

# 1

## Opening Night

Jonah Miller bounded up the steep narrow stairs, each tread worn at the center from more than a century of use, the only reminder that this place had ever been anything but his. In fifteen minutes, when the doors opened for the first time, it would be Huertas, a Spanish restaurant that had the twenty-six-year-old chef almost \$700,000 in debt before he sold his first beer—on paper, at least, as restaurant investors knew how bad the odds were of repayment, let alone profit, anytime soon. Everything but the stairs was new, a practical compromise between the dream Jonah had carried in his head since he was sixteen and the realities of building codes and water lines and oven vents and his partners' input and, always, the budget. He had managed to erase the storefront's past as a pizza place that simply stopped paying rent and gave the keys back to the landlord, a Korean place that preceded it in failure, and, before all that, a vague something else. Now all he had to do was not fail as his predecessors had, in a business where it happened all the time.

Jonah was ten pounds lighter than usual on an already beanpole frame, skinny enough to catch his mother's attention and inspire his fiancée to make sure there was always takeout in the refrigerator for a late-night meal. His professional kitchen philosophy boiled down to "keep your head down and do the work," and he wasn't a screamer, like some chefs, so the stress of opening his first restaurant turned inward, instead, and eroded his appetite. He referred to the space that way, as his first restaurant, because there was no chance he'd stop at one.

At six foot two, he'd developed a slouch in deference to kitchen soffits that might want to knock him in the forehead or coworkers who preferred eye contact to staring at his chin. He was, he said, too tall to be a chef—which made him laugh, because he had never wanted to be anything else. The slump was part of an overall concession to the fact that cooking always came first. Jonah had gone to the same East Village barbershop for the last five years for a \$15 adult version of a kid's buzz cut, because it spared him having to make aesthetic decisions or to engage in mindless conversation with someone who considered himself not a barber but a stylist. He had no tattoos, even though they were as ubiquitous as clogs in a restaurant kitchen. He wore anonymous dark cotton pants that were baggy enough to be comfortable on a fifteen-hour shift, and equally nondescript T-shirts and hoodies; no outlier colors or styles that required him to devote conscious thought to what he put on in the morning. His shoes were broken in and built for comfort.

What stood out was his new chef's shirt, blindingly white, its creased short sleeves not yet softened into shape by repeated washings. Jonah could have worn a more formal and more expensive double-breasted chef's coat, embroidered with "Huertas" and "Executive Chef Jonah Miller," but he chose the same shirt that the cooks and dishwasher and porter wore, and told them not to call him "Chef." Better to lead by example, he figured, than to insist on respect before he'd shown them what he could do. Hierarchy didn't mean anything. He was going to earn their admiration.

He took his place at the pass, a marble counter at the front of the narrow open kitchen and a particular source of pride—six old pieces of marble set into a steel frame, held in

place with some adhesive, twelve and a half square feet of work space for \$200, the price of a single square foot if he'd insisted on a pristine new slab. He checked the inanimate objects that hadn't budged since the last time he looked, because he had to have something to do: a large Spanish ham on a metal skewer set into a wooden frame; little mismatched vintage dishes, one of Maldon salt and one of lemon wedges; a canister of tasting spoons; a metal spindle to hold completed order tickets; a jury-rigged rail that wouldn't last the week, to hold tickets that were still in play. He checked the fill level on his squirt bottle of olive oil, retied his long apron, and refolded and retucked a towel at exactly the right position on that apron tie, just behind his left arm.

He walked back past the roast and sauté station and the fry station, peered inside the refrigerated drawers at the mixed greens and portioned proteins, and headed up to the wood-burning oven to survey the prep work of the one cook Jonah couldn't see. The oven had been there when he leased the space, and he wasn't about to spend money to move it, so they'd ended up with a bathroom between it and the kitchen. Until everything was running smoothly, he'd shuttle back and forth to keep an eye on things. While he was up there, he reviewed the glass jars of citrus wedges that sat on the bar, to make sure they looked good enough to suit him.

