



KITCHEN NIGHTMARES

Chilling tales from the culinary dark side

THERE WILL BE BLOOD. As I set off in search of scary restaurant stories in the spirit of Halloween, I braced myself for gruesome imagery.

An erstwhile Kenichi apprentice with questionable experience butterflied his palm open while trying to wipe clean a sushi blade. Elsewhere a cooks' quarrel ended abruptly when a knife was thrown and ambulance summoned. At least two unlucky souls have slipped down the stone stairs and cracked a skull at L'Hostaria. One hapless local found a human tooth stuck in

a slice of focaccia purchased at a now defunct bakery. *Eeek!*

Here are a few more cringe-worthy memories, all made in an effort to put food on the table.



AMANDA RAE

 "I was working grill at High Cotton in Charleston, and there was this girl working fry. Came time for us to start cleaning; she had just cut the fryers off and **put a sheet tray over top. She stood up there to clean the hoods** above...the sheet tray buckled with the heat and her one leg went into the fryer. She's screaming, and you could hear her leg cracking and popping. You could see the skin bubbling and peeling off. You smell it. She was out for six months." —*Chef Kyle Wilkins, Home Team BBQ Aspen*



"When I was a junior sous chef at Country Place (RIP) in Atlanta, my executive sous chef, Desi, was a bit overbearing but a good, fair guy. We had these old steamers for the fine-dining classic summer vegetable medley, standard on two-thirds of our plates. **Protocol was to turn the wheel to depressurize the steamer.** Desi was yelling at someone...and didn't spin the wheel. The steam blew out with a loud rush and the whole facade of his giant forearm sloughed off and hit the floor. Imagine: bionic-looking silver strings and forearm muscles glistening, with a zombie-looking cast of blood over it. He never came back to work. The expression 'cut to the white meat' never had meaning until that day.

—*Private chef Christopher Randall, formerly of the Limelight Hotel Aspen*



"One pasta cook who used to work here **tried to poke a hole into a can of clam juice with his knife.** At that moment, someone called over to him. He turned his head, and missed connection with the can. The knife hit his arm, cut two tendons (and the plastic band of his watch). You know when you kill a pig? He was screaming like (*high-pitched frantic squealing!*) 'Muoio, muoio! I'm dying, I'm dying!' Poor guy. Luckily he didn't die." —*Tiziano Gortan, owner of L'Hostaria*



"It was the end of August, many years ago, working for a wealthy family in Starwood. The client planned and planned for this outdoor garden party. Of course, the weather changed, so we ended up moving the party inside. **She instructed her gardener to cut down all of these flowers to make gigantic centerpieces for a long table.** When everybody showed up, they gathered in the living room. The husband was pouring martinis, making the best of it. Eventually, they all sit down at this beautiful, decorated table. I bring out the first course. Suddenly, one lady screams, *OH MY GOD!* and pops up. Everybody else starts screaming, *OH MY GOD!* The bugs in the flowers had warmed up enough that they came alive: an attack of 200 earwigs, scrambling over the table! It gets worse.

Everyone returns to the living room. I pull all of the flowers off the table. I need more chilled plates for another salad course on the fly, so I grab another stack of grandma's bone china out of the cabinet and stick 'em in the freezer in a hurry. I make a new batch of salad. We reset the table. When I open the freezer door, I realize the warm plates have shifted. They come flying out, like they're being shot out, bouncing off the floor, crashing. I'm trying to catch them, and I'm wearing shorts. Both of my shins are bleeding, my fingers are bleeding. The homeowner comes into the kitchen, looks at me and the broken plates, and says, 'Kip, I don't need good insurance, I just

need one bullet! It was one of those Murphy's Law catering nightmares—all because of those damn earwigs." —*Chef Kip Feight, owner of Conundrum Catering*



