you want to do and then really wait and think on it. Give yourself six months, and, if that's still the tattoo that you want, then go for it. There's been a lot of ideas for tattoos that I wanted to do, and then six months later I'm kind of grateful for the fact that I didn't do it."

You work in an upscale kitchen. Are there fewer tattoos? "It's pretty universal. I'd say 90 percent of my team have tattoos, some of them quite covered, literally from neck to toe. It's everywhere now; it's no longer just kind of the rough and rugged days of the tougher kitchen. I saw a meme the other day. It was a picture of a guy with sleeves of tattoos, and it said, 'It used to mean that if you had tattoos from head to toe, you probably killed somebody and were in a motorcycle gang. Nowadays, it means you can make a wicked beurre blanc.'"

BROOKE STOCKWELL

EXECUTIVE CHEF, GLEASON FAMILY VINEYARDS

Initial ink: The kanji symbol for music. "I was an honor student and I had to write a business plan for my mom to allow me to get it for my 15th birthday," said Stockwell, who has more than 17 tattoos now, including a full sleeve.

A business plan? "I had two or three options, and I wrote out what they meant to me, and we decided on what to get together. I remember writing down, 'If I'm in a bad mood, I can turn on music, and it will just change my outlook or my mood.'"

Veggie tats? "Most of my tattoos are culinary, and everything has a meaning behind it. I have an artichoke on my arm because that's my brother's favorite vegetable. I have a beet and brussels sprouts because those are my two vegetables I hated growing up, and once I learned how to cook, I realized that they're delicious if you cook them properly."

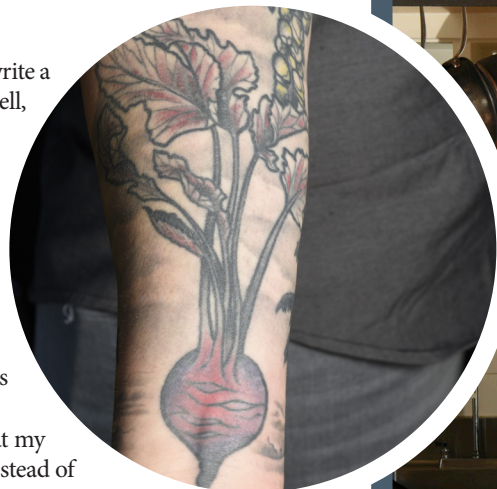
Most meaningful? "I have a Jalama Beach tattoo that represents the day that my grandpa's ashes were released there. Two dolphins appeared out of nowhere. Instead of swimming away, they swam belly up, with tails waving. It was like my grandpa saying I'm not alone and waving goodbye."

Blossom bicep? "I love all of my tattoos. I wake up every morning, and I stretch, and I see my colorful arm, and I smile. I have a squash blossom positioned on my right bicep, so when people do their whole gun show thing and flex, I've got my squash blossoms."

Stress relief: "On my other arm, I only have one tattoo. It says, 'Life doesn't stop for anybody,' in my mom's writing. So many times I've been cooking and stressed out, and I see my mom's writing, and I remember to take a breath; everything is good."

Why do you like tattoos? "I know why I got my first one, and that's because I wanted to be different. They definitely don't feel good when you're getting them. They're expensive. I love being a badass tattooed female chef. It's just a way to show my personality on my outside. If I don't want to give someone enough time to get to know me, they can at least get a little taste of my personality and see who I am because I wear it on my skin."

She likes when people ask to hear the stories. "I say, which one? It's the story of my life; how much time do you have? Sit down."



CHEF *Ink*

SCOTT SMITH

HEAD BAKER, BOB'S WELL BREAD

Stats on tats: "I have a full sleeve on my right arm, and they are all kind of connected in a way. On my left arm, I have a whole forearm and the back top, so probably about 30."

Initial ink: "My first tattoo was a horrible tattoo. It's on the back of my neck, the equivalent of a male tramp stamp. It's this little red tribal art design that I got when I was 18. I just ran to the tattoo shop and picked it off the wall. I'm still planning on getting that one covered up."

