

# The New Yorker

## SAUCE ON THE SIDE

by Michael Schulman  
DECEMBER 7, 2009

It's a given that almost every waiter in Manhattan is an aspiring actor, but those who wait tables in midtown have some extra perks: proximity to auditions and the Capezio store, and plenty of networking opportunities. But rarely do the dual vocations achieve the kind of symbiosis that they have at Orso, on West Forty-sixth Street, where several members of the staff have banded together to produce and star in an Off-Broadway play—S. N. Behrman's 1932 comedy "Biography," at Theatre 3, on West Forty-third Street. Reservations suggested.

"A lot of people in New York spend all their time trying instead of doing," Kevin Albert, the general manager at Orso and, in the play, a bumbling Southern politician, said the other night. It was half past eleven—or, as Albert called it, "wine thirty"—and he was sitting at a table near the bar. He was joined by his collaborators: Simon MacLean, a waiter, who plays a movie star in "Biography," and Cheryl Orsini, who, besides mixing acclaimed margaritas, portrays a testy German maid.

Albert grew up in Vermont and moved to New York in 1994, with the dream of dancing on Broadway. He met Orsini, a former New Jersey Turnpike toll collector who had just returned from a European tour of "Hair," while working at Orso, and encouraged her to join an acting class that he was taking. There they met MacLean, who had left his job as a consultant in Portland, Oregon, to come to New York and try acting. When an opening came up at Orso, Albert recruited him. After their acting teacher died, his widow cast all three in a production of "The Crucible," upstate. Feeling hopeful, they held a meeting one night at the restaurant—"at Table 17, where that white-haired woman is," MacLean said, pointing—and decided to bring the show to New York, where it played for a month at the ArcLight Theatre. "Biography" is their second production. "We're talking about a reading series, and we're trying to do a Clifford Odets play," MacLean said.

MacLean leaped up to say good night to Joe Torre, who'd been eating a bowl of pasta at the next table. "I am a lifelong Red Sox fan and I've always hated you, but I have a deep and profound respect for you," MacLean said.

"Thank you," Torre said, looking puzzled, and left.



Returning to the table, MacLean said that he sees a kinship between the group's artistic values and the vibe at Orso. "We serve fantastic food that's simply and beautifully executed," he said. "There's no flair—we're not doing all kinds of sauces. The theatre that we do is the same thing. It's about conveying what's in the mind and the heart, without a lot of hubbub."

The collaborators are careful about drawing a line between their two jobs, and for the most part have avoided talking up the show to patrons. Albert has a personal rule: "If they ask me, I'll tell them." Both men had grown mustaches for their roles, which turned out to be a useful marketing tool. "People ask about the mustache, and it's the perfect opportunity to talk about the show," Albert said. Many of their regulars have expressed interest, including the actors Jim Norton ("Finian's Rainbow") and David Hyde Pierce. "On Wednesdays, we could have people come and see the matinée, and then, immediately following it, we could be serving them dinner," MacLean said.

Nearby, at Table 3, Ken and Ellen Stuart, who estimate that they eat at Orso twenty-three times a year, were drinking cappuccinos. They had already bought tickets to "Biography."

"We went to see 'The Crucible,'" Ken said, after handing Albert the check. "It was a great experience. Orso is our favorite restaurant, and we're very nicely treated when we come here."

The Stuarts described themselves as frequent theatregoers—their son is an actor and substitute teacher in L.A.—but they especially enjoy seeing their servers onstage. "We both tend to stay awake," Ellen said. "And maybe they'll hand out some pizza bread or something."

A few days later, just before the first performance, Joe Allen, Orso's owner, who is seventy-six, was drinking coffee near the bar. "I wish them well," he said. "And, if they get, as they say, discovered, good for them. There'll be someone else to take their jobs." ♦