

# Chefology



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**Roland Passot**  
Executive Chef and Owner of La Folie,  
San Francisco

**Now:** La Folie (San Francisco, CA since 1988) and Left Bank group in the Bay Area

**Then:** Léon de Lyon, Pierre Orsi, Le Français, Le Castel, French Room at the Adolphus

**Kudos:** San Francisco Chronicle, 4 stars; Michelin, 1 star; James Beard Rising Star Chef Award (1990), Maitres Culiniers de France (1991)

**Mentors:** Pierre Orsi, Jean Banchet

**Mentees:** Trey Foshee (Georges at the Cove, La Jolla), Richard Reddington (Redd, Yountville), Anna Klinger (Al Di La, Brooklyn) and many others

**Favorite restaurants:** Poggio, Le Garage and Angelino in Marin County; Bocadoles, Piperade, Boulevard and Nopa in San Francisco. ("But there are so many I haven't been to, I am ashamed – because I am here six nights a week!")

**Age:** 55

**Grew up:** Near Lyon, France

**Came to U.S.:** 1976

## When did you start cooking?

About age 15, in France. My parents were not in the business. I just loved to eat, I guess. It was more the passion of eating and what we call in France a *gourmand*.

## What was it like, apprenticing?

My first few jobs were still [using] coal stoves, where you have to go start the fire early in the morning – put your paper, put your wood, put the coal, and keep it going. A lot of time kitchens were in the basements. It was not the best places to work. It was a hate/love relationship!

## How's it different now?

You didn't have the fame that you have today. It's uncontrollable, with the television and everything else. Paul Bocuse is the one who got chefs out of the kitchen. He got the media out to talk about him, his restaurant, his personality. He's the one who put French cuisine and chefs on the map. At the time, it was amazing! To me, he was a hero.

## How did your heroes like Bocuse, Roger Vergé, Lenôtre, influence you?

My goal was, I'm not going to do it halfway – I'm going to try to work at great restaurants, to become one of the best. My goal was to be successful, not to end up in a cafeteria, cooking. I was looking at the path.

## How did you end up in the U.S.?

At age 19, I was working for Pierre Orsi, and he told me eventually he wanted to send me to the United States, to have that experience. His friend Jean Banchet (of Le Français, near Chicago) came in, spent some time in the kitchen and he asked me, "Would you like to come?" I left for Chicago in 1976. Imagine being in your early 20s and going to America! It was a huge adventure!

### How did it turn out?

Banchet was so demanding, he was so much looking for perfection that you didn't know if you knew how to cook anymore. It was never good enough. If I would have signed up for the Marines, it would have been as difficult! Banchet was demanding. He was abusive. He literally beat you up. One day he threw a saddle of lamb in my face right out of the oven.

### Where were you first the chef?

Le Castel in San Francisco, 1980. It was still the time when French cuisine was very much the leader in America. I was a kid, 24 years old, and I became the chef and got great reviews. Just like at Le Francais, all the fish was coming from France, the foie gras was coming inside the belly of the fish.

### Foie gras in the belly of a fish? It was being smuggled?

Yes! It was amazing, because we were getting haricots verts, raspberries, fraise des bois – everything was coming from France. I was doing cool things. I was not doing traditional things. I'm going to say this and you're going to laugh, but I was using things like raspberry vinegar, pink peppercorns, things that at the time were cool.

### You've talked openly about how you used to be abusive with staff.

It's like having an abusive father. I was really a screamer, a yeller, even violent. I remember throwing knives in restaurants. It was like you lose your mind. Because you've been so abused, you feel like it's OK. And one day I realized, I need to stop that.

### What made you realize you needed to stop?

I realized it because I lost my job at the French Room, in Dallas. I was not afraid of anybody. I would go to the general manager's office and punch a hole in his office wall. I would threaten to punch the owner in the face. They had to stop me but they didn't know how to stop me. One day they gave me a check and escorted me out the door with security at gunpoint.

### Wow!

I realized, that's not good. It's not good for my health. It made me realize, what it was like when I was at Le Francais, and he was screaming at me. You're terrified. You don't know what's right and what's wrong. And you're panicking your staff – the front of the house, the back of the house. People don't know what to do anymore. They're blocked.

### So now, how do you handle things?

I think you can look at somebody in the eyes, sit him down and say, "Look, I'm not happy with your performance. This is what you need to work on or you're going to be gone." And it's a lot more efficient than screaming



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and yelling. You're a lot more powerful that way. You don't build a better restaurant by screaming.

### So what's the most recent thing that you've learned?

Molecular gastronomy! Because I don't want to be left behind. I want to understand it. Do I use it? Yes, I use some of it. I have a very young crowd working here. If I don't do some of it – if they don't do some of it as well – they'll go somewhere else where they can learn it. So you have to adapt. It's all about an evolution.

### You still cook on the line, too, don't you?

Every day. If you come to my restaurant, you will see me cooking. I like to be there, because first of all, I know what's going on in my kitchen. If I don't keep up with it, then I'm out of the game. I want to evolve, I want to learn. So for me, it's a very big part of it.