Jonah had played high school baseball, starting out as a pitcher until a chipped bone in his shoulder exiled him to shortstop and third base, and the pitcher's habit of minuscule last-minute adjustments—once the microscopic repositioning of fingers on the ball, now the equally fine placement of a knife on a cutting board—had stayed with him. It was a nice, familiar way to dissipate some of the tension.

If Jonah was right—and he had bet his professional future that he was—Huertas was exactly what a healthy range of people were looking for, from the East Village millennial crowd that cruised First Avenue to serious diners old enough to be their parents, to neighborhood residents looking for a regular haunt. He was going to serve them Basque food because he loved it and because it had newness going for it, in two distinct formats that gave people a range of choices, from a drink and a snack to a multicourse meal.

In the front room, where he expected the younger crowd to gather, he'd serve pintxos, little one-bite appetizers that would fly by on trays like dim sum, an endless array of impulse purchases served with Spanish beers and wines and traditional drinks like the kalimotxo, which was red wine and Coca-Cola. The pintxo list led off with the gilda, named for Rita Hayworth's character in the 1946 film *Gilda*, a skewered white anchovy curved around a manzanilla green olive at one end and a guindilla pepper at the other. There would be some type of croqueta, jamón or mushroom or fish, determined by what he had on hand, and a slice of bread topped with egg salad and a single shrimp—which might not sound as good as it tasted but was going to look alluring enough to get people to take a chance. He could build a pintxo around a chunk of octopus or some homemade sausage; the point was to have a half dozen every day, and to change the list frequently, so that repeat customers had to start all over again once they got past the gilda, which would always be on the menu, no matter what else he made.

He would offer conservas, tins of Spanish seafood—Spain put its best seafood into tins—and serve them with bread, condiments like aioli or lemon or pickled peppers, and

homemade potato chips. There would be a few raciones, midsized plates, but for the most part the front room was a place to drink and snack and chat, either at the bar or at a table or standing up, which was what people did in Spain.

The dining room at the back was for what he called the menu del día, four courses, pintxos through dessert, with choices for the entrée and dessert. Jonah planned to change some portion of that menu every week, at least, to keep people coming back for what qualified as a fine-dining bargain by New York City standards—a \$52 fixed-price menu, with wine pairings at \$28.

His signature dining-room dish was the egg course, huevos rotos, or “broken eggs,” which summed up what he was trying to do—have fun with refined, reconsidered versions of Spanish classics. He’d tried the original at a Basque place in Madrid, a fried egg plopped on top of a batch of fried potatoes with a side of chorizo or chistorra sausage or jamón. Jonah’s version had only the basic ingredients in common with the original. He used a hand-crank machine to spin an impaled russet into strands as slender as spaghetti, which he flash-fried, dressed with a chorizo vinaigrette, and topped with a slow-poached egg and slivers of fresh scallions. As soon as the soft egg broke, it turned the vinaigrette into a richer sauce.

It was “carbonara with potatoes, like al dente pasta with chorizo Bolognese,” he told the food writers who had already started to hover, because more of their readers understood Italian references than Spanish ones. It was also about a dime’s worth of Idaho potatoes and a quarter’s worth of chorizo, total cost per serving about \$2. Jonah prided himself on his ability to wrangle food costs below the stiff 28 percent industry standard in New York City, which was lower than the national figure of 30 percent because other costs in the city were so high. He knew how to be frugal without sacrificing flavor or quality, and he’d already explained his philosophy to his sous chef, Jenni Cianci: “If there’s something left over, use it.” The chefs he’d worked for had taught him not to waste food, long before it became a politically correct stance, so he repurposed things that a more wanton kitchen might discard, whether it was the duck trims that landed in the croquetas or cod skin that became crispy chips he could use instead of a cracker as the base of a pintxo.

His version of migas, which meant “crumbs,” was another mix of style and economy. In Spain, people made migas to use up old bread, toasting coarse bread crumbs and mixing them with an egg or sausage and some greens. Jonah mixed his homemade crumbs with a slow-poached egg and bent the rules from there—he planned to add whatever vegetables were in season along with whatever protein felt like a good match.

