

Food



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Dinner and a band
 Music, meat and Spanish mackerel were on the menu when star chef Mario Batali teamed up with Chicago's Paul Kahan and the band eighth blackbird.

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French lesson
 Chef Brad Phillips isn't French (he's a Hoosier). But you wouldn't know it by his beef bourguignon.
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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24, 2010 | EDITOR: JANET RAUSA FULLER | N

FOOD DETECTIVE



The rise in wing prices this year can be attributed to major sporting events and the recession.

Grabbing hold of wing costs

BY LISA DONOVAN
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The flap over soaring chicken wing prices is slowly calming down. That's according to industry experts and a local purveyor of the wallet-friendly snack food inhaled by generations of beer-guzzling college students.

Figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture show that for the first three months of year, wholesale prices for wings averaged \$1.70 a pound, up 22 cents from the same period in 2009 (the price had fallen to \$1.59 in recent days). In 2008, wing prices were \$1.06 a pound.

The spike in recent months can be attributed to the trifecta of all sporting events—the Super Bowl, the Winter Olympics and college basketball's March Madness, says Richard Lobb, spokesman for the National Chicken Council, the industry's trade group based in Washington D.C.

Plain and simple supply-and-demand is at work here. Now that wings are a menu staple at many restaurants, demand is up and, likewise, price.

"It's not like we can get on the phone to Georgia, the biggest [chicken] production state and just order more wings. It doesn't work that way," Lobb says.

Soaring wing prices have something to do with the recession, too. Wing prices for the first time have surpassed wholesale prices of skinless, boneless chicken breasts—consistently the most expensive chicken product since the 1980s, when they came onto the market.

In today's economic downturn, people's dining habits have changed, particularly in the casual dining market, Lobb says.

"So even if you can't take your family out for dinner at some nice place, you can take your friends out for some wings and pound a few beers," he says.

At the year-old Wings Around the World, 510 E. 75th, owner Abeng Stuart says he's going to have to raise prices by a few pennies in April.

"It's been a tough road for me," Stuart said. "I went from paying \$1.40, \$1.45 [in August] to paying something like \$1.80, \$1.89 a pound by the Super Bowl."

Buffalo Joe's, which has locations on the Far North Side and in Evanston, is eating the costs.

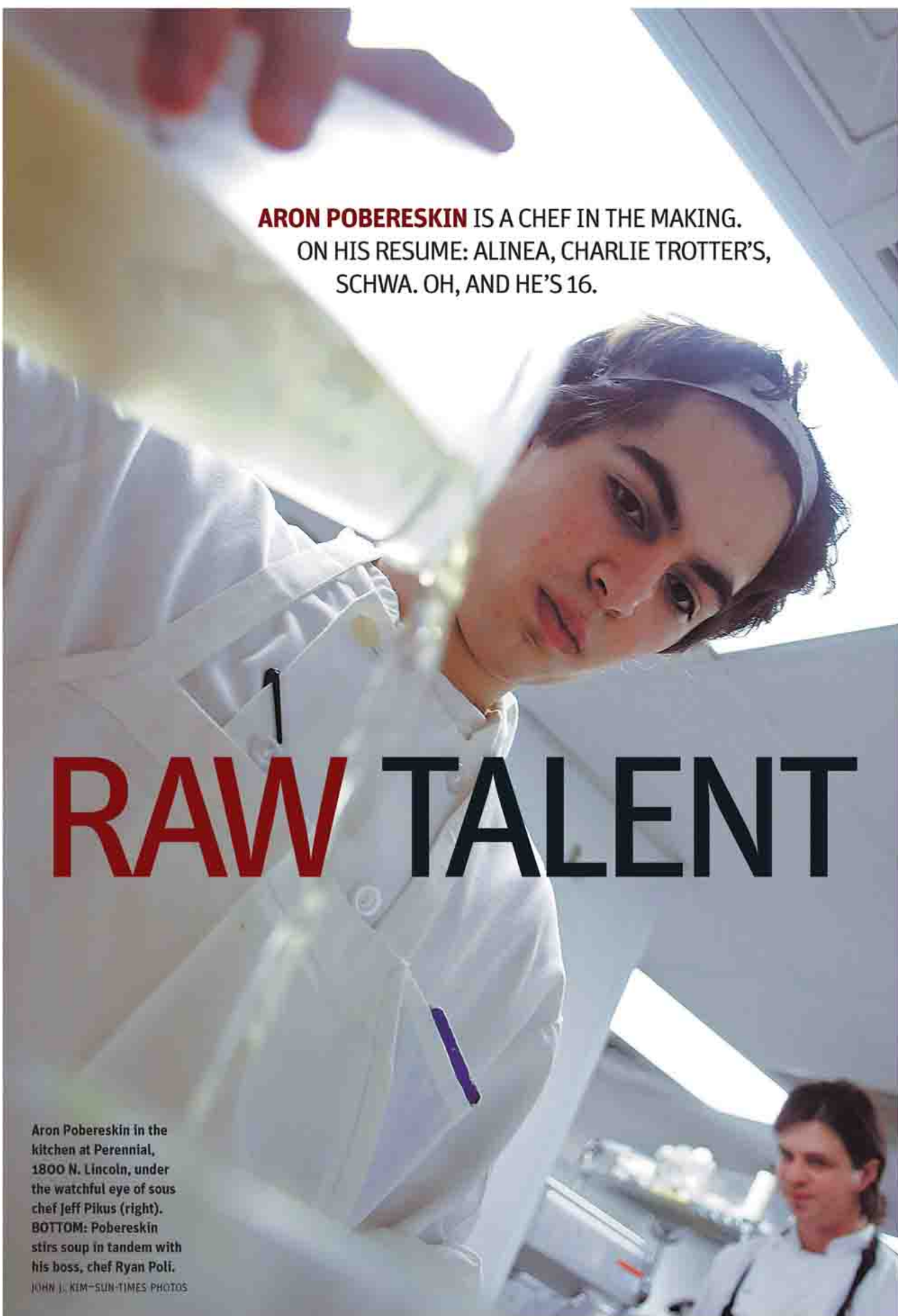
Dean Holden, the micro-chain's general manager, says wholesale prices for wings jump every year around the Super Bowl, but never quite slide back down.

