

Behind the curtain

NEW YORK CITY | Alinea chef shows off culinary wizardry for convention foodies

BY SEANAN FORBES

It's mid-October, and Alinea's Grant Achatz is far from home. The molecular chef is in New York City for the Gourmet Institute, a weekend focused on food.

Early in the event, a smartly dressed woman describes the Institute as "a science fiction convention for foodies." If it's a con, then it's an upscale one, with top chefs dishing out game, artisanal cheese, chocolate and charm.

If there is to be sci-fi, then it will be in Achatz's seminar.

On Sunday afternoon, people awaiting entry to his session murmur quietly. This is Oz and they're about to see the Wizard.

When the door opens, attendees enter a space with neatly ranked chairs. Each seat bears a large black envelope holding one sealed plastic bag with a vanilla bean; another fresh rosemary, garlic and black pepper; and a third, a gingerbread cookie. A travel-sized spray bottle promises to contain a Christmas tree.

At the front of the room, Achatz stands behind a workstation. Before him, a tray is piled with branches of oak leaves.

Achatz is a peculiar — not strange, but distinctive — combination of benevolent dictator and underground anarchist. He would like nothing more than to cloister you and your companion

within a pod where he could adjust each aspect of your environment — and then he'd want you to collaborate in the creation of your experience.

"In the spirit of the restaurant," he says, "we're going to play a couple of games today. The first one is what I call my 'proof of concept'. I'm basically going to show you how aroma plays into taste."

He has people pinch their noses and insert vanilla beans into their mouths.

"What do you taste?" he asks. Nothing.

He asks his pupils to release their noses while holding the beans in their mouths. The flavor explodes and so does Achatz's energy. He's just gotten a room full of people to enter his world, to taste the ordinary — vanilla — in an extraordinary way.

Achatz fills a plastic bag with scented air. He seals the bag, perforates it with a needle and slips it into a pillowcase. At Alinea, 1723 N. Halsted, the pillow would be placed on the table and a plate set on it, pressing lavender into the air while a diner ate. Here, the pillow is passed around the room. Squeezes, instead of dishware, release the scent.

The oak branches come with tempura-fried mouthfuls of pheasant breast, roasted shallot and apple cider gelée impaled on



Alinea chef Grant Achatz burns oak leaves as part of a demonstration on the power of aroma. He was among the participants at the recent Gourmet Institute in New York. | PHOTO COURTESY OF SHAHAR AZRAN, GOURMET

their ends, the leaves smoldering. The whole is intended to invoke the autumns of childhood.

A few minutes later, bowls of dry ice, hay, "the guts from pumpkin", cinnamon and fruit are borne down the aisle by black-clad staffers. Autumn walks the room. "Don't be afraid," Achatz says, a grin audible in his voice, as someone recoils from a smoking bowl.

Finally, participants spray their mouth with "Christmas" (pine tisane) and bite a ginger-snap. Achatz tells his audience that the blend should "conjure the memory of the holiday." The seminar ends with winter.

After class, Achatz drapes himself into a chair. His slim body looks as if it hasn't been touched by adolescence, let alone anything harsher.

In fact, he has survived Stage IV tongue cancer, treatment for

the disease and the media frenzy that followed him through the illness. He became a hot human interest story (a chef with tongue cancer — imagine it).

No one could blame him for putting up defenses, but Achatz, who in June won the James Beard Foundation Award for Outstanding Chef, is relaxed and candid — even about having not much left to reveal.

"I feel like I've run the gamut," he says. "Especially with the cancer; that whole wave of press ends up getting very personal, so you're not only talking about cooking, you're talking about your life, so I feel like I've been incredibly open."

He's also relieved to have a project over. "The book is out," he says, speaking of the thick tome that bears his restaurant's name. "It was hard work, man — I had no idea. I thought, 'Hey, I'll

just write a cookbook.' Good lord. Two years, it took us . . . I'm a cook, I'm a chef. You would think that it would be really easy for me to write a recipe. But it's not."

Books don't interact. But at Alinea Mosaic (www.alineamosaic.com), the Web site that complements the book, participation is actively invited.

Asked what's next, Achatz squints into the future. "The big stuff can wait for a little bit. The book is going to consume a good amount of my time until the holiday. But after the holiday, I really need to focus on the restaurant entirely. We need to reinvigorate ourselves creatively."

Let the big stuff wait. Look at Grant Achatz and you know that there's magic yet to come.

Seanan Forbes is a free-lance writer based in New York and London.