



TEST KITCHEN: Chefs Lustbader (center) and Jason Vincent (left) and beverage director Josh Perlman aim to foster a new work culture in their Chicago restaurant, Giant, opening in July.

Kitchen Confidantes

Chicago chef Ben Lustbader '01 and his partners offer great food and great atmosphere—in the kitchen as much as the dining room.

By Maya Dukmasova '12

Running a restaurant is usually unpredictable, grueling, stressful, and not a good way to get rich. That's why chef **Ben Lustbader** '01 and his friend and business partner Jason Vincent formed a pact long ago: no matter what, they would be honest with each other.

"If you're pissed about something you've got to say it. No passive aggressiveness, no letting it build up, no trying to work around it," Lustbader says.

They're on the verge of opening a small, new restaurant (ironically named Giant) in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood. Vincent made *Food & Wine*'s list of best new chefs in 2013, when he and Lustbader worked together as head chef and sous chef at the Chicago restaurant Nightwood. News about Giant, which opens in July, has dotted Chicago's cultural rags for months now. "Rumors have swirled about Jason Vincent possibly opening his new restaurant. Today the announcement comes," wrote a breathless critic in *Chicago Eater* last February.

With Giant, they're aiming not only to create great food, but to build a supportive, healthy culture inside their kitchen. The size will help. "Forty seats is really small, which is really exciting because we don't have to mass-produce stuff," says Lustbader.

Lustbader's journey into the food business began in the unlike-

liest of places: the archives of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. As an intern there after graduating from Rochester, he was supplementing his income with a job at a Borders bookstore café, which turned into his first restaurant job, at chef Martin Saylor's Butterfield 9, right next door.

Having no previous cooking experience besides a summer of deep frying at Rochester's Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, he started with prep work: peeling butternut squash, picking herbs, and making infinite quantities of gnocchi.

"I didn't know anything. They'd send me into the walk-in for rosemary and I'd come back with parsley," Lustbader recalls with a chuckle. But Saylor's leadership style and professional generosity were an inspiration. Eventually he stopped applying to museum and archiving jobs.

After three years at Butterfield 9 he moved on to Michel Richard's Citronelle, what was once widely regarded as one of the capital's best restaurants. It was a classic French kitchen, where Richard was pushing boundaries with whimsical recipes. Lustbader grew immensely as a professional. But, looking back, he says, "The whole place was way over my head. Their goal was to break you down so that they could build you back up." He recalls "the yelling and screaming and throwing things."

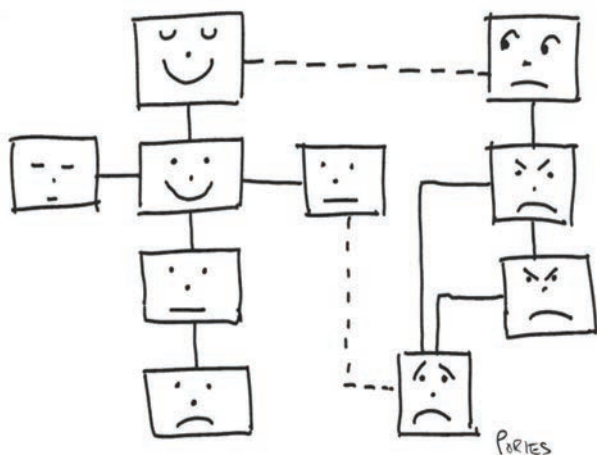
Lustbader stayed for a year—the norm (*Continued on Page 49*)



"My faculty agrees with you that we need to run this center like a business. Accordingly, we voted to shut down the medical school and invest the reserves."



*"Yes, you are fully insured."
"Yes, we require six months of consecutive visits for dietary control prior to bariatric surgery even though the NIH has found it not useful."
"No, of course we don't pay for these visits."*



Departmental Organization Chart

(Continued from Page 47) for a young chef at any restaurant—then left D.C. for Raleigh, North Carolina, quickly finding a job in a much more casual restaurant. There, he learned for the first time about seasonal cooking, and that it was possible to have fun in the kitchen.

In 2007 Lustbader moved to Chicago, working in the heady environment of a Michelin-starred restaurant (North Pond) and eventually finding a home in a kitchen pioneering farm-to-table eating (Lula Café). There, he met Vincent and went on to work under his direction for five years at Nightwood. A regular in the Michelin Guide's Bib Gourmand category (for restaurants offering exceptional food at a moderate price), Nightwood specialized in locally sourced products and conceptual recipes.

Lustbader and Vincent clicked. Their bond remains palpable. "I've always liked working with Ben," says Vincent. On a May afternoon, the duo joked and teased one another through a round of recipe testing for Giant.

Experimenting with a microwave cake, they tried one batter mixture with eggs, piping it through an aerosol into different containers. The cake, baked in a plastic cup, had a Wonder Bread-like texture, but could only be torn, not cut. They tried an alternative, baked on a ceramic plate, which turned into a spongy crepe. Then

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they tried a batter with sour cream, which burned in a shallow dish, leaving a sweet flavor resembling marshmallows. In a ramekin, it became a rubbery rice cake.

The recipe testing process is part inspiration, part experimentation. Recently the partners spent about 20 hours working out the perfect onion ring; other dishes can come together in minutes. The cake idea needed time to rest.

Giant will have a menu of small and large plates, based as much as possible on locally sourced, Midwestern-style fare. While Nightwood had been a foodie destination, Lustbader, Vincent, and a third partner, beverage director Josh Perlman, hope the new restaurant will be much more of a neighborhood mainstay, affordable and unpretentious. They also want it to be a foundation for a good life outside the kitchen.

"Priorities are a big deal," Lustbader says, "We were invested 24/7 at Nightwood, and at some point, no matter how good your intensions are, you've got nothing left. You're burning the candle at both ends."

Vincent says that the meat of animals slaughtered in distress tastes different from that which comes from animals who die peacefully. Similarly, he says, "if you're stressed out and you don't like your job, are you really going to do the best job that you're being asked to?"

Lustbader doesn't quite agree. "There's been tons of amazing food that's been put out by completely stressed out, miserable cooks, at the highest levels," he says. Vincent has second thoughts. "Most of it, actually," he admits, laughing.

But that's not the point. "Our goal," says Lustbader, "is to show that you don't have to have that kind of culture to create great food." 