

## Your Waiter Tonight... Will Be the Chef

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At what point in the chef-diner relationship is it O.K. to offer a backrub?

One night last week, during dress rehearsals for the tiny new restaurant Momofuku Ko, David Chang could barely stand, much less cook. ('Back pain, stress-related,' one of the sous-chefs opined under his breath.) Each of the 12 diners, seated a narrow counter's width away, was in a position to suggest remedies, panaceas and stretches, which the chef attempted in the sliver of space between the steamer and the sorbet freezer.

'I'll be O.K.' he said, waving off an offer of Valium. 'Let me do the foie.'

Grab a stool and belly up to a new brand of upscale dining, where closeness to the cook comes with your meal as routinely as bread. Although counter seating, open kitchens, and chef's tables are not new to the scene, Momofuku Ko and a few other restaurants are reaching for a new level of intimacy. The chefs are not only cooking and plating the food, but also serving it, taking coats, recommending wine and confirming reservations.

'Everyone who works here is a chef, and everyone is also a dishwasher,' said Michael Carlson, the chef at Schwa in the Wicker Park neighborhood of Chicago, which serves elaborate multicourse menus of dishes such as parsnip custard with ice-wine vinegar caramel, candied sweetbreads and a lavender lecithin bubble. (It's a dessert.)

The new model was inspired by sushi bars and re-engineered by the French chef Joël Robuchon in 2003 at his Paris restaurant L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon, where a counter surrounds an open kitchen. Adopters of this model across the Atlantic tend toward the young and the restless, who are interested in testing received notions not only about food but also about what a restaurant can and should be.

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