If he splurged, it was with a specific purpose. For the opening he indulged in an order of percebes, stubby little sheathed gooseneck barnacles that clung to the rocks in Galicia, in northern Spain, and were harvested by divers who had to cut them off with knives, still attached to the smaller rocks that sustained them—\$20 a pound, probably twice that if he subtracted the weight of the rocks, but “a cool experience,” said Jonah. “If you want to talk wild, this is wild.” He steamed a small batch in water and white wine and showed the dining-room servers how they worked, amid jokes about how they resembled little penises wearing little condoms; he snapped the soft part of the barnacle from its base, removed the sheath, and ate what was inside, which was supposed to be an aphrodisiac,

or at least that was the legend. It was a good story to tell about something people weren't going to find all over town. He planned to offer them to some of the back tables, but only if he had the time to go back there and eat one with the guests.

**He had thought about it** all, and rethought, endlessly, in the twenty months since he walked away from a sous chef job rather than bide his time waiting for a promotion to executive sous. He still had little idea of what to expect. The big variable at Huertas was experience, or the lack of it. No one, not Jonah or his two general manager partners or his sous chef, had ever done their jobs before—each of them had leapfrogged over a step or two on the career trajectory to be here, skipped jobs that might have given them a more seasoned perspective. Jonah had been a sous chef for just over a year when he left Maialino, the Roman restaurant owned by Danny Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group, where he had worked since he graduated from NYU; he had never been an executive sous, never managed a kitchen team. Luke Momo had worked both front and back of house at the other end of the spectrum, at the elegant forty-year-old Le Cirque, and Nate Adler had been a beverage director at USHG's popular group of barbecue restaurants, briefly, but neither of them had ever run a front-of-house operation. Now they were general managers—and partners, because they'd each wagered on Jonah's ability to pull this off, a \$10,000 investment from Luke and more than \$20,000 from Nate, in exchange for small chunks of equity. His sous chef, Jenni, was a line cook only three years out of culinary school when he offered her the job. The four of them had in common an impressive set of skills, given that their average age was barely twenty-six, and an impatient ambition. Jonah reassured himself: The people who were opening Huertas were green but smart.

If they were a little insecure, maybe that was a good thing, since they would be motivated to work that much harder. Luke took every detail seriously, and at the moment had three servers with him in the dining room debating the proper seat-number rotation, which had plagued him for days. Identifying diners by number enabled servers to put each dish in front of the person who ordered it, and to avoid messy tableside queries like "Who has the duck?" but any system required consensus about how to number. Luke placed diner one in the southeast corner of a table and counted the rest clockwise, which left everyone confused about whether the two tables at the far side of the room should work the same way or be a mirror image of the others.

It wasn't an idle concern. In the worst-case scenario, the diner in seat three, who was allergic to shellfish, mistakenly got the plate intended for seat two, took a carefree bite, and ended the evening in the emergency room. As more people wandered in with an opinion, though, it became a lightning rod for anxiety. Nate listened just long enough to be exasperated, worried that he and Luke weren't exuding a suitably managerial air.

"We'll figure it out," he said, signaling that the conversation was over. "For tonight it's the southeast corner for everyone." That resolved, he went back to his own way of coping with opening-night nerves, which involved never standing still. He checked the bar, he looked at the reservation list that was Luke's responsibility, he adjusted the music level up and then circled back a moment later to adjust it down.

Jenni had nothing to do until an order came in, because her way of coping was to get ahead. She took pride in her exacting *mise en place*, the double row of small steel containers that held every seasoning and garnish and sauce she needed for the night's menu, a setup worthy of a *sous* and an example to anyone who worked for her. It was almost enough to make her feel ready. She stepped over to review the line cooks' setups, and that helped, too. To bridge the rest of the gap between her experience and her new job, she chattered. She couldn't help it, and in between commenting on almost everything she apologized for doing so. No one seemed to mind, as her running commentary balanced out Jonah, who tended to get even quieter when he felt stressed.

The need to keep busy was contagious, so there was a flurry of nervous hygiene right before the doors opened. Jenni made sure that her long ponytail was tucked out of the way, even though it already was, and the line cook took notice and pulled her ponytail into an even more disciplined braid. Nate, whose downtown style involved a fitted button-down shirt and narrow chinos with hems rolled to expose his ankle boots, darted into the bathroom to brush his teeth and then continued to prowl the space. Luke put on a sport coat and used his electric razor to eliminate any shadow that might have appeared since he shaved that morning.