"I'm not going to tell you any different—this hurts the bottom line," Holden says.

The restaurant took a loss over the holidays and will make it up during the year, he says.

"We don't want to price ourselves out of the market, even though we know we've got a good thing going here," he says.

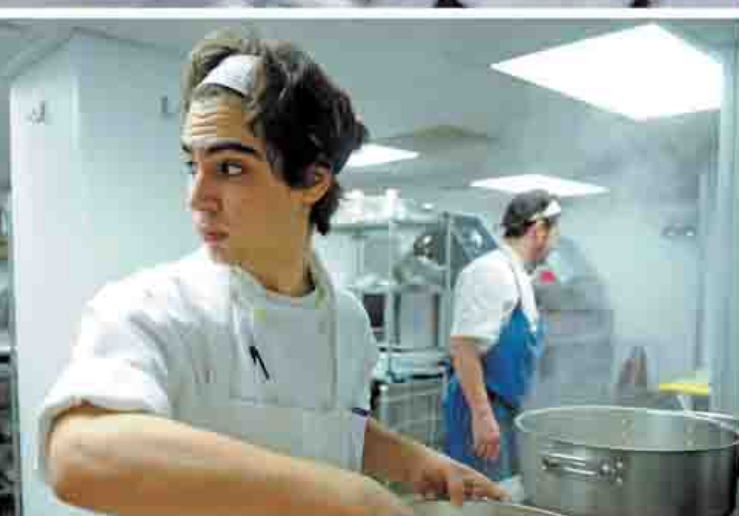
"We have [college] kids who come back for spring break, and they don't go home first—they come here if they've got \$20 in their pocket. Otherwise, they go home first and stop here second."



ARON POBERESKIN IS A CHEF IN THE MAKING.
 ON HIS RESUME: ALINEA, CHARLIE TROTTER'S, SCHWA. OH, AND HE'S 16.

Aron Pobereskin in the kitchen at Perennial, 1800 N. Lincoln, under the watchful eye of sous chef Jeff Pilkus (right). BOTTOM: Pobereskin stirs soup in tandem with his boss, chef Ryan Poli.

JOHN L. KIM/SUN-TIMES PHOTOS



BY SEANAN FORBES

At 16 years old, Aron Pobereskin is a veteran of some hot kitchens.

The Deerfield High School student has been interested in food since he was quite young. How young? He was a preschooler when he got hooked on the Food Network, says his father, Joseph Pobereskin.

"We have a picture of him, standing on a chair, stirring carrots," his mother, Janet Shore, says. "He couldn't reach the top of the stove."

