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The Tao of Schlow

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It was all about the capicola.

There you were one night last summer in the enoteca of Via Matta. Let's say, hypothetically, that the tiles were shimmering on the wall behind you, reflecting glitter from the diamonds on the swirl of Hollywood B-listers and DC politerati. There was Alan Cumming dropping his cell phone under a chair, Alfre Woodard downing spicy calamari, Wendie Malick making speeches.

Let's say that night the enoteca had become the makeshift VIP room for one of many political parties held during the Democratic National Convention. But you were hanging out there with Via Matta co-owner and chef Michael Schlow. Hovering above the room in his slightly smudged whites, all Schlow wanted to talk about was capicola.

"Just taste it — it's the best thing in the entire world," he might have boomed, pointing to the thin slices of meat being served on tiny bits of *bruschetta* with grainy mustard. "There's so much flavor there. It's straight from Italy."

Found in Italy when, as rumor had it, Schlow was hanging out with REM's Michael Stipe? He won't say. Will barely even acknowledge the question. He's giddy all right, but about a piece of imported meat.

So what about the capicola, anyway? Was it heaped with caviar to appease the tony crowd? No. Was it laced with foie-gras powder and lobster foam to awe them with Schlow's culinary fearlessness? Negative. And, after the last groupie and politico had left the party, did Schlow do what any other modern-era chef would do — call the gossip columns? A most definite no.

That is, hypothetically. Because even if you *were* there, even if you saw it all with your own eyes, odds are that the only part of the evening Schlow would willingly confirm — and maybe the part he cared most about anyway — is the part about the capicola.

By all measures of the fickle, image-obsessed landscape that is America's food world these days, Schlow should not be a player.

That's because, in the age of celebrity chefs, he staunchly refuses to consider himself one. He is the anti-celebrity chef. Just as stubbornly, Schlow is loathe to label himself a celebrity magnet. When Bono and the Edge turn up at the bar at Radius, he barely flinches. When Tim Robbins drops in for lunch, he feeds him like anybody else. Other chefs might fawn first, then run to call the paparazzi and grab as much attention as they can. Schlow does exactly the opposite.

"Michael has absolutely no air of pretense about him," says rock legend Peter Wolf, a friend of Schlow's for more than 10 years. "He loves to share his knowledge about food, but in a way that makes you know that he loves what he does."

Schlow's outsider-made-insider status extends, not surprisingly, to his cooking. You can't talk about food these days without mentioning the fun food trend spurred by Spain's Ferran Adrià of El Bulli and the international kitchen wizards-gone-mad scientists taking their cues from him. Soon, we'll all be awash in banana gels, basil foams, and countless other experimental bits. There's Schlow, meanwhile, turning out keep-it-real recipes of cod with tomatoes, pine nuts, and olives, or pork chops with figs, fennel, and cashews. It's a predilection for simplicity best documented in his first cookbook, *It's About Time*, out this month. Sound pretty dull compared to banana gel? Maybe so. But behind that simplicity is a philosophy of cooking and serving that, in the end, is the very thing that makes him great.

Installed on the wall of Radius is a list Schlow calls the "Ten Commandments of the Kitchen." One of the first is *Taste, taste, taste*. "Chefs put food up without tasting it to make sure it's seasoned right all the time," explains Schlow, who grew up in a strict, food-loving household in Brooklyn. "And I hate sending the food back to our cooks. It means we haven't done a very good job training them."

Perfectionism is one of Schlow's trademarks. Unlike many chefs, he isn't loyal to any one type of cuisine, technique, or gastronomic methodology. No classic Italian. No fusion. No straight Continental. The restaurant triumvirate he and business partners Esti Parsons and Christopher Myers run is a precisely fitted puzzle of distinct menus and atmospheres.

Radius, the most formal, expensive, and critically lauded of the three, came first. Opened six years ago, it's the modern French showpiece. Then there's Via Matta, which draws from four specific regions of Italy Schlow thought New England ingredients could represent especially well: Piedmont, Tuscany, Campania, and Emilia-Romagna. Lastly is Great Bay, positioned to portend the next evolution of New England seafood.

"In order to work at any of them, you have to have a predisposition to serve," says Schlow. "Every espresso, every wine glass, has to be perfect. The Boston food scene has become better over the last 10 years since I got here. So you have to compete with yourself, and that's why we have so many rules in our kitchen."

Some of those rules are straight old school. For starters, all of Schlow's chefs must be clean-shaven and wear white T-shirts under their jackets. Oh, yeah, and no swearing. "It costs you \$1 every time you curse," he says. In the first months after implementing the rule, he collected almost \$1,200 (which he used to take the offenders out for dinner). "I'd have guys handing me a \$20, saying, 'This should cover me for the week.'"

To Schlow, such a thing becomes almost a civic duty. "Chefs right now have a responsibility to educate the next generation," he says, proudly listing off the chefs who have worked under him before heading on to other prestigious kitchens. "We have sous-chefs at Babbo and at the restaurant Daniel," Schlow says. "In Boston, there's Gabriel Frasca [executive chef at Spire] and Amanda Lydon [at UpStairs on the Square]. That's the greatest mark of success. You feed people well and turn out great young chefs."

Not just great chefs, but expressive ones — qualities, according to Schlow, that are synonymous. "Some kitchens are downright hostile," he says. "And that *does* affect what you cook. Do you want to be angry and cursing when you're making food for someone?"

That's a sensibility that runs contrary to much of the current Ferran-fueled school, which can be more about pushing food to its chemical limits and less about the mood of who's making or eating it. It is, arguably, the science department to Schlow's humanities program.

Not that he would put it quite that way, of course. "It's great that there are chefs like Wylie Dufresne [of New York's wd-50] and Pino Maffeo [at Restaurant L] doing experimental work," he says of the new chef-scientists. "But I cook the way I wish I was being fed."

Simple perfection. The altruism of teaching young chefs. Cooking according to your mood. Sounds compelling enough. But then there's that whole celebrity chef thing. Schlow may not like it, but it's part of his reputation. Can we really believe he's thinking about the humble art of feeding cravings while his ego's getting pumped on TV?

"I don't want this to sound too *been there, done that*, but at one of my first jobs for Pino Luongo in the Hamptons," Schlow recalls, "he instilled in me this need to treat everyone the same. If you want them to come back, you have to treat them like human beings."

And every now and then, to lie for them. Or so Schlow sheepishly admits as he launches into the story of how one rock star — let's just say (since Schlow refuses to name names) a certain knighted British rock god — came into Via Matta for dinner. "As soon as it was leaked to the papers, [the gossip columns] called to confirm. I just outright lied. I said they were not in the restaurant. And then the paper wrote a story about how they didn't believe me." The rock star "came back again. He said, 'You know Michael, people are always lying, saying I am somewhere I'm not. And here you are lying for me, saying I'm not somewhere I am.'"

Schlow "understands the trials and tribulations of a musician on the road," explains Wolf. "They all love him because he just makes them feel so comfortable."

Which is why in the end, it really is all about the capicola. Mention it to Schlow months later, and he's talking about it with an enthusiasm you'd expect to hear about something he'd just discovered five minutes ago.

"I really think all you need are amazing ingredients, cooked well," Schlow says. "There aren't many things that can make our brain, heart, and tummy happy at the same time like food can. You know when you're craving a chocolate-chip cookie? Well, nothing's a bigger disappointment than a shitty chocolate-chip cookie. But a soft, gooey, warm chocolate-chip cookie at that moment? *That* can really do something for you."

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