

## **Chapter 1**

### ***Ignorance is Bliss***

“Hello, what is it?” I shout into the phone as I watch my Head Chef, Claudio, and his crew of young guns plate up the order for table number two. The table guests are a collection of hip, trendy, young and upscale professionals; three couples out for a big night on the town. One of them is celebrating a deal closing involving a penthouse condo in a slick new development overlooking the marina, called “La Caille Place.”

Fuck, it’s hot in here! The heat is coming off from my new heavy-duty “Legend Broiler” by Montague, which I installed last week. It is blasting and searing the beef steaks at 1800 degrees Fahrenheit, and that’s some high heat, believe you me. Chef loves it, and so do I, as the meat just cooks so much better and faster while sealing in the juices and giving it just the right texture and crust. The intense infrared radiant heat is the secret. I could never understand the sous vide method of cooking the meat for long periods in vacuumed sealed plastic. It just didn’t seem like the right method for a proper chef to use; it can get good results if finished correctly, but nowhere close to the exceptional ones gained from the Montague grill. Nope, just not possible. I don’t use this method in my kitchen. No sir, I’m certainly not going to adopt it, for my guests deserve not just better, they deserve the best. Hence—the reason—I splurged on the grill.

It was a small fortune, but my accountant figured I could manage to pay it off over the next eighteen months without too much strain on the cash flow. Accountants. Shit, how I love to hate them. Michael is constantly fiddling around with the books to make them balance and usually giving me a solid—“No, the business can’t afford it” answer to my usual eagerness to add more equipment to my small restaurant empire. Empire, shit, my ass, what castles we build in our minds of the dreams we seek. My world revolves around a small forty-seat dining room with a twenty-seat lounge and a ten-seat bar counter. We can comfortably extend the seating out onto the sidewalk with additional twenty seats for its entire four months in the summers. That’s it. My castle. My life.

The last three years have been all about realising my dream, the dream of building my restaurant into the finest upscale steakhouse in town. I am getting closer to earning that title—I just need a few more months to convince the city’s leading food critics, journalists and lifestyle columnists

to bestow on us culinary accolades and awards of irrefutable recognition. The new grill will help us get us over the top. No other restaurant in town has a Montague grill, the Cadillac of grills.

Man, what a journey it has been, a journey of blood, sweat and tears. No doubt about it. My days are ever brimming with activities; I take reservations, manage the staff requirements, order stock and balance the receipts. Online advertising campaigns and social media updates keep me on my toes. Mostly, a great deal of time goes into posting new pictures, promotions, and special menus on our website and responding to various comments on digital forums such as TripAdvisor. I also hold regular meetings with my distributors, selling those various products to run this business. When I have free time, I like going out to try the competitors, just to keep my finger on the city's pulse, albeit it's less often than I would like. It all feels like a never-ending parade of time-consuming activities.

For all the frantic pre-dinner and dinner engagements—we open every night, without fail—for 7 days a week, straight for 364 nights in a year. Our only exception is New Year's Day, that is, the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, one day of the year that brings quiet and total peace. This day is usually spent on the sofa, nursing a hangover sipping Bloody Mary (heavily salted and spiced), and eating the leftover pizza from the night before while watching football. Totally, mind-numbing.

So far, I have managed to open only in the evenings. However, in summer, we do offer lunch—"patio lunch". If I could make a go at it, I would open full-time during all the seasons. But with the cost of labour already eating up over 45% of the revenues, coupled with the lower lunch menu prices due to a drastic drop in wine consumption, I just can't afford to operate. Wine keeps us alive—quite literally. The mark-ups average out to be almost 50%. Each evening, my team of waiters and bartenders are out there, night after night, up-selling the finest vintages to my eager, thirsty, well-to-do patrons. About 60% of the total revenue from the daily sales is generated from beverage sales, comprising wine, cocktails and bottled water, and toss in a few frothy cappuccinos or creamy espressos with a hand-warmed cognac, and that's a wrap.

It has been three years of grinding it out. Three years of struggle. But almost there, almost at the top.

“Hold on!” I yell into the phone as I duck into the stairwell that leads to the basement, effectively creating a sound barrier between myself and the noise of the kitchen.

“Hey, Richard, I know you’re in the middle of the dinner rush, but we need to talk. Have you heard the news about this coronavirus? Fuck dude, this is getting serious!” says Wheels in a somewhat panicked voice—highly uncharacteristic of him.

