



of RICE *and* MEN

We sent our guy to shrimp-flipping, steak-slicing, onion-exploding school at **Benihana**. Did he leave with a degree in pyrotechnic culinary arts or third-degree burns?

by STEVEN LECKART

Photograph by Some Photographer







The onion sure is a temperamental little bastard. As anyone knows, if you slice one up, its liable squirt sulfuric acid into your eyeballs. But trust me, it could be worse, borderline lethal. I've just drizzled safflower oil and water into the mouth of an "onion volcano," one of Benihana's signa-

Benihana's arduous final exam. Before he graduates, a chef must be able to slice chicken lightning-fast, fling shrimp tails into his hat, and juggle salt and pepper shakers table-side—all without underseasoning, overcooking, or, well, exploding a customer's meal.

As fun as this challenge sounded at the beginning, I soon discovered that getting paid to play with someone else's food takes actual work. Unlike chefs on TV, the cooks at Benihana only have one take to get everything just right. You are *not* supposed to hit a customer in the eye with a blazing chunk of onion, which I've just done. I'm not 20 minutes into my dinner service and already I fear I've blinded someone.

The grills are even more unforgiving. On day one at Benihana San Francisco, I sling enough fried rice to feed half the kitchen staff. (I won't be allowed near the steaks, shrimp, or chicken—let alone a knife—until day two). Fried rice features the most components, so it's the hardest dish to perfect. Cooking back-to-back orders is also supposed to give me a feel for the electric-powered industrial grill. The blazing surface has four concentric heat zones. The farther from the center, the cooler the temperature: 250 versus 530 degrees Fahrenheit.

The difference is painfully obvious. After scorching my thumb, I'm extra careful. An hour later I've charred both pinkies and singed off all my knuckle hair

Turns out I'm lucky. Since 1977, when an 18-year-old Chef Tony joined Benihana, he's been to the ER five times: twice for second-degree burns and other, knife-induced trips including one to treat a severed nerve.

I decide not to bitch about my minor burns. Instead, I focus on the food. Proper fried rice is all about timing. Each component sizzles on a different area of the grill, then gets mixed, seasoned, and heated. Which is to say nothing about the rice's potential for entertainment: Chefs spatula-massage piles of rice into hearts, Mickey Mouse heads, and phrases like I *U*. They also dish UP puns while they dazzle "Would you like an egg roll, Steve-san?" Chef Tony lets a whole egg slide down his spatula and go tumbling across the grill. Get it? Egg...roll! "Ever seen the butterfly, Steve-san?" Chef Tony raises a tablespoon of butter above his head and... Well, you can guess what he does.

Just when I'm bored with rice, Chef Tony hands me a freshly sharpened knife. My knife! I slide the six-inch blade into a steel holster dangling from my belt. I feel legit, I feel powerful, I feel like a man!... until I try cutting a shrimp. There are five movements. Working a fork and the knife, you remove the tail, rotate the body for two precise slices, and flick the meat and tail into separate piles on the grill. To pass Benihana's final exam, a chef must deconstruct 24 shrimp in 60 seconds. I barely finish six in three minutes. Whenever I speed up, I nick a pinkie on the grill or make an uneven cut.

Chef Tony leans in and tells me a secret: Scrape the knife against the grill and flail your elbow as you cut. It distracts the diner. The human brain can process only so much information at once. Instead of keeping tabs on the shrimp, the diner gets busy tracking the chef's arm motion

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ture dishes, now frying on a grill cranked to 525 degrees. Only problem is, I've added way too much. The grill sizzles furiously. A cloud of hot steam engulfs my face. Then, pop! Four pieces of onion hurtle three feet into the air, spattering droplets of scalding oil all over my bare forearms. "Fuck!" I clench my teeth.

Benihana's executive chef Toshiya Nemoto is standing beside me, cringing.

For the past three days, I've been apprenticing under "Chef Tony" at Benihana's restaurant in San Francisco. The 35-year vet not only creates every new menu item but also oversees the seven regional top chefs and three sushi chefs who teach all the newbies who will be shipped out to the 86 Benihanas worldwide.

Wannabe grill men train five hours a day for eight weeks, then must pass

II. PREP SCHOOL

Chefs are not morning people, and neither am I. It's Monday at 9 A.M., and I'm in the private-party room at Benihana, an alcove with two grills typically used to entertain big groups, including the New York Yankees, who dined in during their recent road trip. Chef Tony walks in, smiling but bleary-eyed - He flew in last night from New Jersey, just to oversee my private, one-on-one training.

My hands are soft and dainty and look like I spend too much time at a desk watching YouTube videos of Carly Rae Jepsen. Chef Tony's are thick and tough, peppered with faded scars. When we meet, it feels like I'm shaking an old catcher's mitt.

"After your first year as a chef, your girlfriend won't want to hold hands with you," he laughs.

and listening to the grating knife sounds. In other words, Chef Tony explains, it'll seem like I'm cutting fast and furious even though I'm not. The illusion works.

III. LOOK MA, NO EYES!

Just when I think I'm getting the hang of it, Chef Tony turns up the heat. I'm behind one of the grills in the private-party room, standing beside Leo, the twentysomething chef assigned to be my "trick mentor."

"Close your eyes and just feel the spatula," says Leo, whose specialty is pulling tricks blindfolded. He's got four hours to teach me how to spin, twirl, and flip spoons and spatulas. (Chefs haven't been allowed to toss knives since the 1980s.)