Pobereskin can't remember not being interested in food. He knows he was into Szechuan food when he was 3. He thinks maybe he was influenced, in his Brooklyn childhood, by the proximity of Jacques Torres' chocolate shop.

Then there was that pivotal meal at Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Nogetime in New York when he was 12. He recalls every dish that was set on the table, from the tuna tartare to the

last bite of chocolate.

As a small child, Pobereskin wanted to be a TV chef. After cooking camp, when he was 10, he was all about catering. No longer.

"Charlie Trotter's," Pobereskin says, "defined me as a restaurant chef."

Pobereskin was 15 when Trotter's executive chef Matthias Merges took him into the kitchen at 816 W. Armitage. The boy—who had sent an e-mail to Merges seeking an internship—was sent from station to station, getting a serious insight into kitchen life.

It "crushed" all of Pobereskin's previous experiences. His voice brightens with an audible flame as he says, "I loved it." His enthusiasm was noted. Merges says the boy's "mindset is built for excellence. He has to bring experience to himself."

SEE ARON, PAGE 3A



Aron Pobereskin (front) gets started on dinner at his Deerfield home, while friends Lance Greenberg (from left), Eric Grossman and Nate Saed grab seats at the table. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN/SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

CHEF IN THE MAKING

FROM THE COVER | Deerfield teen earning kitchen chops in some of world's best restaurants

At the time, though, Trotter's had its quota of interns. If he wanted to cook, then Pobereskin had to look elsewhere.

He looked for the best and chose Alinea, 1723 N. Halsted, and Grant Achatz.

"This is a great chef," Pobereskin thought. "I have to work for him."

Pobereskin sent e-mails, admitting he was young and lacked experience but saying, "I want to be a great chef. I work hard. I am constantly trying to progress."

Pobereskin assesses his marketing technique. "I think that's what chefs want to hear." He pauses for a moment. "I took the initiative."

At 16, Pobereskin was then the youngest person to stage at Alinea's kitchen.

"That's a smart kid," Achatz says. "I wanted to give him a view of what it was going to be like—live a day, a week in the life of what he wants to become."

At Alinea, interns, called stagiaires, face realities: 16-hour shifts, hard-working professionals earning less than \$30,000 a year. In that environment, they quickly discover whether cooking is a crush or a long-term relationship. After two days, Pobereskin had no doubts.

Learning by doing

He was just about to start summer school when Achatz called. Did Pobereskin want to spend the summer at Alinea? He did.

Pobereskin put in four shifts a week: making stocks, juicing, cutting, taking in orders, organizing, cleaning, ... earning.

Stagiaires earn no pay, but they are an investment.

"It drains the restaurant," Achatz says. "They're not trained. They're young, so there's a communication barrier. ... It takes a good amount of our resources to coach them through a day."

Like Merges, Achatz found the teenager to be an excellent student.

"He doesn't pester me, he doesn't pester the chef de cuisine," Achatz says. "He knows what he has to do. He does it. He does it well. He knows he's a minuscule part of the cuisine."

And he stayed until 1 o'clock in the morning, even after Achatz had told him he could go, even with his mother waiting in the car outside the restaurant. He stayed until the flat-top was clean. He



"He doesn't pester me... He knows what he has to do. He does it," Alinea chef Grant Achatz says of 16-year-old Pobereskin.

stayed until every job was done.

Alinea's had other teens since—in itself, a statement about Pobereskin's dedication—and the Deerfield teen still stands out.

"He does really well," Achatz says. "We've had five. There's him and a young woman [Jessica Leatherman] based out of L.A. that did exceptionally well."

Pobereskin found Achatz's creativity incredibly stimulating.

"Every night I would go home and try to come up with some idea that would be crazy that no one ever thought about, and the next day, I'd go in and see it being used already," he says.

People ask Pobereskin why he gave up his summer for Alinea.

"It's a very necessary basis and foundation," he says. "If you want to run a kitchen well, you have to have that discipline. Alinea instilled that in me."

At Lockwood, 17 E. Monroe, chef Phillip Foss noted Pobereskin's discipline and built on it. If you want to learn, then Foss will feed you knowledge—in abundance.

"I seared 60, 70 scallops on my first night," Pobereskin says. "He really got me in there. ... He's probably the most important person so far in helping me learn how to cook."

That was the purpose of the 60, 70 scallops. "Mastering your trade is about repetition," Foss says.

There were short stints at the restaurants Moto, Graham Elliot and Schwa, but Pobereskin found a long-term placement. He wanted one. To the teenager, Perennial at 1800 N. Lincoln, was both new and—because of Jeff Pilkus, who had been chef de cuisine at Alinea—familiar.