### How long will you stay on the line?

Well, eventually I'll have to stop cooking. If I'm 80 years old behind the stove, I don't see how I'm going to be doing it – with a walker or something!

### You mentioned molecular gastronomy. What do you think of chefs who are doing the more radical things?

Some people look at food as a brain exercise. You have to think about what it is and how you're supposed to eat it. I think it should be about being at the table with your friends, family and having fun. Being able to laugh and being able to share the food. It should be "My meat is great" or "My duck is wonderful." But it should not be "Look at my capsule, did you see that?" or "My pillow is smoking!"

### What about sous vide?

Sure, we have the equipment, but we use it for very few things. Aside from chicken, I disagree with cooking meat sous vide. It's a sacrilege! Sure, it's perfectly cooked, but as a chef, you want the human touch. The human touch is not perfect, and thank God it's not! If you're trying to get perfection from a machine, you're losing something. I use a cast-iron pan for my beef

because I think it adds a good flavor. You get that crust, that caramelization that you don't get otherwise. Sous vide is poaching. You abandon it, then you open the bag and sear it. It's not the same.

### **What do you want people's reaction to be when they eat your food?**

Some people say, "That dish, it's orgasmic. It's better than sex." When you hear those reactions, for me, it's like, "Wow! I really succeeded."

### **What makes food sexy?**

The "wow" factor – the look of the dish when it arrives at the table. The smell. Your senses should be awakened. I'm more for a cuisine of senses, of emotions, than an intellectual cuisine. The surprise. For people who are having French food for the first time, they are like virgins!

### **Where do you get your inspiration?**

I like to re-think classic dishes, reinvent them. How do you embellish pig's feet? How do you make it novel? I do a terrine of pig's feet, sweetbreads and lobster. I asked, "What would be good with pig's feet, flavor- and texture-wise?"

Sometimes, I wake up in the middle of the night, and I will take notes on a piece of paper. I remember when I did the oyster with the seawater granita. People said, "How did you come up with that?" To be honest, I came up with it in the middle of the night. I just woke up and I wrote it down!

### **What is your favorite kitchen tool?**

My little egg-topper, as a gadget tool. Otherwise, a good knife. I like the Korin knives.

### **What's the one ingredient that's a must-have in the La Folie pantry?**

Salt. You have to have an extremely high-quality salt. If you're going to buy high-quality ingredients, why cut corners on the salt? I use fleur de sel.

### **What's your must-have at home?**

Cheese! I love cheese! I can live on cheese - cheese and red wine!

[PASSOT'S WIFE, JAMIE, PASSES THROUGH THE ROOM, INTERJECTING, "He loves his cheese more than his wife!"]

### **How do you keep creating the buzz for a restaurant that's been around for 23 years?**

First, you have to keep up, be aware of what's happening. You have to evolve. Otherwise you become the "old guy."

We opened a lounge a year and a half ago. That created buzz, because it's a new generation. I wanted to target a young clientele. The idea was to offer bar food, but also the La Folie menu as well. They go there, they have a great time and say, "OK, we've been to the lounge at La Folie. Let's try the restaurant." And it's working really, really well.

### **What about staff?**

I know I have to hire kids who are going to be very much involved with haute cuisine but also bring a little bit of their style. I want them to bring some of their style – I'm not afraid of it. I'll have to control it, but I'll have to embrace it. Because it is the next generation. I have them pushing me like I push them!

It's like with music. The Beatles have aged well. That's what I'm trying to do with my restaurant – age well. I'm still hip, but I'm not techno!

### **You really love interacting with your guests, don't you?**

I would have no problem being the front of the house. For New Year's Eve, I get on the top of the bar and I saber the Champagne. It's a party!

### **What about at home?**

I entertain a lot. Two weeks ago, Jaques Pepin came to my house to celebrate our birthdays, and I invited a bunch of chefs. KQED [the local PBS station] came to film it. I sabered nine liters of Champagne!

### **What's down the road?**

I don't want to stop cooking, but eventually I'd like to slow down. I want to have an inn – maybe four or five rooms and a small dining room, like staying in my house. It will be open just for people that I like, not for pretentious people. I'll say, "Send me your bio! I'll tell you if you can come for dinner and stay in my house!"

### **What's your "last meal?"**

Of course, I will splurge! I will have caviar, a nice bottle of Krug – hopefully not by myself, but if I have to drink it by myself, I will! Then some black cod – with truffles – why not? Crushed Yukon Gold potatoes, melted leeks and a nice jus with it. I'd open a Mersault or a good Chablis. Then a côte de boeuf. That's usually for two, but I will eat it all – it's my last meal! For wine, a Nuits-Saint-Georges or a Romanée-Conti. And then with my cheese, a '61 Margaux. For dessert, maybe an apple bread pudding with rum-raisin ice cream. Oh, yes! Kill me then!

