





PANIC STATIONS

*Thriving under pressure in Masterchef is one thing — but could **Andrew Kojima** take the heat of a frantic week's cooking in a three-Michelin-starred Dutch kitchen?*

It's not normal,' says Orlando from Amsterdam, plaintively, uncomfortable with the state of the fridge. His nickname, embroidered on his chef jacket, is 'The Dog' because he eats his food out of a tub. To the uninitiated, not much about this kitchen is normal.

I am the uninitiated, experiencing a week in the life of the brigade at Oud Sluis. I have travelled for six hours, on my 34th birthday, from London to Sluis in the Netherlands, on the border with Belgium. Its streets are lined with boutiques, chocolatiers, home accessories, lace and cafes. Like Bruges but smaller, with a windmill and three sex shops.

Where the two main streets fork, next to a Gouda shed, is a family-run restaurant once renowned for Zeeland mussels. Sergio Herman inherited it from his father in 1991, aged 21. That's pretty young to be a head chef. Oud Sluis was awarded a Michelin star four years later. Four years after that, two Michelin stars. In 2005, three Michelin stars, just after Sergio turned 35. He is not normal.

'The food here is sick,' warns 'Jets' from Blackburn. 'In a good way,' he reassures, spotting my confusion. 'His name is Yates but he's called "Jets" because the foreigners can't pronounce the Y,' according to Hukezalie from Toronto. 'What about your name?' I enquire. 'It was made up by officials who couldn't understand my great-grandfather when he emigrated from Ukraine.'

'The hours are brutal,' says 'Costner', a sick grin across his face. His real name, Kevin, is deemed by his colleagues too unlikely for someone from Antwerp. I report to head chef Nick at 7.30am on my first day. 'On Wednesdays we start an hour earlier because the restaurant is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays. Normally we work from 8.30am until 2.30am.'

Nick is Sergio's stalwart, the equivalent of Ashley Palmer-Watts to Heston Blumenthal. He assigns me to the hot section and deposits me with Hukezalie, who introduces me to the chefs on hot section: he and Costner on 'Entremetier' (veg), Jets on sauce (kitchen argot for meat) and Max from Vienna on fish.

The newcomer is immediately dazzled by the pace and confused by the clamour. This is no office environment: no time for coffee or perusing the news. By 7.45am, chefs are trotting to and from the fridge. The language is international hotchpotch melded by familiarity into vernacular. The first bollocking is delivered before 8am. I'm not yet sure whether it's Dutch or English, but it's a guttural bollocking.

English prevails as the common language. Escoffier's French terminology, the official language of professional kitchens, is occasionally used. There are no recipes but orders lists are in Dutch. Some ingredients are so obscure that Hukezalie does not know the English name. My first word, 'ACHTER!' (meaning 'behind'), is key to survival in any kitchen, as chefs issue this warning to avoid accidental burns and knife punctures. Front-of-house staff use it, too, usually preceded by a nudge with a chair or bottle of polish. They differ from chefs in physique and attitude, but they share the same sense of humour: filth. Like forwards and backs in rugby — different breeds united by common purpose.

All the more like professional sportsmen, exhortation and admonition are received in equal measure. Anyone found letting the side down is confronted and castigated. In my previous career I had appraisals once a year. I wrote about how good I was and was told how I could be better. Chefs don't get report cards — they receive feedback several times a day, eighteen hours a day, five days a week.

Hukezalie is berated for using the wrong type of knife to chop a shallot. 'Are you unaware which knives Sergio wants used in this kitchen? Then why are you disregarding his wishes?' The best praise you can receive in the kitchen is none at all, because it means you didn't screw it up.

The chefs refer to each other generically not as 'chef' but 'guy' — a Dutch word meaning something like the Scottish 'pal', sometimes used affectionately and supportively, sometimes menacingly and sarcastically. I haven't managed to learn everyone's name yet but I hesitate to adopt the use of 'guy', worried by hierarchy and etiquette. Later, Sergio asks Hukezalie: 'Hey guy, have you got those cabbages?'



Hukezalie replies too snappily, 'Yes, guy.' He chokes, swallows, thinks quickly, resends and recalls: 'Yes, Sergio.'

'Do I see you running?' Nick blasts Arnie, a young German chef. In normal Michelin-starred kitchens, chefs wear clogs and walk purposefully. 'Why don't you get some running shoes, guy, like the rest of us and show us that you care? Seriously, guy, if you don't start running, we're going to throw you out of the family and leave you to die, like a dolphin. And you know how the dolphin dies? Of sadness, guy.'