"A chef friend of mine went to Japan the last year that Tsukiji Fish Market was in the original location and bought me this oyster knife. It looked like a piece of wood with a piece of metal stapled into it—super ghetto, but dope. **I got decently good shucking oysters.** Last winter at the restaurant I was having a contest with someone and totally whooping his ass. We were going for, like, 10 a minute. I think they were Shigoku oysters; the strength it takes to pop them open is really inconsistent. I stuck that oyster knife right into my wrist, just a half-inch left from the moneymaker artery. It was so deep and so forceful that it didn't bleed or hurt at first...then it started gushing. I hit the tendon that went right to my middle finger. It hurt a lot, but I just pushed the gnarly flap closed and kept a bandage on it. You gotta suck it up. I haven't had oysters on the menu in a while." —*Chef Taylor Hale, co-owner of Maru Aspen*



"A long time ago I worked as a production chef on a cruise ship from Hawaii to Japan, total capacity about 1,900 people. We had a gas-powered rotary oven with four trays, like a rotisserie, with 250 prime ribs cooking for dinner. **Two storeroom stewards were horse-playing in the kitchen**—they had nothing to do the whole day except cause pranks—and they kicked the fire alarm. Suddenly it was really cloudy in the kitchen: the fire extinguisher discharged all over the prime ribs, a half-hour before service. Nobody starved, but a lot of diners were disappointed." —*Chef Andreas Fischbacher, owner of Allegria Restaurant in Carbondale*



"In college back in New York, I worked for a caterer. **Normally I bartended, but she was short on servers at a wedding.** I remember being behind the bride,

leaning in, and the glass of red wine went right over her shoulder down her cleavage. She was very kind about it, though I did have to pay to get the dress cleaned. Joan, the caterer, did not have me serve again." —*Dr. Scott Tesoro, owner of Sopris Chiropractic*



"I was 16 years old, just entering culinary school in Trinidad and Tobago. When it was my turn to be the week's dining-room chef, I designed my own menu. As my appetizer I made habanero-corn soup. The head lecturer—a French chef, Louis—suggested not to put the peppers *in* the soup, but to let them steep in corn stock, for flavor rather than spice. Another student, Sharon—she always looked like she got up from a sleep or was flat-out high—prepped my soup. **I told her not to forget to take the pepper out. She said OK.**

Of course, chef Louis decides to come in for lunch with his wife and 3-year-old son. They all order the corn soup. Within 10 seconds everything comes back to the kitchen. I feel two warm nostrils breathing on my neck. Louis didn't have the English words to express himself; this was my first taste of how to say "You stupid idiot" in French. Like a drunk pirate, he slides a bowl across the counter toward me. I can smell the habanero. Within a second of it hitting my tongue, I *feel* that habanero—a deathly, fiery taste. I could see in his eyes that Chef Louis felt the same about me: He

wanted me to die and burn in hell.

Chef Louis hated 86-ing an item, so he added five squash, six quarts of caramelized onions, a roasted pumpkin, and a lot of cooked rice to transform the soup. Outside on the chalkboard menu, he scratched off 'corn soup' and wrote, 'Chef Abhay's F--ked Up Water.' The worst part: he made me mop the ceiling with dirty water because I burned his wife's mouth with the habanero soup. Later, Chef Louis pulled me into his office and said, *Great job today.* Then he poured my first glass of Grand Marnier." —*Chef Abhay Nair, Aspen Public House*



"On one of our 50-percent-off nights at Rustique we were crazy busy. **You slam tickets really quickly—pull, pull, slam—and sometimes you don't even look.**

I had my head turned and I slammed down on the ticket spindle. I lifted my hand up, and it was heavy. The spindle had gone up underneath the fingernail of my middle finger, to the first knuckle, and was hanging from my hand. I looked down the line: one of my prep guys saw it, gasped and passed out! I pulled the metal out of my finger, shouted '*Somebody get some water for this guy!*', washed it, and kept working. You have to." —*Chef Robert "Tico" Starr, formerly of Rustique Bistro (RIP)*

Amanda Rae once sliced the tip of her thumb off with a mandoline. It grew back. amandaraewashere@gmail.com



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