

CHERRY BOMBE

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PRUNE A TRIBUTE

A LINE COOK FINDS
A HOME AT CHEF
GABRIELLE HAMILTON'S
SEMINAL RESTAURANT

by Mashama Bailey

The long-awaited Prune cookbook by chef/restaurant/author Gabrielle Hamilton is finally here. Hamilton opened her influential East Village spot in 1999, but is only just publishing her first collection of recipes.

The book is a triumph; beautifully designed, simply written, elegant and so evocative of the restaurant. Home cooks will love the book, as Hamilton's classic dishes and greatest hits are presented in a way that's easy to follow and recreate. Yet, with references to the pass, cylindrical buns, health department visits and walk-ins, it's clearly written with restaurant folk in mind, especially the final two chapters, "Garbage," in which odds and ends are transformed into edibles, and "Family Meal," that all-important moment when the staff eats before service.

To celebrate the publication, Cherry Bombe asked Mashama Bailey, the former sous chef of Prune, to pen a short remembrance of her time there and her boss, whom she refers to as GH.

I want to be a line cook at Prune! On July 6th, 2010, this was the subject line of my e-mail directed to that mysterious info person who answers the emails sent to every company's web site.

Hey, My name is Mashama Bailey. I'm an ambitious line cook looking to work in an environment of like-minded staff that wants to cook great food! I'm not afraid of hard work. I have been trained to work clean and with a sense of urgency. I would love to have an

opportunity to come in and display my skills. I have attached my resume for your review.

I had no idea that my hopes and aspirations underlined in this short, excited and somewhat unconventional email would change my relationship with food forever.

On my trail, I walked down into the basement where the dinner service is prepped. Prune had been closed for a week. Gabrielle shuts down Prune for a week every year for maintenance, but this year, the co-op apartment building above the restaurant was replacing its boiler. Prepping a restaurant from scratch as repairs finished up a big job wasn't your usual situation. The prep area was protected with cloudy sheets of plastic taped and hanging from the ceiling. Walking into this space, I could see that it was very organized; every inch of space had a purpose. And with the shiny stainless-steel tabletops, it was like entering a meth lab from a scene in *Breaking Bad*.

All the cooks wore white pants, white bakers caps, white aprons and black shoes. I loved the solidarity of their uniforms. I no longer questioned what I had gotten myself into after walking down that windy staircase to a basement with exposed pipes and low ceilings. I changed in the narrow hallway tucked off to the side, dubbed "the changing area," where nothing was locked and people kept their belongings on hooks with their names written on tape. This was a team of cooks, I thought, and the culture here was one that I had never seen before.

When I meet GH during my trail she was warm. While cooking on the line, holding me to my word, she wanted to see what I could do. Not knowing then what I know now, GH has a way of reading people. She can walk into a room of cooks and instantly spot the one in doubt. I grilled branzino and head-on prawns. I roasted bone marrow and toasted bread. I watched and I listened. She stood at the front station looking on as we cooked her food, making sure I finished what I started. While we worked I thought, "This food is delicious." It wasn't like restaurant food (which to me can sometimes be overly trendy and soulless), but like someone's grandmother's food. Cooked slowly with love, superstition and patience. It all comes from a real place with its own traditions.

By the end of my trail, I needed to work at Prune. I needed to find my inner grandmother and my traditions. For almost the next four years I worked alongside GH, growing as a cook and changing into a "chef." She holds you accountable; careless actions are often met with a "ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME!!!" She encourages you to cook your food; good family meals start with "What do YOU feel like eating." GH is still teaching me about taste, the act of breaking bread and how it affects people. Earning the respect of your peers, cooking in an honest way and a good gin cocktail is what I take from Prune.

Deciding who and what you are in work, love and life is what I take from Gabrielle Hamilton.

Thank you, GH.



*At the time she wrote this story, Bailey was busy working on the opening of her first restaurant, The Grey, housed in a former Greyhound bus terminal in Savannah, Georgia. thegreyrestaurant.com

SHAVED CELERY, FENNEL AND RADISH SALAD WITH BUTTERED VALDEÓN TOASTS

Yield: 4 orders

- 1 head celery, tough outer stalks removed, well rinsed
- 2 medium heads fennel, stalks and fronds removed
- ches scallions (approximately 15 pieces), root ends removed
- and first outer layer peeled off with your fingers
- 1/4 pound sugar snap peas, stem ends removed and the thread at the seam peeled
- 2 bunches red radishes, tops removed and well washed
- 5 fresh sticky garlic cloves, peeled
- 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1/4 cup + 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 4 long thin slices of fresh peasant bread
- 4 ounces sweet butter, at room temperature
- 8 ounces Valdeón cheese, crumbled or shaved

With a sharp knife, thinly slice the celery and then the fennel and toss together. Sliver the scallions and sugar snap peas on a bias and add to the fennel and celery. With a sharp knife or mandoline, thinly slice the radishes and add to the salad.

Grate the garlic on a microplane. Mix together garlic, oil and lemon juice and dress the salad. Season with salt and pepper to taste and toss well. Let stand.

Toast the bread slices and spread each with an ounce of the butter. Divide the cheese among the 4 buttered toasts.

Toss and taste the salad again before portioning, add salt if necessary. Plate with the Valdeón toasts.

You want a bright, assertive, unafraid dressing on clean, crunchy, crisp and lively vegetables—keep your mise fresh each day, pay attention to the potency of the garlic as it changes from head to head and make sure the Valdeón toast is still warm when the plate hits the pass.

Recipe from the Prune cookbook

