

Futures

Grace and flavour, under pressure

A taste of home. By M. E. Garber



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

I'd arrived on Mars, at glorious Idyll City, to cook Pork Normandy for the richest human in the Universe. Me, a chemist.

Yes, chemistry was my job, and I liked it – had even loved it, once. But food was my calling. I took no greater pleasure than seeing smiles when someone took a bite of a meal I'd made, or hearing the conversation fade to leave only the soft clinking of cutlery on plates as guests focused entirely on the meal. That silence was the best compliment a chef could have.

But I wasn't really a chef, just a cook with a passion. No schools would take me on. I was too old, too entrenched in my own methodologies, too inflexible, too whatever-would-give-them-reason-to-deny-me-admittance. I wanted to change all that by winning this contest.

Calling Gilles-Gerard Daumont 'demanding' was like calling outer space 'cold'. Unable to return to Earth's gravity, he'd issued a challenge: a position as chef for whoever could recreate his beloved grand-mère's preparation

of his favourite meal.

"Everything tastes insipid," Daumont complained. "I want the wonder of those flavours."

Hundreds had tried; all had failed. They'd arrived with top-notch ingredients, transported at enormous expense from Earth – the last Belle de Boskoop apples, dust-covered vintage Calvados, actual cream from pastured Normande cows, authentic porc du Normandie – and failed. Some prepared the meal on Earth – in Rouen, France, even – transporting the finished product to M. Daumont. They'd failed. Vat-created historic-identical meats: failed.

Two top chefs had gone to extremes: one making the meal in a sealed 'clean room' kitchen, the other cooking in an ancient thatched farmhouse in Clécy. Both went home in tears.

They were chefs. Why did I think I had a chance when they'd failed? I'd gnawed my fingernails to shreds before I hit 'send' on my application.

The famed Daumont temper flared hotter with each failure. He ruined reputations, flung offending plates in their faces. Once, when a chef protested, Daumont had tried to space the man, but fortunately the dome's gendarme intervened. Apparently creating a bland meal wasn't grounds for death, even in Idyll City.

Still, few chefs remained willing to make the attempt, and at last my application was approved.

Ayad Allali, Daumont's chief of staff, met my shuttle. The man's clipped manner said it all: as a mere chemist and home cook, I was nobody.

It didn't matter. They'd already complied with my only request: provide a complete analysis of the dome's environment, including *exacting* pressure measurements, and the composition of both the current planetary atmosphere and that within the dome. It was hideously expensive. The reports had arrived within two days.

Allali waited as I toured the enormous kitchen. Stainless steel gleamed in the flat

Futures

lighting. Not a single scent lingered in the air. It was as if I was the first chef to step into this space. I meant to be the last.

“Sufficient?” Allali’s attention had wandered to his messages, eyes snapping up and down as he scrolled to the next ‘chef’ on his dwindling list. He’d already written me off as another failure.

Accepting his challenge, I got to work.

It wasn’t a particularly complex meal: pork with cream, apples and apple brandy. But the gentle flavours melded, becoming complex, elevating simple ingredients to epicurean.

Allali personally oversaw my work. Seeing my basic ingredients, he gave a tiny sniff and went back to scrolling his neural feeds.

I prepared the meal according to my favourite recipe, one that focused on the freshness of ingredients rather than their novelty. Despite that, the kitchen remained nearly scent-free. No aroma of freshly peeled apples, even after they began simmering. No heady whiff from the Calvados – just the barest of odours lifted from the open pan before me.

Allali stood by my shoulder, ready to whisk a plateful to the dining room. “Just like the others,” he opined. “Daumont will hate it.”

I held up a hand. “I’m not done yet.”

I opened my final supply box. Whereas the others had held the recipe’s ingredients, this one contained an array of small vials. Powders, liquids and granules winked inside each, their chemical symbols clearly written on the front. Tucked in one corner, a sheet of paper outlined exacting proportions.

I lifted the first vial and measured, preparing to sprinkle it over the meal.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” Allali shoved my arm aside.

“Finishing the meal.”

“This isn’t the recipe. I know! I’ve seen it hundreds of times!”

“And they’ve all failed,” I reminded him.

“Pressure and atmosphere affect human scent, and therefore, taste. I’ve come up with a translation formula. These aren’t harmful.” I held out the vial. Allali squinted at it, then methodically examined each label with his retinal scanners. Frowning, he reluctantly released my arm.

Quickly, I ‘seasoned’ the meal, counteracting the flavour-inhibiting atmosphere as I’d worked it out back on Earth. As I finished sprinkling, a pleasing scent wafted up.

Still, Allali made me carry the meal to the table myself.

Daumont sniffed appreciatively as I set the plate before him. With clear anticipation, he cut and lifted a morsel to his mouth. Chewed. His eyes closed for a long moment, savouring, before he swallowed.

Lifting wet eyes to my face, Daumont smiled. “Ayad, give this man whatever he wants.”

Warily, Allali faced me. “What’s your desire? To become chef here, yes?”

“I want to be an *independent* chef,” I clarified, and named a fat figure. “And I want a school to train others.” When he bobbed his head, I asked Allali, “What’s your favourite meal – I’ll start there.”

Allali startled, and I smiled. He still thought it was a ploy of some kind, and he didn’t respect me as a chef – not yet. But I’d earn it. One flavourful bite at a time.

M. E. Garber lives halfway between the Kennedy Space Center and Disney World, the ideal place for someone whose work spans the speculative gauntlet. When not writing, she’s often found in the kitchen. She blogs at <http://megarber.net>, and tweets pics of her ridiculously photogenic dog @m_e_garber13.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

M. E. Garber reveals the inspiration behind *Grace and flavour, under pressure*.

This story began as a misread prompt. The real prompt was ‘season’, but because I was rushing I read ‘seasoning’. My writer-brain was hooked.

I decided to try something SF with food, but what? Then I remembered an article I’d read on how the pressures of space, and other worlds’ atmospheres, would affect human perceptions, specifically taste and smell. The story was off and running.

Like the protagonist, I’m a home cook, and I take great pleasure in creating meals, melding and balancing flavours. I’m certainly no chef, nor do I wish to be. I’m happiest being able to play, and improvise, and not having the pressure to perform. And yet, I bristle at the notion that this attitude makes cooking, and one’s dedication to the art of cooking, somehow lesser. Because to me, as for the protagonist, the silence that falls once forks lift to lips and flavour explodes on tastebuds — *that’s* true praise. And yes, I hope Mars’ first human settlers include professionals who are also talented home cooks.

