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IN MY KITCHEN

Grant Achatz

The molecular gastronomist unwinds at home with pasta and Little Caesars



LAND OF GRANT | The chef at home in Wicker Park DANIEL SHEA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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Since opening his mad scientist lab of a restaurant Alinea in 2005, Chicago-based chef Grant Achatz (rhymes with jackets), 37, has earned formidable accolades, including three Michelin stars and the James Beard Foundation's Best Chef award. He has also battled stage 4 squamous-cell carcinoma of the mouth, a struggle he recounted in "Life on the Line," one of two books he has co-written with his business partner Nick Kokonas. With his cancer now in remission, Mr. Achatz recently opened two more spots in Chicago: Aviary, a cocktail lounge, and Next, a restaurant featuring prepaid tickets and a fanciful, frequently changing menu. (Next's 29-course El Bulli-inspired menu wraps up in May.) Mr. Achatz relaxes at home in Wicker Park with his two sons, Keller (named for Mr. Achatz's former boss, chef Thomas Keller), 8, and Kaden, 10.



Inside his cabinet DANIEL SHEA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

My home kitchen is airy, with a gas stove, a stainless-steel island table in the center and granite countertops. It's very modest but there's tons of counter space, so you can slap down three or four cutting boards. There's also lots of cabinet space, so we're able to have a spice cabinet with pullout drawers, an oil and vinegar cabinet and a starch cabinet.

I have every spice you could ever imagine: saffras root, dried lavender buds, togarashi [a Japanese spice

blend], rosebuds and all kinds of salt, including Kona sea salt, smoked salt, sel gris, Maldon and Murray River salt. My two boys lick their fingers, dip them in the spice and try to tell me what's in it.



His spice racks DANIEL SHEA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

I like shopping for antiques. I recently bought an old gramophone and we play records, everything from Sinatra and "A Charlie Brown Christmas" to Elton John.

I always knew I wanted to be a chef. Because my parents were restaurateurs, the big thing for me as a boy was, "I need to make my dad happy." I wanted to be a cook—and not only a cook, but a better cook than my dad. When I was a senior in high school, I thought of being an architect but that lasted about 15 minutes. My grades were terrible.

I love cooking with my kids. About a year ago, we went to a Thai restaurant and they loved the pad thai. We went to the Alinea kitchen and took every raw ingredient we could and made pad thai together. They asked me, "What is tamarind?" and I took a fresh tamarind pod and had them suck on it. When we were done, we went to the dining room and ate the pad thai and they loved it.



His espresso machine DANIEL SHEA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

To me, every kitchen appliance is useful and nothing's overrated. When I look at my little espresso machine, I don't see coffee. I see a steaming valve as an opportunity to make amazing crème brûlée.

The kitchen gadgets I use every day at home are a mortar and pestle, a Benriner Japanese mandoline and—this will sound sacrilegious—a Fiskars knife sharpener. Here I am, a chef who knows how to sharpen a knife with a whetstone, but rock your knife back

and forth on the Fiskars and you're good to go. For my sons, we have a collection of Zyliss plastic knives and they're the greatest thing ever: sharp enough that the boys are contributing to the prep, but there's no way they're going to cut themselves.

My secret vice is Little Caesars cheese and pepperoni pizza. I also like Potbelly Sandwich Shop in Chicago: They've got good condiments, bread and meat, and you can get a sandwich for \$3.85.

In my refrigerator, I have sriracha sauce, Hellmann's mayonnaise, Heinz ketchup, French's yellow mustard. People think that because I'm a chef my refrigerator is filled with high-end stuff, but we're people. Good God, in my freezer I have crappy vanilla ice cream.

The best gift I ever received is an antique hourglass. It's incredibly beautiful but there's also a meaning to it because of the way I do things and my history with cancer. When you watch the sand go through the narrow passage and fall into the bigger section in the vessel, it has some meaning. What should we all focus on? Time. But nobody thinks about it.



His mortar and pestle DANIEL SHEA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

My two greatest influences are Thomas Keller, who would always leave me a list of things to do and a couple of times he would write at the top: "What is your legacy going to be?" I roll my eyes at the word "legacy," but what he was saying is: Think about your life every day, how you're going to live it and how you're going to contribute to the lives of others. Also my best friend and business partner Nick's big saying is: Think long-term. He's programmed

me in a way that makes me realize everything I do right now affects me 25 years from now.

The most luxurious thing to me is having an hour of my day, which rarely happens, to listen to my iPod and sit on my couch. That's how I unwind. Nobody's asking you a question, you're in control of your environment. That's a very rare moment in my day.



An antique gramophone DANIEL SHEA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

My home entertaining philosophy: good wine, good food. When you invite people over, you have to expect they're going to indulge themselves. We recently had a paella party for 100 people, friends and employees, and we had two 6-foot-long paella pans, and everyone taking turns stirring the paella over an open fire. For a friend's birthday, we had 12 people and we did sushi and made everybody participate.

One of the most meaningful meals I ever had was when I first showed up at French Laundry. I was with my father. I was 22 years old and naive to the culinary world.

When I eat at somebody else's house, I find that people don't use enough salt. That's a pet peeve of mine.

The meal I like to eat best at home with my family is pasta with capers, toasted garlic, basil, olive oil and Parmesan. I also like scrambled eggs

and quite heavily toasted whole-wheat bread, dry. Those are my two go-tos. I'll drink fresh-squeezed grapefruit juice and sparkling water, mixed 50/50.

In my carry-on bag, I always take cuff links and a nice shirt. I like French cuffs, the juxtaposition between wearing a French-cuff shirt and leaving it untucked.

I learned the best lesson about wine when I was working as a winemaker at La Jota. Bill Smith, the vineyard's owner, said, "Do you want to take this home for dinner tonight?" and I said I couldn't because it was a \$300 bottle. He said, "It's just grape juice." If you treat it as a trophy

you're not going to get enjoyment. At home, we'll drink the \$9 Australian Shiraz or a vintage Krug, and to me it's the same.

—Edited from an interview by Jackie Cooperman

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