Says Ryan Poli, Perennial's chef: "This is a unique situation for him and for us also. He brings so much passion and interest into what he's doing. He's so raw that you really have to start from

the very, very basics with him.

"Sometimes, we catch ourselves using terms that he might not know yet." Brunoise of apples — "I'm sorry, man. It's like a little small dice."

"He knows a lot," Poli continues. "He's just second-guessing himself right now."

Pobereskin swears that he has time to just be a kid: hang out with his friends, be on the computer, play his bass, do homework. At Perennial, though, he's head-down.

"He works," Poli says. "You can see him, looking around and absorbing everything that's going on around him. When his opportunity comes, he's going to try to do it the best that he can."

Poli has invited Pobereskin to come in on a Sunday during brunch, when the kid can do more cooking. Will Pobereskin do it? "Oh, yes," he says. "I'll jump at the chance to cook."

Maybe, Poli muses, it would be good to have Pobereskin cook the staff a meal, throw him a slab of meat and see what he does.

Denmark, college in future

The teen's Facebook page is adorned with at-home attempts to recreate some of the Perennial plating techniques.

Chefs aren't shy about commenting. In a way, it's like having homework publicly graded, a thing that Pobereskin takes with good humor.

In the fall, he hopes to find paying work. He has friends who bus tables, and they're bringing home money.

Then there's life beyond high school. His parents have laid down the law: There will be college or cooking school. Maybe, Pobereskin thinks, a program that combines cooking and business. He wants to have his own restaurant some day.

Foss has doubts about whether Pobereskin would get much from ordinary cooking schools.

"If he could go to Ferran Adria's cooking school ...," Foss muses.

It's not as if Pobereskin is afraid of leaving home. This year, he turns 17 and takes off for Denmark, where he'll spend the summer at Noma, in Copenhagen, which has been rated the third-best restaurant on the planet.

As it turns out, Noma's chef, Rene Redzepi, is a friend of Poli's. Pobereskin hadn't been at Perennial when he wrote to Noma, and he wouldn't have used the connection, he says.

Peter Kreiner, Noma's director, says the kid will learn about regional eating.

"We focus on good producers and the Nordic terroir. What you see on the plate is something that is very much in touch with the seasons," Kreiner says.

You won't find tomatoes on the menu; they're not indigenous to the region. In contrast, the staff is international, and English is the kitchen tongue.

Is it normal to have someone Pobereskin's age in the kitchen?

"No. Absolutely no," Kreiner says. Once again, Pobereskin is an exception.

Talent, determination, courage and a passport, and the teen's off to another country and another kitchen.

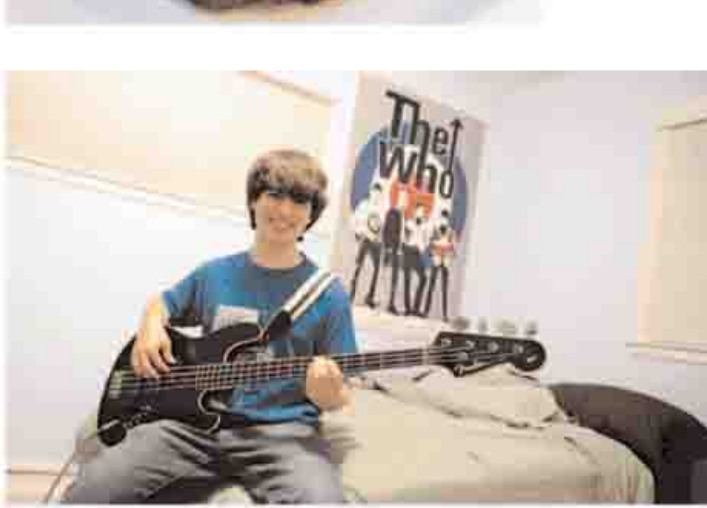
Seanan Forbes is a free-lance writer based in New York and London.



Pobereskin rolls out homemade pasta dough. BELOW: Shaping the tortelloni dough over cauliflower puree for a rapt audience.



The finished dish: cauliflower-filled tortelloni in a beurre monté sauce with wilted arugula and roasted purple cauliflower.



Pobereskin plays bass guitar in his down time. The high school junior says college or culinary school is in his future.



At a pre-dinner service meeting at Perennial. | JOHN L. KIM/SUN-TIMES