'I sometimes have tears in my eyes when I talk to my staff,' says Sergio. This is not hyperbole: I see the passion as he implores his chefs to meet his standards. 'I demand perfection and I know that I drive everyone to extremes every day. Cooking in this team is rock 'n' roll, sexy and 300 per cent passion. Going for it every day shoulder to shoulder, facing a battle with yourself and your focus.'

At around 11.30am, after four hours of full-speed *mise en place*, I wolf a mortadella baguette and neck a plastic mug of black coffee. No break, just ten minutes of pre-lunch service clean down. Sergio does not employ kitchen porters. The chefs down tools, fill buckets of hot soapy, then slosh, scrub and dry the floors. 'Where's Judas?' the chefs echo, mocking his conveniently timed absences. His real name is Patrick but, in compliance with the 'no bullshit at work' policy, he is known to his face as Judas because he likes to gossip.

Just before midday, the first customers arrive. Banter ceases. The pace and volume intensify as the need for communication and coordination increases.

Sergio and Nick raise their voices, conducting an orchestra with jockeys' whips. The maitre d' choreographs service, aggregating the dining room into series of no fewer than eight at a time. Normal chefs dislike large parties — they clog up the pass and derail service. Sergio's dishes are so extraordinarily complex that plating table by table, different dishes each time, would be dysfunctional, so they plate several of the same dish at once, which works because most people have a tasting menu. The pass comfortably accommodates twenty plates and an echelon of six chefs around it, placing elements at the same position on each plate.

Whereas Marcus Wareing plants himself immovable at the pass, Nick skids up and down the runway, towel slung over his shoulder, cooking meat, tasting sauces and checking fish under the salamander grill. Sergio finishes *mise en place*, ordering chefs to the pass to plate up. It's not normal.

The plating system is adopted at the four other sections: Amuse, Starters, Pastry and Petit Fours. There are two or three chefs assigned to each section, but in service there's almost always an extra drafted in from somewhere else. Guests receive seven *amuse-bouches*. They are mirrored at the end by *petits-fours* that are so numerous and fiddly that they require a section of their own, nicknamed the 'coffee section'.

Just the list of elements in one of Sergio's dishes (I count 26 in one) reads like an extreme Ottolenghi recipe. The new

hare dish features loin fillet with three sauces, two jelly shapes, one fluid gel, one emulsion, four root vegetables, five types of cabbage, two herbs, one edible flower, two pickled vegetables, two discs of croutonised brioche and a cube of hare pâté. It comes with a side dish of braised hare and fifteen other elements, including eucalyptus gel, oat root and *rapini*, a brassica with leaves that taste like turnip and stalks that look like celery.

Chefs on a double shift normally take a break some time between 3pm and 5pm, returning for the second half of their day just as tube stations and pubs fill with nine-to-fivers. Lunch service at Oud Sluis rarely finishes before 4pm, leaving about three hours in which to clean down and continue *mise en place*. Staff dinner is hot, served on the pass at 6pm. As I eat standing at my station, I perform heel-to-buttock kicks to relieve the backs of my knees. I realise that I haven't been to the loo all day. I haven't had a chance, even if I needed to.

Before I know it, we're back in service and the tempo rises again. The flurry of activity is all new to me and time passes quickly. The last main courses leave the kitchen at 11.30pm, then a screen comes down to obscure the view from the restaurant into the kitchen as the chefs prepare to clean down. A few go to the warehouse to deposit the rubbish. They are rebuked for being gone too long.

Normal kitchens have a deep clean once a week. At Oud Sluis, sixteen chefs clean at the end of service every day for two hours, starting while the pastry and coffee sections are still in service. The last guests leave around 1am, but the chefs count themselves lucky if they finish before 2am. Food is labelled, containers are changed, drawers are cleaned, walls are sprayed, extraction units are taken apart and degreased, bins are disinfected. After the floor has been scrubbed, chefs scurry around on all fours wiping the skirting boards between floor and units. Finally, the surfaces are polished with baby oil for stainless steel.

Hukezalie brings in a crate of beers, hands me one, cracks one open for himself and starts sharpening his knives on a whetstone. For the first time, at 2.15am, the chefs unwind — except Jets, who has 100kg of hare to joint. Taking pity, Dexter from Ivory Coast and Simo from Finland take rubber gloves, chopping boards and boning knives. The rest leave to get five hours' sleep.

The soles of my feet burn as I walk to the only hotel in town. As I get into bed I breathe a deep sigh of relief on behalf of my lower back and legs. Physically, I am exhausted but my body is full of adrenaline and my mind is processing the day's experiences.

