

Patience in a pomegranate

A few years back, when I was a beginner in the food world, I took a pastry job in a very busy restaurant. My job included making and plating desserts during dinner service. When serving between 500 and 600 people a night, this is a daunting task. My inner planner never felt fully prepared.

Loud, hot, and fast-paced, a restaurant's kitchen is a place where people yell and scream at each other. You get used to it. The keys: Don't take all the criticism to heart, and stay sharp at all times.

One night, I was tasked with seeding pomegranates for a pastry garnish, and also with running the pantry station that would use the many remaining seeds in a salad.

I was a bit put out at the request, as I had mounds of *mise en place* (prep work for the chef) that I needed to get through and it took me a long time to seed just one pomegranate – cutting it open, banging it with a spoon to get the seeds to fall out, then setting to the task of dislodging the little pink seeds that didn't want to leave their cozy cobweblike membrane.

A soft-spoken guy with rectangular glasses who was working farther down the line came over and said to me, "You should do that under water."

"What?" I was frazzled and annoyed at his intrusion. I was the only girl on the line and all the guys saw it as their personal duty to school me with their sage advice.

"Pomegranates," he said with a smile. "It's easier under water."

He turned and walked away. I rolled my eyes, brushed off his advice, and kept seeding them my way. My pink-stained fingers worked madly, smashing every fifth seed in the process; pomegranate juice dribbled over my cutting board and apron.

A few minutes later, he appeared at my side with a bowl of water and his knife.

He cut a pomegranate and began to show me the error of my ways. As he worked the fruit under water, the seeds slipped to the bottom, the spongy membrane floated to the top. He scooped the membrane out and drained the water, filling a container quickly with perfect jewel-colored pomegranate seeds.

With a sweet smile on his lips, he handed me the container and walked away.

It came to my attention shortly after that he was the sous-chef, yet he never yelled or demanded I do it his way. Showing me was all he had to do. If I con-

tinued to do it in my laborious way, I deserved to stand pink-handed, picking at a pomegranate skin.

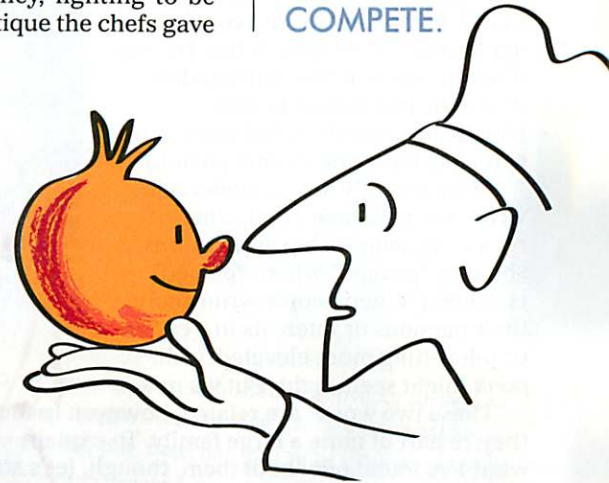
He was the poster boy for patience, but the thought that clicked into place later was that I needed to show myself some patience.

In a kitchen, we are always working with a sense of urgency, fighting to be the best. For every critique the chefs gave me, I'd be 10 times harder on myself. But in that moment I just felt released from having to know everything. His genuine approach had disarmed me.

Now that I have people working under me, I try to overlook their young egos and show them the same patience. Sometimes, though, I get annoyed and give myself a timeout in the walk-in refrigerator. I usually come face to face with a pomegranate.

– Rachel Ellrich Miller

IN THE HEAT OF THE KITCHEN, A TRAINEE PASTRY CHEF FINDS RELEASE FROM THE PRESSURE TO COMPETE.



JOHN KEHE/STAFF