Beyond Breakfast

Before things went so wrong, my little corner café was the center of our town’s universe.

Over breakfast, deals were struck. Plans were laid. Hearts were broken and mended. My kitchen served the mighty and the humble. Eggs Benedict over local bacon, French toast with fresh fruit, cheese grits, Cheerios – the menu ranged from the sublime to the pedestrian.

Every weekday morning from 6 to 9, I greeted a hundred or so regulars at my narrow 34-seat diner. Lawyers, judges and defendants bound for the courthouse across the street. Shopkeepers fortifying themselves before a day of commerce. Farmers hauling their produce to the town market. My breakfast crowd represented a cross-section of our town’s demographic.

“Morning, Chef! My usual!” boomed my banker as he maneuvered his impressive girth through tightly-packed tables to the counter where I presided over the grill.

“Jack, come and get it,” I sang out to the dog groomer across the room. “Clyde, here you go,” I announced as I slid a platter down the counter. “Hands off, Kenny!” I shot a mock glare at the six-year-old eyeing a teetering French fry on the passing platter. I reveled in the congenial familiarity of mornings at my café.

Today’s breakfast talk was focused on the news. It was March, 20, 2020, and a highly-contagious novel virus had become a pandemic. “There were nearly five thousand new cases yesterday in the U.S.,” reported Doc Hansen, the local veterinarian and news junkie.

“That’s not so many. It’s like flu season,” scoffed Gil Gillis, owner of the hardware store next door.

“But this time last week it was only 250 new cases,” Doc countered. “That’s a scary escalation.”

As talk ebbed and flowed, the virus topic gave way to Spring training, Presidential politics, collapsing stock prices and abundant local gossip.

Toward 9 o’clock, I poured myself a cup of coffee and leaned against the counter, congratulating myself for another breakfast rush with no broken crockery. Now the fun would begin: the daily magic of converting my greasy spoon breakfast joint into an *haute cuisine* dinner venue.

It’s amazing what a white cloth can do to a visual impression. An ordinary steel and laminate table becomes an elegant invitation to leisurely dining when dressed in crisp white linens. A single orchid floating in a petite crystal bowl reinforces the refined effect. Dousing the fluorescent breakfast lighting in favor of understated pendants creates an intimate glow. And dropping a velvet curtain over the counter and the wall of windows embraces the room in softness.

The scene is set, and it is seductive. But the food will be the star. Every evening’s dinner is a set menu, with no choices or substitutions. This night is to be butternut squash and pear soup, endive salad, slow-roasted prime rib with red wine reduction, creamed spinach gratin, and petite potatoes roasted with shallots. Flourless chocolate cake will be the final flourish.

I keep CNN on in the background as I work. I’m not a news hound, but these days it seems wise to stay informed. The dessert is finished, the vegetables are prepped, and the beef is in the oven. I am feeling the late afternoon lull when the announcer’s voice cuts through my mental multitasking. “The Governor of Florida has just ordered all restaurants to be closed, effective immediately.”

Well, no. I have a full house tonight for dinner. Reservations are always waitlisted on Fridays. And so, I make what might have been the biggest mistake of my life: I redefine “immediately.” I pull the velvet curtains closed, dim the lights and open the doors for dinner.

And the people come. They are my friends as much as my customers. People I’ve known all my life, people who appreciate a superlative dinner. I cannot disappoint them, and I do not. We are aware this will be our last meal together for a while, and we are more gregarious and more appreciative of one another’s company than usual. It is bittersweet and enchanting. I bask in the approval of my peers. I am proud.

My arrest comes early the next morning. I am made an example, even though my hubris has not resulted in a viral outbreak among my dinner patrons. Pandemic scofflaws are not tolerated. My prison sentence of five years will soon end. Meanwhile, I am master of breakfast at the county jail. My fellow prisoners tell me I whip up the finest hash and the lightest eggs. I revel in serving an honest breakfast to my peers. I am proud.