Jonah watched a server make wipe towels, a precise ritual that seemed tonight to be two-thirds necessity and one-third superstition. First she trimmed a small edge off a set of paper hand towels, and then she moistened the slightly shorter towels so that they were neither too dry nor too drippy. Satisfied with the moisture content, she rolled them as tightly as possible and stacked them in a dish so that Jonah could wipe the rim of a plate before it went out. On opening night, this chore required an experienced front-of-house staffer, not some kid doing it for the first time. A properly rolled towel was a totem that said, This is a professional kitchen. A loose or uneven towel could be a sign that the whole place was about to unravel.

**The last minutes before** five-thirty were somehow very long and very short all at once, and Jonah had an extended moment, right before the first customers came in, when he let himself reflect on what was about to happen, unspooled the future like a kite on a breeze. Someday he'd split his time between Huertas and his other places—plural—with a system that enabled him to develop new concepts while his dependable kitchen staffs handled the day-to-day operations. Someday his restaurants would be an incubator for talented cooks who moved on to open their own places.

He dreamed of creating the kind of kitchen that people in the industry talked about with admiration—venerable ones like those at Meyer's company, which owned Gramercy Tavern and Maialino; kitchens run by chefs just a half-generation older than Jonah, like David Chang and April Bloomfield, who served pork buns and cheeseburgers and dismissed the need for tablecloths and distinct courses and even reservations; anyplace that the three principals of Major Food Group decided to open, after four successes in as many years. The usually fickle opening crowds didn't move on from these places, unless it was to check out what the owners were doing next.

There were a handful of such companies in New York City, groups that grew

exponentially, their openings always mobbed, the crowds never dissipating. At the moment Jonah might be rolling trays of cod croquetas like some first-year line cook, but it was all in the service of his long-term plan. Some young chef with an irresistible menu was going to be the next phenomenon, and he had to believe he had as good a chance as any to be the one.

Nate broke the spell to give Jonah the latest news. Ryan Sutton, just named the lead New York City restaurant critic at Eater.com after a stint at Bloomberg, had tweeted about Huertas's opening. "That means he's coming," Nate told Jonah, assuming that a critic wouldn't bother mentioning a restaurant he intended to ignore.

He was hardly the only one paying attention. In the days leading up to the opening there had been announcements on Zagat, Tasting Table, UrbanDaddy, and Gothamist. On April 18, Huertas showed up as number ten on Grub Street's weekly Restaurant Power Rankings, *New York* magazine's list of the city's hottest restaurants—based on nothing but advance noise, since the restaurant wasn't yet officially open. The phone was ringing like mad, and a third of the opening-night reservations were for people Jonah didn't know, "which would have been more if family and friends hadn't booked earlier," he said. He'd had to post a sign on the front door on the final two nights of the five-night soft opening, a friends-and-family tryout, saying that Huertas was closed for a private party, because strangers who tracked openings came by hoping for an early glimpse.

It was exactly what Jonah had hoped for, despite the occasional twinge of anxiety about living up to the advance press, because the alternative was to be one of those chefs with little neighborhood places nobody discovered for six months, if at all, and nobody reviewed, ever. He'd much rather get noticed.

Nate tried to achieve a similar enthusiasm, and failed. He was fixated on the fact that this was the first critic to weigh in.

"It would be nice," he muttered, "if somebody would let us open before they blew us up."

**An hour into service,** Jonah had decided that the homemade potato chips for the boquerones plate needed more salt, that his homemade setup for order tickets was a mess, and that the people at seats three and four at the bar should get their papas bravioli for free because they'd waited too long, which meant that the fryer wasn't hot enough. He riffled through the cooler drawer of micro-greens to replenish the small tray at the pass with the specific varieties he needed. In between orders he picked flecks of Super Glue off his fingers. He'd successfully repaired the food processor earlier in the day, but now he couldn't feel the food to make sure that crisp was crisp enough or that a piece of protein was cooked through.