I haven’t been paying much attention to it. The virus story has been hitting the news network, but I don’t have time to waste listening to the talking heads on *CNN* and *FOX*. Instead, I just catch the odd news flash in my daily read of the newspaper. I am old-fashioned that way, preferring to read the newspaper over coffee in the morning while sitting in the restaurant before the business day starts. I predominantly review the lifestyle section, scanning if there are any write-ups on restaurants. I also thoroughly check the advertising section to gauge what the competition is up to, read the special deals on offer, and check out the newest promotional material. I rarely bother reading more than the front page; thus, my limited knowledge on the coronavirus about which Wheels was going on.

“Hey, Wheels,” I yell again into the phone. “How about we meet for a drink at the pub after work, say around ten? You can fill me in then. I got to help the team pick up now. I have to help serve food to this table of six that Chef has just started to plate onto the line.”

“Ok, man, see you then. Shit, what a mess is coming our way, big fucking mess, dude.” I hear Wheels fret as I disconnect the line.

Good guy, Wheels, one of the best. A true hospitality junkie. He is my main guy, front of the house, head waiter, captain, mentor, trainer and an all-around champion or something like that. He is a lifer, remarkably professional, and always on top of his game. Wheels vigorously shuns the responsibility of managing the restaurant, preferring to wait on tables four shifts a week with the occasional addition of one, or sometimes staying late to help close the shop or cover for me when I’m unavailable.

Wheels is dialled into things in the city, particularly the restaurant scene. At one time or another, he has probably worked at the most of the top restaurants in the town. Wheels has been at it for almost thirty years and knows everybody in the game—the serious players, all the owners, all the

chefs, all the managers, bartenders and the best waiters, and well, most of the worst too. He has slogged it out in the kitchens and on the floor, too. He is in tune. Wheels is a rare breed, a very, very rare breed, and content in keeping it simple—life, that is. He believes that time is best spent doing as little as possible but with the right people. And usually, that's while enjoying a good meal or a glass of wine. Or, like tonight, over a pint of beer while tossing wildly inaccurate shots at the dartboard in Harry's Pub.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Belvedere**

I quickly slide my mobile into my pocket and help serve the table of six. I carry out to the dining room a large oval tray, upon which is a selection of side dishes that include truffle oil- infused mashed potatoes, grilled asparagus, sautéed mushrooms and creamed spinach. These are some fan favourites or what we call ‘cash cows’ for Belvedere’s kitty. Side dishes have become *the* ‘thing’ in the upscale steakhouse trends, in addition to the premium steaks.

We have a top-of-the-line selection of choice cuts, aged to perfection, either grain or grass- fed and free-range style from a handpicked collection of local artisan ranches. Chef Claudio and I have taken this concept to a ridiculously awesome level by convincing a top rancher to sell us one of his best genetically developed bulls, bred with carefully selected cows. We butcher all the steers and keep the best cuts for the restaurant. The rest is sold away to local craft butchers and speciality meat shops. It is seriously over the top, but the results are excellent. We not only procure the best beef available in the market at increasingly better prices than our competitors but also, perhaps, importantly, we have a ‘story to tell our customers.’ Stories are part of the marketing angle, and we play hardball when it comes to developing the most innovative stories about our products. The restaurant business, first and foremost, is about the selling of food and beverage—but notably, it also has elements of entertainment. Pure and simple, it is like going to a live Broadway Theatre show, but in our case, it is real life and not a make-believe dress-up play.

Behind the curtain, in the chaos of the kitchen, there are searing hot pans, razor-sharp knives and passionate chefs barking orders while furiously coordinating the preparations, cooking and timing an array of dishes. It is a wild environment. It peaks around eight every evening, with the grand climax demonstrating the class performance of the chefs’ speed, agility and skills. It is pure magic when it all goes well, but complete madness and rage when it breaks down—it really *is* something to witness and be a part of.

On top of the line and grill cooks, there are prep cooks, crafting various cold appetisers. Alongside is our Pastry Chef, Candy, designing

masterpieces from the finest Valrhona chocolate or firing up her favourite tool, ‘the blow torch’, to finish caramelising her much-loved, famed, crowd-pleaser *crème brûlée*. Candy apprenticed at the award-winning San Francisco Bakery and Patisserie Craftsman and Wolves (CAWS) on Yosemite Avenue. She was tutored by Chef William Werner, who is a legend in this part of the country. Chef Werner was a finalist in 2015 and 2016 for the James Beard Award for ‘Outstanding Baker’. *Craftsman and Wolves* has been recognised by the likes of Bon Appetit, Martha Stewart and Food and Wine, amongst many others. Candy acquired a preference to work exclusively with Valrhona chocolate during her time working there. The chocolate is indeed one of the very best. I especially like the chocolate shoyu caramel and the delicate but dense yuzu smoked butter.