By day two, I feel less of a spare part. Daily procedures such as washing herbs are now familiar. The hours are long and the work is repetitive, but time flies because there is so much to do. After lunch service, Sergio empties the entire contents of the walk-in fridge on the benches, demanding it

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Above: Andrew Kojima (second from left) and his fellow chefs find a spare moment to put on brave faces. Right: The restaurant at Oud Sluis offers a more peaceful setting than the kitchens. Below: Head honcho Sergio Herman tries his best to smile



be properly labelled. Orlando ‘The Dog’ was right to be disquieted by the state of the fridge. Sorting the mess out sets everyone back by almost an hour and it’s a later finish that night, compounded by a bottleneck on coffee section that forces a re-allocation of resources away from the deep clean.

By day three, the brigade is breaching Working Time Directives. To help lift the kitchen tempo, the brigade is fuelled by black coffee and house music mixed by DJ Sander Kleinenberg, a friend of Sergio. The chefs ask me how I’m enjoying it. Have I ever worked anywhere like this? The unique culture developed by Sergio and Nick nurtures loyalty, commitment and drive, despite the brutality of the hours and workload.

On Friday nights, the whole staff, nearly 30 in all, gather for snacks and cocktails in the restaurant after service. Nick finds a volunteer to make snacks. ‘How about you, BBC guy?’ I’m told I can order anything I like, within reason. I can have a small space in the kitchen for two hours starting at midnight while everyone else cleans. Hukezalie, knowing that I’m half-Japanese, tells me that he’ll love me for ever if I cook ramen with marinated eggs. I soft-boil the eggs and peel them so I can get them marinating. I’ll finish them later in the water bath to get the yolks perfect.

Friday lunch service feels awkward. I sense excessive use of the whip. Nick is annoyed that the fridge issues reflect badly on him. Sergio’s freak-out has set back *mise en place*. Things get done in haste. Between services, Hukezalie warns me it’s going to get worse: ‘You know it’s going to be shit when Sergio and Nick are laughing.’

His barometer is right. As service begins Costner is taken outside and given the hairdryer treatment by Nick. It’s the start of a bad night — the nadir is around 10.30pm when the entire hot section starts going down. I’ve seen the wheels come off in a few kitchens but never thought I’d see it in a three-star restaurant. Nick storms out the moment the last plate has left the pass and returns less than a minute later. Once the screen is down between kitchen and dining room, he calls a meeting by the hot section then takes a few individuals outside for one-on-ones. Jets, who has recently been promoted to junior sous chef, is first. I fear snacks will be called off.

Every kitchen, whatever calibre, has a bad service. They have it out and move on. Staff snacks are delayed by the postmortem but we convene at 2.30am in the restaurant for cocktails and ramen. I garnish it with sweet marinated pork belly, fondant eggs, cabbage in sesame oil, *mizuna*, bean sprouts, *nori* sheets and deeply caramelised *brunoise* shallots. As an extra treat I deep-fry chicken thighs coated in tapioca flour. It’s served with own blend barbecue sauce and washed down with beer. This is Oud Sluis social life.

At 3.30am, the chefs dissipate into empty streets as fishmongers lay out their stall at the local supermarket. We will return in a few hours when they are serving their first customers. Meanwhile, Jets is paying penance. He has his ramen in the kitchen while he finishes hare pâté. He goes to bed at 5.30am.

The restaurant is closed for lunch on Saturdays. I’m not sure whether this is a deliberate survival mechanism, but it gives the chefs a lie-in and a full day of uninterrupted *mise en place*. At midday, the kitchen falls silent as chefs gather in the restaurant for a monthly team meeting. There is fruit, bread, ham, cheese, coffee and juice. Nick runs through an agenda that is part team talk, part off-site. One hour later, the music goes back on for five hours of full-speed *mise en place*. Dinner service on Saturday is better.

Thank God it’s Sunday. One more day of cooking, two services to go. Jets calls out: ‘Shumbody Tinosh?’ For days I have heard but not understood this abbreviated argot for ‘Does anyone have any orders for Tino’s?’ I can see why Steve McClaren picked up a Dutch accent.

What is Sergio doing? He is cooking to himself, with his Macbook open on the island. We are mid-service at 9.30pm on Sunday night and he is making a list of elements for a new scallop dish. He has a development kitchen at the warehouse down the road, but he prefers his own kitchen. Sunday finishes are even later. The restaurant will be closed for two days, so fridge organisation needs to be even more diligent. At 3.30am, the chefs get changed, drive to Antwerp and party until morning. Some of them don’t eat, drink or go to the toilet for 24 hours. They just sleep, shut down completely. It’s not normal. *J*