He checked every plate that went out, even as he kept an eye on the big digital clock on the wall and waited for reinforcements to arrive. Jonah had set up an insurance policy for himself, three guys to help out at the start who had more experience than the rest of his kitchen staff, combined. He stopped holding his breath when the first one walked in at seven, after a day that had begun at five thirty in the morning with a catered breakfast for

four hundred. Dan Dilworth shrugged off his exhaustion, carved out a little space for himself at the end of Jonah's pass, and began peeling lemons at warp speed, so that slivers of peel could be candied and used as a garnish for the rice pudding.

By eight the bar stools were full, people were standing at the counter across from the bar just as Jonah had imagined they would, the three booths across from the kitchen were full, and a steady stream of people walked by the kitchen on the way to the dining room. It was gratifying, but it was an illusion, and Jonah knew it. The opening crowd, most of it, was a fickle bunch that prized new over good, and a percentage of the bar crowd would likely never come back because they were on their way to the next new place, loyal only to being current.

It was easy to spot them—funereal chic on the women, whose cut-out clothing had a mysterious chicken-and-egg relationship to their tattoos, and big shirts over little pants on the men. Silver studs on their shoes, belts, backpacks, and in their earlobes, unless they had a day job where it was acceptable to wear gauges, the earrings that opened a hole in the lobe. Anyone who was that committed to a look was not going to stick around to become a regular, because the whole point of their existence was to be wherever the next scene was.

The customers who walked past the kitchen to the dining room were older, probably more likely to settle in, potential regulars—and if this worked the way it was supposed to, regulars who came in more than once a week, because sometimes they opted for a lighter meal at the bar. But there would be attrition there, too, diners who decided that they wanted more choice on the menu or less of something Jonah couldn't even speculate on.

There was no time to dwell, because the dominant noise, in Jonah's world, was the mechanical bleat of the little gray order printer that sat on the counter to his right. Jonah and Dan danced the experienced dance of cooks who'd worked the line in a crunch, somehow managing to do what they needed to do, fast, without colliding, and with an urgency that made everyone else try to stay out of their way rather than break up the pattern. Jonah reached up to a top shelf next to the combi oven for a bag of almonds as Dan dipped out of his way and dove for a quart container of chocolate pieces from the cooler drawer. Without a word, they set out two little saucers of almonds and chocolate chunks for bar seats three and four, with the chef's compliments, a final apology for their late potatoes.

As the pace in the back room picked up, Dan silently stepped over next to Jonah and started plating cod entrées. This was how a kitchen was supposed to work, how Jonah hoped the Huertas kitchen would work once everyone got used to the rhythm and traffic patterns. Jonah had always loved working the hot line and had nothing but admiration for Dan and the other members of his special crew, one an executive sous chef and one a sous, who had some free time between jobs and would arrive in mid-May and early June, respectively. "To be able to show up in the middle of service, help out, not be in the way, roll right in without even knowing what's on the menu is a unique talent," he said. In his kitchen, a great cook was the one who got the work done without taking up a lot of psychic space.

When Nate came over to ask how it was going, the question barely registered.

“Great,” said Jonah, preoccupied with what was on the plate in front of him.

“Doesn’t sound convincing.”

Jonah shot him a distracted but managerial smile; he had to remember that people looked to him to set the tone. “It’s great,” he repeated, more loudly. “Dining room pacing’s good.”

The bar was moving a little too fast, but that was a good thing. The pintxo runner skidded toward the pass and asked for any pintxos at all, because he had a slew of new customers, including people who were drinking and eating in the middle of the front room, balancing their drinks and little plates in their hands because there was no space at the bar or the standing counter against the wall.

“Ten chorizo, eight shrimp, eight scallops,” called Jonah over his shoulder, without stopping to turn around.

**The final order of the night** meant that housecleaning could begin, as much a daily ritual as the preparations that preceded service. Jonah wanted his kitchen as clean at the end of the day as it had been on the day they connected the kitchen appliances; it was a matter of self-respect as well as a smart habit, given the constant threat of a surprise city health inspection. Breaking down the kitchen was hardly a glamorous aspect of his job, not the kind of thing people saw when they watched food shows on television, and someday he’d graduate from having to participate. For now, he intended to work as hard as everyone else did, to establish a base-line standard that would survive when he took his two days off.