Off to the side is the pot wash, better known as the ‘dish pit’, where Jonny is furiously trying to keep up with the growing pile of pots, pans, glasses, china and cutlery, which have been

relentlessly bombarded by cooks and waiters coming in and out of the revolving doors. It is fast-paced, laborious and a grind of a job—the toughest job of all—and the starting point for young, eager entrants like Jonny looking to get a shot at prep cooking one day in the future. Hierarchical learning, that is, learning from the bottom up, characterises the old school style that fosters lessons in all aspects of the job essential to becoming a true pro. It demands respect for the process, and hence, is unlike the current day culinary schools with their methodically structured fast-track path designed to acquire a hotel restaurant job straight onto the line. Duly, it encourages elbow grease to climb up the proverbial rungs as hard knocks. Classic education.

On the floor, it is a different scene altogether as things unfurl at a much slower pace. Elegant jazz music plays softly in the background with just enough volume to be heard—careful not to overwhelm the conversations happening at the tables. Again, it’s a thing of details—details, ever so minute, yet in the final analysis, significantly forging the difference between magical and just ordinary.

We do create magic—with sounds as well. I insisted on installing the Bose 240 W Bluetooth Mixer Amplifier System with DesignMax surface mounted speakers in opposition to Michael’s terse objections. Excellent

sound can only be achieved with quality equipment, and it is more important than selecting soundtracks to serenade the customers. Though admittedly and undoubtedly, the artist selection is a well-thought-through process for creating the right mood and elevating the dining experience.

The dining room and lounge temperatures are set at 69 degrees Fahrenheit, along with a forty per cent relative humidity balance. This temperature ensures an agreeable setting for gentlemen to wear a sports coat and lends ladies the choice to wrap a neck scarf or not. It's a perfectly comfortable environment.

The bespoke chairs, built for luxurious comfort, use plush fabric over soft yet firm cushioned seats and have thick and sturdy armrests. The chair's height is a critical element that cannot be overlooked—a chair too low makes the guest feel like a child sitting in an oversized chair, whereas one too high has them knock their knees on the tabletop's bottom. High-grade furnishings, accurately fitted, are an absolute must.

For the flooring—I have installed a solid Ipe, a Brazilian hardwood walnut floor that can withstand ladies high-heel shoes' indentations.

The walls have the floor to ceiling mirrors with heavy fabric curtain draping, creating the illusion of reflective windows, thus lending the dining room a more spacious look. The creation of this splendid illusion was suggested by a talented interior designer whom I had hired to help me source the fixtures and furniture.

An artistically done lighting system is imperative, too. It mustn't be too bright or too dim. I prefer soft lights, and for good measure, I have installed yellow and orange-tinted LED electric lights as they always evoke such a soft and seductive ambience. On being lit up, while possessing an almost smokey edge, they consume barely about ten per cent of the regular incandescent lamp's energy utility. Placed upon the tabletops are wax candles set in clear square glass holders which beam small dancing flickers when lit. The crisp white 600-thread-count linen on the table accentuates the candlelight falling on it.

The bottom-up floor spotlights subtly illuminate the rustic red brick finished interior walls and the old, brass-footed ledge of the dark oak bar, extending the whole length.

I started Belvedere with the view to deliver the best dining experience in town, an accomplishment that hugely rests on creating the right atmosphere, which precisely is what I went on to do. After years of working my way through a wide variety of restaurants, with the bulk of them being upscale or fine-dining establishments, I have gained the finest lessons from some of the best restaurateurs in the business. These talented restaurateurs hail from backgrounds as diverse as you can imagine—essentially, from all around the world. However, one common trait among them had been—paying immense attention to quality and details.

