

Maybe next time

By Shannean Gormley

It's a Sunday morning, and I am hitting snooze on my alarm. 5.30am already, I say to myself. Longing for a peaceful lie-in, I eagerly await the final workday. However, the truth is that it has been quite some time since I last enjoyed the simple pleasure of waking up without the interruption of an alarm clock. I plan out the next forty-five minutes in my head, get out of bed, make coffee, get dressed, don't forget your knives, and, for the love of God, leave early enough so you can make a coffee stop on the way to work.

I say goodbye to my family, and I am out the door. The first glance at my phone, message notifications, friends making plans for Saturday night, and family asking to meet for coffee. I am late to reply, but I say maybe next time, or let's reschedule. You know I must be in the kitchen. We are short-staffed. You work too much. Have a day off, they say. It's not that easy, I say, but isn't it? I quickly push that thought out of my head. A big day is ahead of me. I need to focus, I need to do the orders, I need to make sure the team is okay, and I need to get this food out on time.

I make my journey to the kitchen. The comment "You work too much" lingers in my thoughts. They don't get it. They have never worked in a kitchen. It's not as simple as taking a day off or leaving when it gets tricky. But isn't it? The thought begins to consume me. Why do I do this? Why do I work 15-

hour shifts, take no breaks, and forget that people in the outside world exist? Is it the love for food? The passion for cooking? Why do I accept a world that has conditioned chefs to believe that work is more important than living life? Don't get me wrong, I chose this career path because cooking truly brings me joy, but when I look back at my life over the past ten years, what has it been for? You see, the life of a chef is often misconstrued. We are expected to show up and cook regardless of the state of our health, more specifically, our mental health. Calling in sick is considered a sign of weakness. If you want to take a Saturday night off to see friends and family, oh boy, you'll regret ever muttering the words, "Chef, can I take a weekend off?"

The kitchen brigade becomes family. We eat, work, and coexist together more than our actual families. Blood, sweat, and tears saturate our chefs' whites. I would describe my fellow brigade members as creative individuals with loyal and empathetic personalities. But what about the world outside those four walls? In a world where finding the balance between work and life becomes blurred. I sit in my car and ponder who I am beyond being a chef. My coffee is going cold now, I am lost in my thoughts. I tell myself it's not that deep or serious. But isn't it?

There is a tapping on my car window. I roll it down. Good morning, chef. A cheerful smile greets me. It's Anne, my trusted second hand. She informs me she has put a pot of coffee on. I park my previous thoughts for the moment and begrudgingly leave my car. It's time to get to work. I enter the kitchen. The scent of freshly baked brioche greets me. I lay my knife bag on my workbench. Good morning, team, I say, how are you all? It's a big day today. Let's all take five and get some caffeine because time is of the essence. As we sit together, I take the opportunity to get the function brief organised. Anne, how's that bread coming along? Have you made enough biscotti to cover the following function? Patrik, how are those short ribs looking? Tender as can be, chef, he replies. Lovely, great job, guys, I say and enjoy the rest of my coffee.

A sense of guilt trickles into my mind occasionally. I ask the guys to spend long hours in my kitchen away from their families. Their kids ask when they are going to be home. It's the crux of an empathic mind. In any kitchen I had the pleasure to work in, Compassion was never an emotion I would have associated with my head chef. I knew the moment I became one myself, things would change in my kitchen. But one thing that never changes is the demand for hours. A feeble compensation for the guilt, a coffee from our local café or some baked goods to boost morale.

I go back into the kitchen, and an internal dialogue continues, so first, I need to get that soup on. I start my daily ritual. I grab my towels, dampen one, and perfectly fold it in half, each corner meeting, no overlap. I lay my chopping board down, roll out the knife sleeve, and take my favourite knife. I take my steel and begin to sharpen the Damascus beauty. It's business time now.

I find making soup therapeutic. Why, you may ask? Well, I don't have the answer to that question. Maybe it takes time and care to produce a warm hug for the palate, taking that first mouthful to evoke childhood memories. Memories of coming home from school on a rainy day, Mother welcoming me in the door with a warm hug and news that she had prepared vegetable soup with soda bread for my siblings and me to get the heat back into us.

I get passionate when it comes to discussing soup. Throwing a miscellaneous of vegetables in a pot with some bouillon is blasphemy in my eyes. The soup should be made in layers, each layer giving it that extra bit of flavour. The soup should taste like the vegetable named after it. For example, a potato and leek soup should embody the nature of a potato and leek.

Today's soup of choice is pumpkin, grown in our abundant garden. I begin preparing my mise en place. I mince garlic, onions, and celery and roast my beautiful pam pumpkin. I start sautéing the above in the world's best butter,

Avonmore, and sprinkle in some of my favourite aromatics, fennel seed and caraway. A pot of flavour gently simmering away. When the time has come to complete the final stages, I take the soup from the stove and blend it in my trusted thermomix. I pass the soup through a very fine sieve and have time to taste and adjust the seasoning. A smooth, velvety texture overcomes my senses as I take a spoonful. It is rich and creamy, with notes of aniseed from the fennel and a gorgeous nutty undertone from the caraway. My once melancholy mood has been lifted from the fallows. Food is at the forefront of my thoughts now, a distraction, if you will, from the morrow mourning of what could have been. My therapeutic soup session has lifted the spirits and thoughts of the world outside those four walls have retreated to a slumber. Maybe next time we shall meet.