Next tattoos: "I held off for a while, then I got a Día de los Muertos sugar skull on my forearm and just started going around that. My whole right arm is like Memento Way. The theme is 'seize the day, live in the moment' because you could die tomorrow, which is kind of a reminder to me of my own mortality. On my left arm, I have all of my children's names."

More to come? "The older I get, I don't look for things I want; it just has to kind of come to me one day. It has to be meaningful, because my tattoos kind of tell a story."

Why so popular with chefs? "One, they are creative artistically, but two, it's the kind of field that allows that, because you can be a chef and be a baker and you can have tattoos on your hands or on your neck. It's just kind of a way of taking something that you love and putting it down on your skin."

Tattoo tip: "Wait until you're older to get one. You just make better tattoo decisions. Don't jump into a tattoo. If you don't know what you want, don't get a tattoo."



DREW TERP

CHEF/CO-OWNER, PICO AT THE LOS ALAMOS GENERAL STORE

Initial ink: The Japanese character for "Monkey Penis" on his foot. "I tried to come up with what I thought was semi vulgar and fairly purist, but also as random as possible, and put it in a place that you mostly wouldn't notice a tattoo. My favorite thing is when I'm on the subway or at a beach and a Japanese person walks by and is looking at my foot and says, 'What do you think that means?' It's a good conversation starter, let's put it that way."

Tattoo #2: The word "Nomad" on his arm. In his early twenties, Terp lived/traveled with gypsies in Northern Spain. Their tradition was, when you turned 21, you either decided to become a gypsy or chose to live outside the culture. If you decide to live secularly, you must denote this from the neck down. If you choose the gypsy culture, you denote it from the neck up. "My friend got 'gypsy' in Basque tattooed around his neck. When I made the decision to change my nomadic lifestyle and settle down some, I decided to get 'Nomad' tattooed on my arm, below my neck."

Why do chefs get tattoos? "There is something fundamentally different about people who decide that this is their lifestyle. If you see yourself as an open canvas, that helps you become a better chef. You can define yourself through your food."

He said that kitchen life can be "numbing," explaining, "To really feel something, which is needles sticking in your skin for hours on end, it's a wake-up — it may just be as simple as that. There are some times that we need to just step outside of our own comfort zone as a chef in this crazy world of kitchens and feel something. Psychologically, chefs are generally not very open with the way that they feel. We're not supposed to be emotional. The kitchen is a tough place, and you have to be tough; you have to be tougher than everybody else to be the top dog. Rather than go to a therapist, you go to a tattoo artist and get a little ink and get out a little pain, and you're ready to go."

DANIELLE VAN STEEN

CHEF, BETTINA

Initial ink: A symbol on her back was the first of four tattoos. "I got it from a monk in Thailand. It has eight points on it, one for every Buddha. The monk chooses for you. He reads your aura and can see what's happening in your life. Mine basically means that the Buddhas are offering me protection from the things in my life that I cannot control. It cost \$5, and you had to pay in cigarettes. The ink is made of snake venom, monk ashes, and some sort of ink. My husband and I did it together."

Next tattoos: The word "steady" on her right hand and a French curse word on the left. "I drink so much coffee that I shake constantly, and plating things when you're shaking can be quite challenging," she explained. As to the other? "I've worked in a lot of French kitchens, and it's just the number-one word for when things are going poorly or someone is especially clumsy, which I am. It's basically twice telling myself to be a little bit more calm."

Most recently: An hourglass with a tree inside, on her leg. "It's sort of a thinking piece, where it's either growing up from nothing or it's turning into nothing — and you have to decide every day."

Why do you like tattoos? "I like the idea of self-expression. I like the way that it feels. I never thought that I would get a tattoo, but then when I got the first one, it felt kind of good to express myself. Without ever really saying anything, it's a mark that you get to choose, and I really like that. It's something that says something about who you are, but you don't have to tell anyone. And it doesn't matter if they like it or not; it's not for them." ■