A restaurant owner's must-do list includes the daily sweeping of the sidewalk and cleaning the windows before the guest's arrival, ensuring the proper tabletop alignments, polished silver, and the placement and positioning of all the items with military precision. Equally important is the plant's watering and pruning and the refrigeration of flowers to retain their freshness. In short, everything ought to be clean, organised and immaculate, and to accomplish it, we meticulously design, prepare and set our stage every night without fail. Then, add to the pre-shift checklist, temperature check, sound volume check, lighting check. Details! The secret to the success sauce lies in the details.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Golden Rule**

My team is the backbone of my restaurant business. Eliminate the two key guys, Chef Claudio and my front man, Wheels, and none of it would matter. All that other stuff is just that, stuff. A magnificent performance requires conductors, and these two are in tune with everything that goes on in Belvedere and each other. They have a love-hate relationship, but it's a deep love and a surface type of hate. That's the way it works with passionate professionals in any creative field of expertise.

The intensity of operating at elevated levels demands a lot from the professionals involved. It's not just anyone that can handle this type of work environment. It requires people with endurance for high-intensity pressure, a sprawling breadth of experience, tradecraft and finely honed skills. Those in this rarefied culinary zone, armed with flexibility and adaptability, also reckon timing's sacrosanct importance. They deliver consistently—without fail. To us, quality results for each meal, drink or any other clientele request is indispensable. We aim to please, surprise and delight.

Claudio and Wheels are perfectionists, and they demand perfection from their team members or as damn close to it as humanly possible. For hiring their crew, they follow a base concept that I have laid out and have applied to hire them.

The first rule in my business (and personal life) bible is the Golden Rule: 'Treat others the way you wish to be treated,' an adage that goes for every person you interact with, including people in your daily life, strangers and acquaintances alike. In business, it's our partners, suppliers, guests and staff. Therefore, when recruiting their team members, one needs to find, select and hire people who have this critical characteristic embedded in their subconscious.

The second rule relates to – attitude. A positive attitude about life that enables forging and fostering relationships and bearing an overall cheery and dynamic personality is indispensable for anyone employed in the hospitality industry. My experience of working with various mentors and bosses instilled the belief that attitude cannot be taught or changed. I

discover it to be mainly an element of a person's make-up or DNA. It shows up as a direct reflection of that person's combined life experiences.

Simply put, unlike skills, attitude is unteachable. Skills—let's consider restaurant-related skills, such as opening a wine bottle, mixing a cocktail recipe, preparing a platter or plating a perfect dish—we can teach these. But we cannot teach someone how to love and respect others or 'how to' willingly seek to and enjoy serving others; these are natural human traits, though scarcely- found. These two guys, Wheels and Claudio, have these qualities, and since they can discern them in others too, at Belvedere, they have been able to select a fine fleet of staff, which is paramount for every restaurant or organisation. Winning is abundantly about these qualities in the people you employ. It always has been, and always will be. After that, it's about the attention to detail that I have earlier mused.

At Belvedere, we pay careful attention to choosing quality products that contribute to its evolved menus, food supplies, wine list and spirit selection. Embedded with every product selection is a story, a rather charming story. We bring that story to life at different times and in different ways during the culinary and dining journey.

Sample this story of our organic, fair-trade certified Indonesian speciality coffee sourced from coffee plantations nestled in South East Asia's deep reaches of the island of Java. The farmers use sustainable farming practices in the production process. The coffee variety is an Arabica bean, planted initially on the island in the 1800s by the early Dutch settlers. The coffee is aged for three years in a process called *monsooning*. The resulting flavour of the coffee is less acidic and mellow in nature. An exceptional product of Belvedere, and we are the only restaurant serving this in the city as I have an exclusivity deal with the importer for my region.

Another delightful story from our product treasury is about Ceylonese tea. The tea leaves are obtained from the lush green countryside of Sri Lanka, a country recognised as one of the world's top tea producers. Situated in the Indian Ocean, it was historically referred to as Ceylon by the British colonial powers who started the tea plantations to supply tea to the European market. Our Ceylonese tea is grown on the rolling green hills on the southern edge of the remote Uva highlands, where the climate is cool and misty—highly conducive to tea gardens' thriving. However, their production capacity is limited, and therefore the tea remains exclusive in terms of availability. The Ceylonese tea is truly a unique beverage, never

failing to add a smile to customers' faces. We have it supplied by the Lopatin family-owned *Arbor Teas*, a small family-operated organic tea business based in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Our speciality products mirror the care and energy we put into our search and selection. At times, the process seems arduous—but, man, the satisfaction derived after the procurement is unparalleled.

We adopt the above process in selecting the farms or producers for vegetables, fruit or any other product. In addition, every product we use is selected with due diligence to find the best ingredient that aligns with our high operational standards. After all, our clientele expects quality, and they pay for it. As a result, we have built our reputation on quality, strategically carving out for ourselves a niche in the highly competitive field of high-end food and beverage operations.