**BEEF TENDERLOIN & BÉARNAISE CROQUETTES WITH TARRAGON CHIPS, PICKLED CHANTERELLES, MARROW CUSTARD & CONFIT POTATOES**

**INGREDIENTS**

5 oz of beef tenderloin

[Béarnaise croquettes]  
[Yields 15]

1/2 lb unsalted butter  
4 shallots, finely chopped  
2 bunches of fresh tarragon leaves  
2-3 Tbsp fresh chervil (no stems), roughly chopped  
4 black peppercorns, cracked  
1/2 cup dry white wine  
1/4 cup champagne or tarragon vinegar  
4 egg yolks  
1 Tbsp Cornstarch  
Salt  
Pinch of cayenne

**METHOD**

In a sauce pan, boil shallots, tarragon stems, (reserve the leaves for later) and black pepper with white wine and vinegar. Reduce to 1/4 cup. Strain liquid into bowl. Add yolks and cornstarch to the liquid and place over boiling water. For Bain Marie, make sure that bowl does not touch water.

Whisk constantly until mixture thickens for about 5 to 8 minutes. Remove bowl from double boiler and slowly add warm melted butter to the thickened yolk mixture; season with salt and cayenne. Add the tarragon and chervil. Then, pour sauce into small silicone dome molds (29mm), cool, and freeze.

Blanch the frozen béarnaise by dipping first into beaten egg white and then ground panko, repeat dipping in egg white and ground panko a second time.

Fry to order until golden brown, reserve under heat lamp.

[Tarragon chips]  
15 tarragon leaves  
1 plate covered tightly with a piece of plastic wrap lightly coated with oil

**METHOD**

Lay tarragon leaves flat on top of the oiled plastic and cover with another sheet of plastic.

Poke holes through both sheets of plastic at random. Put the plate in the microwave for 4 minutes; store on paper towels in a dry place.

[Confit potato]  
5 small fingerling potatoes  
Duck fat  
3 pieces chanterelle mushrooms, cleaned

**METHOD**

Put potatoes in a pot and cover with fat. Cook slowly in fat until tender. Peel warm potatoes and return to fat. Cut 1 potato into 3 large pieces and caramelize with duck fat, a clove of garlic, a sprig of thyme, to order with chanterelles. To order: heat potato puree, then mix with tarragon puree to make it green.

[Pickled Chanterelles]  
1 qt small chanterelles, cleaned  
1 pt water  
1 pt champagne vinegar

**METHOD**

Combine vinegar and water; add chanterelles and let sit in the refrigerator for two days. To order: mix 3 chanterelles and 3 pieces of Ancho chress and dress with olive oil and season with salt and pepper.



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[Beef Chip]  
1 case of beef tendon  
Water  
6 onions  
5 carrots

**METHOD**

Cut onions and carrots into large dice and put into a hotel pan. Lay beef tendons on top. Cover with water, braise for 8 hours and let cool. Warm the pan until the gelatinized water becomes liquid.

Pack tendons tightly into another hotel pan and cover with gelatinized water and let cool. Cut the cold tendons and water into manageable pieces. Slice paper thin on the slicer and lay on a sheet tray with a Silpat. Put up to dehydrate for 1 day. Fry to order. Should puff like pork skins.

[Tarragon puree]  
4 bunches of Tarragon, stems removed

**METHOD**

Blanch tarragon leaves for 30 seconds and shock. Puree blanched leaves with ice. Strain through a serviette and adjust the consistency with the liquid that was strained off.

[Potato puree]  
1 Tbsp shallot, bruised

3-4 fingerling potatoes, peeled and minced into brunoise size  
Cream to just cover potato and shallot

**METHOD**

Cook potato in seasoned cream, remove from heat and steep 4 sprigs of thyme in the cream for 5 minutes. Remove thyme, puree and strain through a chinois. Taste and adjust seasoning as necessary.

[Marrow Custard]  
4 oz chicken stock  
4 oz milk  
1 pt of cleaned marrow  
3-4 whole eggs

**METHOD**

Bring marrow, milk and stock to a simmer for 5 minutes and remove from heat and let sit for 5 minutes. Puree and strain. Let rest, then measure the puree. Be careful, it will be foamy. Do not measure the foam.

Mix in eggs at a ratio of 6 whole eggs per quart of liquid. Strain again and pour into a 1/4 sheet pan that has been sprayed with vegalene. Cover with aluminum foil and bake in a water bath at 300°F for about 20 to 25 minutes until the custard has set. Let cool then stamp into circles.

[Beef sauce]  
20 lb beef neck bones + any beef scraps/trimmings  
1 pt shallot, roughly chopped  
1 head of garlic, split at the equator  
1 bunch of thyme  
2 Tbsp cracked black pepper  
6 cups red table wine  
Veal stock

**METHOD**

Roast bones until nicely browned. In a large Fond-deu, caramelize the beef scraps and shallot scraps until very dark but not burned. Add garlic. Deglaze with red wine (about 2 1/2 quarts) reduce by half. Just cover the bones with veal stock. Simmer about 2 hours then strain. Reduce the liquid to sauce consistency while skimming off any fat or foam that appears. Taste and adjust seasoning. Cool and store.

**ASSEMBLY**

When ready to serve, assemble all components on plate, making sure they are at the proper temperature. Season dish if necessary.

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