Food went into plastic pint or quart containers, the date and contents written on a piece of blue masking tape. Cheeses and ham and half-sheets of pintxos were covered with food-grade plastic wrap as tight as a trampoline. Cooks ran up and down the narrow stairs at an angle, one with a half-sheet held overhead, another carrying a hunk of cheese tucked close like a football, to store bigger items in the basement walk-in refrigerator. The bartender decided whether the citrus wedges would last another day, stashed what could be stashed, and wiped down every surface.

The dishwasher sprinted back and forth as though he were being timed on relay legs, darting from each cook’s station to the sink at the rear of the kitchen and back again to return clean plates and platters and equipment to their rightful spot. Lance Hester-Bay had informed Jonah during his job interview that he would take a dishwashing job only if there were a chance for him to move on to the line someday. In the meantime he made sure that his new boss saw how hardworking he was, no matter how menial the task.

Once the food was put away, the kitchen staff got on their hands and knees, or leaned hard against a cooking surface, or balanced on a counter to reach the exhaust fan, to

soap everything down. The smell of cleansers quickly smothered the smells of cheese and ham and wood- oven char, and after a half hour the space approximated a kitchen that had never been used. The front-of-house staff, like any good dinner- party hosts, bused the last tables, adjusted vases, and wiped every sur- face clean. Well after midnight, the last exhausted staffer left for home, or for a nearby bar to decompress.

Jonah slumped into a booth with Nate and Luke to try to make sense of what had just happened. They had sold so many pintxos that the servers had lost track of the numbers, which meant that they needed a better tally system right away. Runners were supposed to circulate with a tray until it was empty and then come back to the pass to record who took what, but things had been too frantic and they forgot how many they served and to whom, which meant that the restaurant lost sales. The dining-room menu worked, though they all knew, without saying, that Dan's speed and efficiency had kept them from falling behind. The kitchen staff had tackled the nightly kitchen breakdown with inappropriate good cheer, emptying and cleaning every drawer and cabinet and surface, something to be grateful for until the novelty wore off.

Jenni had found her rhythm and recovered from her opening-night jitters, and the cook at the wood-burning oven burned her arm only once. They'd used up all of the prepped ingredients except for a cup or two of pre-sliced potatoes, which Jonah took as a very good sign. The better his volume estimates, the fewer the leftovers, the less money he threw away on unused product.

But before the partners went home, they had to address the missteps. They needed a "soigné" list to alert the staff to VIP customers and their preferences. They needed the food runners to keep an eye on the pass and grab hot plates as soon as they appeared rather than wait to be called over. The bartender had to stay off his cell phone.

Most important, in terms of building a decent total check, they had to bus pintxo plates as soon as they were empty. If plates sat on the table, customers felt that they'd eaten enough. If they disappeared, customers stared at the empty space in front of them and were likelier to order from the next circulating tray.

They analyzed the particulars and listed the next day's tasks as though to compensate for a rising elation. It would be so easy to relax—and after all, a small moment of celebration was called for, given how long they'd waited for this moment and how hard they'd worked. Jonah, who had worked as a line cook at four previous openings, was the most experienced member of the trio, in addition to being the majority owner. It seemed appropriate for him to provide a little happy context. This was, he told his partners, the smoothest opening he'd ever worked on, and he wasn't saying that because of any bias.

"I know stuff's going to go wrong, but I know we're going to fix it," he said. "And I think we're going to make money."

He and Nate and Luke started to laugh, with relief as much as anything. He regaled them with a story a friend had just told him of a much bigger opening, twelve cooks to Huertas's four, eighty covers to tonight's fifty, where the cooks had lost their synchronized rhythm and never got it back. "They went down in flames," was how the

friend described it.

And Huertas hadn't. For all their inexperience, they'd pulled it off.

It was two in the morning before Jonah had a moment to himself, and more time until the adrenaline subsided and he could even think of sleep. He'd be back in the kitchen the next morning before ten to make his own stocks and prep for dinner. Eater was sending a photographer over at noon to shoot the restaurant's interior.