I am talking with the guests at the table about their wine choice as Jody-and-Patrick's service tag team finalise the dishes placement on the table and conduct some slight table maintenance. Jody offers to dust fresh cracked pepper from a hand mill to each guest, while Patrick adjusts items to make the table just more comfortable for the guests to dine. They also top up the water glasses with Norwegian Voss water and replenish the fresh home-style baked bread and balsamic infused butter.

I pour the remainder of the bottle's wine into the crystal stemware while raving about a new wine that I just added to our wine cellar collection. I explain to my eager listeners why I think it would be an ideal match with the magnificent steaks they now have before them. The gentlemen are finishing up a tasty Oregon wine from Alex Sokol Blosser's vineyard, a *Big Tree Pinot Noir*. The ladies are genially sipping from a lovely chilled bottle of delicious peach and passion fruit freshness found in the *Honig Sauvignon Blanc*. This drink is produced in Napa Valley, not far from *Cakebread Cellars*; in fact, it's just down the road on the Rutherford floor. It is *Cakebread's* famed *Dancing Bear Cabernet Sauvignon 2012* that I have suggested as a perfect pairing to their feast. I admit that it is a bit over the top, tailed with a steep price tag, but, oh, how deep, rich and delightful it is with its boysenberry and plum flavour, earthy softness and intensely dense dark chocolate finish. "Just simply divine!" I sigh.

Convinced, the table leader, a young lawyer from a highly successful commercial real estate firm, gives me the nod, and I retreat to allow

Patrick to do the honours of going through the wine presentation ritual, the sample-tasting and servicing.

The art of opening a bottle of wine is one of the most lavish rituals of all and one of my most enduring favourites. It begins with presenting the wine bottle for verification to a pair of piercing eyes and then carefully cutting the cap. The ensuing two steps, in order, involve the extraction of the cork and decanting the precious bottle into a crystal decanter. Once fully decanted, the server studiously pours a small sample into a wine glass like a priest piously offering libation for a deity, after which he spins the wine, keenly observes the colour, judges the viscosity and ultimately inhales the sample in the glass for the fragrance. Finally, if all that indicates the wine is drinkable, they take a taste. Tasting involves the process of nimbly rolling the liquid around on the palate while drawing in a draft of air and together, sucking the ruby richness around the entirety of the mouth. A truly magnificent sensation it creates, I swear.

Patrick conducts the drill with confidence and grace, and when done, he pours for the guest to get his confirmation and then goes ahead to serve the other table guests.

The young lawyer is mesmerised and almost screams in ecstatic delight on taking the first sip and quickly downs the remaining splashes as he reaches out greedily for more. His tablemates appear envious and eagerly await their turn to try this nectar of the gods.

Life doesn't get any better than enjoying one of the *Cakebread* family wines. It is a fantastic family that is respected within California's Napa Valley's wine society for its exceptional quality wines and commitment to sustainable farming practices, not to mention its community involvement. I could go on at length about their wines, their collective graciousness, and the exceptionally meticulous way with which the family led by Jack and Delores Cakebread has built the winery into a world-class venture. Truly a business built on the same values I try to instil in my own restaurant.

After checking on a few tables, I return to check the table of six. Then, seeing the couples mirthful, I pat the lawyer on his arm, wink in passing, and while leaving the floor, I playfully remark, "Good choice, sir." He is still nodding his head in glee as I pass through the swing doors and enter the kitchen.

Chef Claudio picks up the last order of the night and instructs the team to begin cleaning up the line and their stations. Pastry Chef Candy is now in her peak hour, and Chef goes over to give her a hand. Teamwork and being a hands-on leader are integral to making our team special. Nothing is beneath any of us—so, we are all willing to pitch in when and however we are needed.

I climb downstairs to my office and simply plop into my chair. What a day! It's just going to be 9 p.m. and, I have been at it since nine this morning, a solid twelve-hour day, which, though, is typical in our line of work. In another hour, I will meet up with Wheels. But before I get too comfortable in my chair, I reach over and pick up the bottle of Paul Hobbs' *Vina Cobos*, a Malbec from Marchiori Estate in Mendoza, Argentina. The wine was dropped off this week by one of my leading wine suppliers, *Summergeate*, which is the same company that I buy a lot of my Californian wines from. I am familiar with Paul Hobbs' winery in Sonoma County and have tried many of his different varietals produced in the various vineyards in Russian River Valley and Napa. In addition to running those businesses, Paul consults all over the world for prestigious wineries. He is one of the true great vintners in the American and global wine-producing industry. He had started a winery in the famed Argentina region of Mendoza County over three decades ago and has ever since won some significant awards and ratings from the leading wine experts, Wine Spectator and Robert Parker.

