

## FEATURE

## CHARLIE'S ANGELS

You need divine patience to take the heat in Trotter's famous restaurant.

By Chris Stearns, Illustration by Andrew Zbihlyj



"It was a tough kitchen. Some people call it hell. I call it a character-building experience."

— Moto chef Homaro Cantu talking about Charlie Trotter's in *Fast Company*

Hell. The descriptions I'd heard of behind-the-scenes life at top restaurants tended toward the diabolical, invoking heat, both literal and metaphorical. Brutal hours, crushing stress, insult, injury. Maybe I'm just a glutton for punishment, but I wanted a taste of the action. So I offered myself up for a *stage*, volunteering free labour for a foot in the kitchen door of one of the most famous restaurants in North America: Charlie Trotter's in Chicago. Trotter literally wrote the book on restaurant service (actually, he wrote two), and his team is considered one of the best there is. My assignment: Survive four days in the fire.

**Tuesday 2 p.m.** I'm loaned a chef's coat and given innocuous jobs, like carrying boxes and steeping tea. I have the distinct impression I'm being sized up before being pulled aside by a couple of servers. "We're going to have to chef-proof you," they say with a look of parental concern, ticking off survival tips. First: No whistling. Chef hates whistling. Second: Respect the Cone of Silence. This is an invisible field surrounding Chef to a distance of nine metres, inside which all conversation and laughter must be suppressed. Third: No touching Chef. A handshake is fine, but for God's sake, don't try to hug him or anything; he doesn't like to touch strangers. I dutifully note all of the above (I wasn't planning on any hugging, so I'm okay there) and ask if there's anything else. "Let's see. Chef's favourite movie is *A Clockwork Orange*, so if you can work a reference into your conversations, you're golden."

Later I'm introduced to Chef. He is perfectly inscrutable. Even those who have worked alongside him for years find him impossible to read. I blabber about how excited I am to be here, how I've been looking forward to it and so on, while Trotter listens impassively. I had thought up a clever way to allude to the Droogs, but now I can't remember it.

**Wednesday 5 p.m.** The staff has gathered for its nightly pre-shift meeting. Trotter wrote about this ritual, and the practice is now imitated in restaurants across the continent. But here they still do it best. Each server is handed a double-sided cheat sheet crammed with information about new dishes, backup products (bison will sub for beef tenderloin if we run out) and wine and cheese changes. The guest list for the night is annotated with the Alerts, impenetrable ciphers detailing the particularities of each table. A party of three is noted as "GOF: 3xDAL, ®FT" (their friends called ahead and are treating). A couple has asked for "®T86&WP" (they'd like to eat at the kitchen table and have the sommelier pair wines with their meal). A large party has "1x lactose intolerant, 1x no pork and 2x no raw food, olives or soft cheese" (the Alert notes they are "quietly pregnant"). The servers may know more about the guests than their dining companions do.

**Thursday 8 p.m.** For much of the night, it is necessary to communicate non-verbally because of the Cone of Silence. I learn to translate the gestures and significant looks that make up the servers' unspoken vernacular. Guests' dishes, for instance, must touch the table in a perfectly synchronized downward descent of plates. Servers lock eyes, then look down, signifying "now." Privately, I call it the Shrug Patois.

In the kitchen, dirty plates are piling up. Chef hates a messy dish area. He catches the dishwasher's eye, then places his hands over his eyes, ears and mouth: a soundless "see-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil" gesture. Quickly, the offending dinnerware disappears. Shrug Patois may have evolved to communicate despite Chef, but clearly Trotter has learned to speak the language. Wait a minute – is that irony?



**Friday 9:30 p.m.** Full house. Chef is angry, and the party of four seated at the kitchen table (a lone group planted in the middle of scurrying waiters and chefs) is getting a show. Eating in the kitchen is like securing a backstage pass: It is the most sought-after table in the building. Trotter is watching lines of plates stream off the pass, leaning in so close that his eyes nearly touch the tenderloin. He finds one dish where a delicate purée, smeared thinly over the plate, has baked dry under the hot lights. He tries to scrape it with a fork –

no luck. He frowns. The room tenses. This is what some guests hope for when they book the kitchen table: discord, a fiery spectacle. Tonight Trotter doesn't oblige. "You know, this is why *other* restaurants suck," he says, pointing at the plate. "Do it again." Cooks speed into a blur of white.

Later, as the last guests are tucking into their main courses, the manager pulls me aside. Oh crap. My mind reels with a list of potential mistakes. (Was it when I put the plates down out of sequence again?) We approach an empty table in the dining room. (Did I set it wrong?) He slides out the chair, motioning for me to sit. I am confused; the room is still half full, and we shouldn't have a sit-down here. Then the manager smiles. "Hungry?" he asks, and I get it. After four days of seeing the restaurant from the inside, now I get to experience it as a guest. It's over. I've passed from hell through purgatory and didn't even notice when I came out the other side. The 10-course meal that follows is a series of tiny miracles. You might even call it heaven. ←

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