I tell Leo he's crazy. But he insists: I shut my eyes and toss the spatula high into the air. I miss. It rattles on the grill. I try again and miss. Each time, it causes a racket akin to a drunk cymbalist in a fourth-tier marching band. But I figure I should trust Leo. Management considers him San Francisco's ultimate showman. The guy has wowed celebs like Flavor Flav (solid tipper), Robin Williams (not so much), and Barry Bonds (the worst!).

After two hours I start to improve. Tricks require deft hand-eye coordination and practice. Still, I'm not shocked to discover chefs don't mind cheating: Sanding down the spatula handle creates a groove for a one-finger spin. Instead of twirling, they cradle a spatula between two fingers and turn their hands over and back. The action looks like nothing until I'm shown how to rotate my wrist and—wait for it—flail my elbow. Just like shrimp-cutting! What magicians call misdirection, chefs think of as business as usual.

The coolest scam of all is Leo's finale. At the close of a meal, every chef is required to juggle salt and pepper shakers. Leo doesn't use shakers, though. He prefers croquet mallets. He removes the handles, which leaves holes at the midpoint of each mallet. Surreptitiously, Leo inserts a middle finger into each hole, then raises his hands and spins the mallets. It's another illusion: Since they're rotating so fast, the mallets look like they're balancing on his fingertips, just like a Harlem Globetrotter spinning dual basketballs. Voilà!

Leo says I can borrow his "shakers." But only if I agree to blindfold myself.

"I believe you can do it, my friend," he says, before explaining how he broke a plate in front of a customer one time. "If you drop the spatula, you drop the spatula. The worst thing a Benihana chef can do is get nervous."

IV. SHOWTIME!

It's only 5:30 p.m., but my Benihana is already half-full, mostly with a mess of screaming kids. Day Three of my training was a breeze—if you consider dropping the spatula (often), burning my pinkie (again), and charring steaks to a hazardous crisp a breeze.

Backstage in the kitchen, I'm dodging a mess of screaming chefs, line cooks, and waitresses. Chef Tony and Leo help me load up my cart with plates of raw food, bowls full of seasoning, and all the tools I'll need. Before I know it, I'm rolling out the door onto the restaurant floor. As I approach my table, I feel my chef's hat soaking up bullets of sweat. I smile big to my three customers, hoping they don't notice the set list of tricks and punch lines scribbled in ink on my wrist.

Leo was right. Well, half-right. While I am indeed sweating bullets as I roll a cart with raw food, seasoning, and tools up to my table, my nerves don't matter much. In fact, I never drop the spatula. Not once. Not even after I ceremoniously tie a maroon napkin around my face and whip around Leo's doctored spatula a few times with one finger. My mechanics aren't seamless, but still the customers eat it up.

That's not to say there aren't hitches. Hostile onion volcano? It doesn't actually injure my customer so much as annoy him. I overcook one steak. I fail to catch many shrimp tails. I botch a behind-the-back shaker grab. But I'm told the rice is delicious.

I also serve up generous portions of ham. Egg-roll: Check. Butter-fly: Ditto (twice). I pretend to shake pepper onto two customers' heads. Before the volcano explodes, I flicker the overhead grill lights: lightning! I smack my spatula on the grill: thunder! Then pushing the steaming onion, I lightly tap the spatula on the grill: ding...ding...ding! I belt out, "Choo-choo!" Get it? It's a train!

Had Chef Tony been keeping score, I wouldn't have passed Benihana's final exam. But I might come almost kind of sort of close! Chefs are rated on timing, food quality, and communication skills, including 10 possible bonus points for humor and engaging with the audience. You have to pull a minimum six tricks. I bust out 10, at least!

Aside from sculpting a fried-rice heart, I make it beat with my spatula. I offer a pretty blonde a rice bowl balancing on my spatula. As she reaches, I fling the bowl backward. It flips twice in the air, landing squarely in my hand. Zero

spillage. I bat .700 catching shrimp tails in the front pocket of my chef's coat. I nail .1,000 in my hat. (Sure, it was one for one, but stats are stats!)

As with almost any profession, there's a healthy dose of fake-it-till-you-make-it at Benihana.

After dinner I'm celebrating in the bar with a tumbler of whiskey, a 12-year-old single-malt Yamazaki (compliments of Chef Tony). One of the managers approaches. He says I should really consider picking up a shift or two on the weekends. "You'd probably make great tips." I sip my drink and smile. I tell him I know I would. ☺



AVERAGE JOE vs. THE ONION VOLCANO

How even you can pull off a sizzling Benihana chef trick!

STEP 1: Cut a white onion in half. If the inside rings are not still intact, get a new onion and, this time, cut in the other direction. Cut one of the halves into four $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch-thick slices. Cut slowly to avoid sautéing onion in blood. Either way, it's OK to cry. Just a little.

STEP 2: Remove the outer ring from each slice. Stack the four outer rings on a hot flat grill or frying pan, beginning with the widest circumference on the bottom. Your volcano's mouth (a.k.a. the caldera) should be about as wide as a penny. If you have trouble positioning the rings with a fork and spatula, just use your hand, man!

STEP 3: Drizzle one teaspoon of vegetable oil into the volcano. Pour two tablespoons of water into the top of the volcano. No need to be precise with the measurements—just don't overdo it with the oil or, as we learned, your volcano might explode!

STEP 4: When steam rises from the volcano, it's your chance to be a showman. Try flickering the lights and yelling, "Mayday, mayday!" Or belt out a quote from *Dante's Peak*. Something like, "Ladies and gentleman, I can assure you there is no immediate danger." Then Netflix *Dante's Peak* so people actually get the joke.