I have been eagerly waiting to try it, and now is the time. I whistle and gently rub my hands before reaching for my *Laguiole En Aubrac* bone-handle sommelier knife. Then, I adroitly cut the cap, carefully extract the cork and finally, pour a generous size tasting portion into my handblown *Riedel* wine glass. Technically speaking, this glass design has the exact specific glass dimensions for this particular varietal. I exclusively stock *Riedel* stemware from Austria because it simply is the best hand-blown glass by expert craftsmen. It is expensive, but there is nothing out there in the market that beats it. It *is* true elegance.

I give the wine a good swirl and then observe the liquid ravishingly run down the crystal edge before slowly dripping down to form the legs. The wine's colour is clean, sharp and vibrant, with an almost cherry-red tinge. I raise the glass to my lips, quaff the entire tasting portion and gradually suck the liquid between my teeth—and as I do so, I almost gargle it as I

allow the wine to seep off my tongue and run down my gullet. “Wow, fantastic fucking drop!” I exclaim out loud. Chef Claudio, who is passing by the office door, curiously pops his head in to the room upon hearing my outburst.

“What are you into tonight, Richard?” he asks playfully. I smile guiltily like a cat caught swallowing a mouse. Then, I turn and grab another *Riedel* glass from the shelf above my desk and pass it to him. His eyes twinkle seeing the bottle, and he promptly picks it up to check the label.

“Oh, Hobbs! Love his wines but have never tried his Argentinian stuff before,” Claudio regales as he pours a healthy refill for me and a portion for himself. He fills the glasses almost to the halfway point, which is more than what is served to the guests in their tableside glasses. But here in the bowels of the restaurant, we go big. Nothing will remain in that bottle when we leave. “Once a bottle is opened, it must be consumed”—that’s our motto! Tonight, Wheels is off, so more for the two of us. One of the trade’s perks comprises enjoying great food and fine wine after a long day in the trenches. We both had eaten at our pre-shift meal with the team, which is another ritual, so now it’s just wine, and for myself, cigarettes too. I fire up a Marlboro light with my gold-plated zippo and draw a deep drag while sipping the wine through the light cloud of its smoke. I lift my legs and unabashedly place my feet up on a stool next to the desk.

“So, Chef, what have you heard of this virus thing? Wheels is whining about it and suggesting that it’s going to be a problem,” I ask.

“Yah, hard to say, really. It is a China thing, out of a city called Wuhan. I heard it has something to do with bats or cats from the wet markets there. Not surprising, as I have seen those markets on T.V., and they look pretty disgusting. Not much of any regulation on health and hygiene protocols... You wouldn’t believe it even on seeing it. The virus is limited to China, so it probably won’t jump the pond and end up here. I wouldn’t sweat it. I haven’t paid it too much attention; I just noticed that there is more frequent chatter about it,” Chef says, looking distractedly at his wine glass on the table.

“Yah, my thoughts exactly. I will get more of an update from Wheels later at *Harry’s*. Are you up for it? Maybe, a quick pint?” I ask.

“No,” Claudio quickly replies with a devious smile, “I have other plans tonight.”

“Oh, someone I know?” I enquire, with a glance his way.

“No, a girl I met last week while jogging in the park—real cool chick. I’m meeting her up shortly, and in fact, I got to shower up and get out of here. Thanks for the wine, a nice grog for sure. We should list it. I could come up with a dish that would pair nicely with that. Maybe, a tapa style thing we could sell on the lounge menu,” he says with a pep.

“You should,” I reply, and “I will” is his prompt answer. “Now, get your ass out of my office and go have fun with that girl. She’s waiting for you!” I laugh as he begins to stroll out. But he quickly retreats to replenish his wine glass with a generous pour.

I turn to my desktop and launch a soundtrack of an American singer and pianist, Norah Jones. She is a favourite musician of mine. I love the combination of her jazz, country and blues sound, and more especially her soothing, sultry voice. The music quickly lifts my mood, not that I am in a bad mood—it just always has a way to make me feel better and relaxed. I pour the last of the remaining wine in the bottle into my glass, gulp it, close the office door and start to change into a fresh cotton shirt, over which I pull on a casual wool sports coat.

It's time for a little stroll about the pleasant neighbourhood before arriving at *Harry's* for darts, beer and the virus story.

## Chapter 4

### BrewHouse

I exit through the restaurant's backdoor and nearly bump into Jonny, who is perched on the steps and smoking a cigarette. He is taking a quick break before returning to a mountainous stack of dishes awaiting him.

“Night, Jonny,” I say as I step out into the alley and begin a brisk walk across downtown. I loop my way past the Grand Hyatt, which is just a few blocks over from us and drop in to check the business in its trendy Italian restaurant *Spasso*. There are only a few tables in the restaurant section, but the bar is bustling—making a brisk late-night trade. I leave the hotel and continue to walk half a block up, passing by the newest restaurant in this section of downtown, a Peruvian Japanese place, serving up a kind of fusion concept. I haven't tried the restaurant yet, but I have heard positive reviews from others who have dined there. Their culinary ideas are based on *Nikkei* cuisine—coined by the renowned Japanese celebrity Chef, Chef Nobu Matsuhisa, who gained international renown for his innovative, masterful blending of Peruvian recipes with refined Japanese culinary techniques.

I have made a mental note to have lunch at *Nikkei* next week with Chef and Wheels. Perhaps, there we find some inspiration to push the tapas idea further. I continue past the *Four Seasons Hotel*, a super posh place with pristine landscaping and immaculately dressed concierges, standing rigidly at attention. Man, would I like to have the cash to afford a weekend stay at a place like that. Maybe when I win top restaurant recognition and have long queues and a reservation waitlist, I could take a date for a weekend to celebrate. Yah, maybe Monica would like to join me for that. “Dreamer,” I say and smile as I circle the block and bound up the stairs leading to *Harry's*.

I enter through the heavy wooden doors and am unceremoniously welcomed into a noisy, crowded bar, brimming with patrons—some seeking the spirits to drown their worries of the day and others wishing to lift their spirits with spirits. I quickly spot Wheels at the bar counter, chatting up Leah, one of the many attractive waitresses Harry has recruited to sling drinks. Leah is studying to be a nurse and does this gig part-time to help pay her tuition. Wheels can be somewhat conflicted when it comes to



women. He definitely loves to be around ladies but mostly keeps them at arm's length, probably due to his two failed marriages. As some might say, he is good-looking, handsome in a weather-beaten kind of way, more an outcome of excess booze and smoking than the weather and outdoors. Wheels' idea of enjoying the great outdoors is sitting in an outdoor jacuzzi holding a glass of wine in hand whilst looking around at the surrounding trees. That's as close as he gets to be a nature enthusiast.

“Hey, pal, how's the day been for you? You slacker!” I toss it out at him for a greeting.

“Yup, just fucking brilliant, I didn't do a thing. Cooked an amazing dinner of a whole beef short rib. Slow roasted it for four hours, and it was dynamite. Could cut through it like butter!” he says proudly. “What was the pairing for that?” I respond as I take a stool next to him at the bar. I nod to the bartender for a pint. He knows what I want as I always have the same beverage here, *Stella Artois*. It's a famous Belgium lager that Harry has as one of the many imports on tap.

“Nothing special, really. I had *Kendall Jackson Cabernet*. Was actually tasty and paired quite well,” he comments as he glances at a pair of Uni girls walking in the door, laughing and looking pretty. “One of those everyday drinking wines that don't totally break the bank. Don't tell me what you had, you bastard.” I smile crookedly and reply, merely saying, “Mendoza.” He instantly knows what I meant as he had seen the Hobbs' bottle on my desk the previous day and only answers with one word dripping with jealousy and contempt, “Asshole.”

The bartender carefully places the beer with a huge head of frothy foam in an ice-cold mug in front of me. I thank him as I pick it up and turn towards my companion. “Nothing like a cleansing lager! Cheers, Wheels!” I exclaim as we both raise our glasses in a toast. I take a deep swig of the beer, and its crispness immediately cools my throat and quenches my thirst.

A small group of university types has stormed the dartboards, so we decide to stay at the bar counter and chat with Leah. Wheels apparently had a few libations before I had arrived on top of the bottle of K.J. Thus, he is in excellent form, making jokes while flirting with Leah at every chance. We chat about Belvedere's evening business volume, and I mention the sale of *Cakebread Dancing Bear*. Wheels is evidently disappointed since he

wasn't there to try it and to benefit from the large gratuity that Patrick and Jody shared from that table alone. The wine was priced just over \$200 a bottle, and the table had consumed two bottles of it, plus the other selections.

“The table must have generated at least twelve hundred dollars in sales. Not bad for a table of six pax. The gratuity was most certainly in the neighbourhood of two hundred bucks,” I inform Wheels exultantly. Our guests drop us tips worth nothing less than 15% and, more often than not, upwards, up to 20% of the bill amount—nice earner for sure, but certainly not out of the ordinary at Belvedere.

Soon our conversation veers to the topic of coronavirus, which Wheels had been eager to discuss when he called me earlier. He looks up and speaks thickly,

“Richard, I have been researching this coronavirus, and it appears pretty wild and horrifying. It started in Wuhan, China, a few weeks ago, though no one seems to know the exact date, and now it's spreading to other countries, beginning to pop up all over the place.” His concerned gaze plumbs into my eyes, and I feel unsettled.

“What does the virus do to people?” I ask as my curiosity burgeons.

“Well, it seems to cause something like nasty flu symptoms, similar to what you might expect if you caught pneumonia, and it can kill people, especially the vulnerable.”

“Vulnerable, meaning?” I quiz him, lifting my beer mug, which is now half-empty.

“Like those that haven't got strong immune systems or those sick or weak like some elderly persons. China has shut down the whole of Wuhan, a city of ten million people. The Chinese government closed it down, just like that. One day regular life is going on, and the next, everything stops, and people are being ordered to stay at home. No work, no school, no anything. Stay home, full stop...,” Wheels explains animatedly.

“The speculation,” he continues, “is that the virus has likely already spread internationally, beyond the handful of countries that have confirmed one or two cases. I am really worried, man. A silent, invisible killer on the loose. How can you contain such a thing? It's airborne, transmitting human to human, so how the fuck can you stop something like that? Can't be done,

man, just can't be done." He utters the last words in such an eerie tone that it causes a slight tingling down my spine.

My throat feels dry, and I gesture to Leah for a refill while I respond to Wheels, "Well, it probably won't get here, and if it did, the government and the medical community surely have some way to detect and develop a vaccine to counter it. Big Pharma might already have the antidote bottled, packaged and ready for sale," I say with blind ignorance, yet trying to sound confident.

"Anyway, how do you shut down a city of ten million people? In the U.S., we don't even have a city of ten million people, the largest city in America is New York, and it has a population of just over eight million?" I ask curiously.

"I have no clue, mate... Fuck dude, you should look online. The internet is lit up with all kinds of crazy stories from Wuhan—stories that have broken through the internet firewall China has built to control its citizens' access to western ideas. The tech-savvy Chinese youth are using VPNs or 'Virtual Private Networks' to access Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms. They have been posting all kinds of crazy shit. It's truly insane, man," Wheels explains, bending and holding his head in his hands.

After a short silent pause and a slow sip from his mug, he continues; now, with a vague sense of dread in his voice, "You know...this morning, I saw video drones equipped with a camera and voice activation technology flying around the Wuhan streets harassing people, barking orders at them to go back home. One drone was even chasing an old lady down the street, ordering her to get off from there. You have to see that video. It's insane. Police and military personnel are arresting anyone not following the orders. City workers are spraying what looks like disinfectant on the streets while wearing full hazmat suits. It's crazy, dude! It looks like the Fukushima nuclear clean-up crews in Japan. They, the Chinese, closed everything...restaurants, bars, markets, everything, literally everything. Richard, if that happened here, could you imagine it? Total chaos, anarchy and mayhem. No way would Americans put up with that. I sure wouldn't, no bloody way."

"Could you imagine if this city came to a halt? How would people react? Crazy scene to imagine... It would be just like living in a real-life sci-fi horror thriller movie written by Stephen King," Wheels concludes, staring at me for an extra few seconds before taking another pull on his beer.

I try to envision the dreadful scenario while Wheels' words pour into my ears. Really—What would it be like to live in a city that's totally closed and the streets deserted, except for the police and military? Not to mention having drones with eyes and ears flying around patrolling the streets? It all does seem like scenes from a horror sci-fi film, giving me goosebumps, though I shy from thinking that it would ever play out in reality, here in America.

“Well, pal, again, I wouldn't worry too much about it as surely the scientific community will get it under control quickly.” These, I recall, were my memorable and infamous last words to close the topic for the night.