

**LIFE, ON THE LINE: A CHEF'S STORY OF
CHASING GREATNESS, FACING DEATH,
AND REDEFINING THE WAY WE EAT**

(GRANT ACHATZ)

June 26, 2024

What we see as history is always downstream from the actions of great men, working with the challenges given them. Such men are very rare, and their necessary traits include extreme discipline and focus, as well as unstinting demand on themselves for achievement. It is not only in making history that such a rare man appears, however; any truly successful entrepreneur, even if he is obscure, is a similar type of man. These traits make him the necessary first cause of a venture's success. With him, everything; without him, nothing. He is the spark, the catalyst, the dynamo. And like Tolstoy's happy families, all successful entrepreneurs are alike—something this autobiography shows well.

We should define “successful entrepreneur” carefully. It does not mean anyone who starts a business which does not fail, although certainly you have to start a business yourself to be an entrepreneur. By “successful” I mean, by honest methods, creating something of notable size or worth where nothing existed before, and continuing the existence and achievements of that venture for some years. If you are reasonably intelligent and competent, it is not all that hard to start a small business and simply get by, replacing a salaried income, though it is harder than it looks. Moreover, one can avoid failure, for a time, by simple dumb luck, or nepotism, or being the least incompetent in a field; none of those demonstrate actual entrepreneurial success.

Equally irrelevant are fictive successes—for example, someone whose “business” relies on contracts reserved for minority-owned ventures. He is not a successful entrepreneur; he is a parasite and cheat. Along similar lines, salesmen can get rich, and good salesmen should get rich, but a man whose chief talent is sales is not often a successful entrepreneur. Good salesmen are indeed very rare, and to many businesses, they are crucial. But a salesman usually sees every problem as a sales problem, amenable to a win-win solution and fixable with the right verbal grease, and this is not true. In addition, salesmen in their nature often are

unable to view the business a whole in the level of detail necessary; a successful entrepreneur must live within a self-generated panopticon.

I have written before, at length, on my own entrepreneurial experience, and I will not repeat here what I said earlier. But this book, by the Chicago chef Grant Achatz, highlights important entrepreneurial lessons and principles. Achatz is well-known, though probably only among that social class which is interested in, and can pay for, high cuisine. He started his rise shortly before I returned to Indiana after a decade living in Chicago, in 2003, and through friends, I was dimly aware of his ascent. When I was an early-stage struggling entrepreneur, around 2008, I listened to an interview with Achatz, who had only recently reached the heights of the restaurant business, and was also recovering from nearly-fatal cancer. Ever since, I have paid some attention to him, seeing him as a kindred spirit of sorts (though I hope to avoid cancer). Not that I myself eat at the caliber of restaurants he worked at, and later founded—I am both too cheap and do not appreciate fine cuisine in any meaningful way. But once, in 2013, my wife and I did eat at Alinea, Achatz's first and still flagship restaurant, an experience I enjoyed.

Achatz was born in the small town of Marine City, Michigan, where his grandmother ran a modest restaurant, and where when he was young, his parents started a successful larger restaurant. As a child, he worked there, and also when a child, he showed the personality characteristics that made him what he is. When his parents took over the larger space of a failed restaurant, the previous owner had left it filthy and full of rotting food. "Some people just don't have standards. I learned that at an early age, spending the better part of three days scrubbing down that walk-in until the smell lingered no more." This is a key part of being a successful entrepreneur—setting high standards. But not only that—also requiring, insisting, demanding that everyone you work with meet those high standards, or leave, immediately. Empathy and misplaced compassion are not the hallmarks of an entrepreneur; leave those at the door.

He had a fairly idyllic small town childhood, in the distant 1980s, when America was very different than it is today, particularly for the young. As was also the norm in the 1980s, Achatz and his friends wanted to see the wider world, correctly seeing opportunity everywhere, in those days before it all went wrong in America. He had already set

on his goal of owning his own “great restaurant,” but rather than taking over his family’s, which was well-run and well-respected but the food of which was pedestrian (not that he says that—he says not a bad word about any of his relatives, other than in connection with his parents’ marital troubles), he went to culinary school, in New York, at the Culinary Institute of America.

There he immediately discovered what all entrepreneurs discover very early, but always find difficult to understand—others are rarely like him. They willingly exchange an endless quest for perfection for comfort and peace of mind, or, worse, for vice. The other students were, when not wholly lazy and unmotivated, not driven in the same way as Achatz (although, again, he does not bad mouth them). Instead of partying, he obsessively read cookbooks and cooking magazines, realizing there was a whole world out there about which he had known nothing. He graduated in 1994 and managed to get a job at Charlie Trotter’s, then the top restaurant in Chicago and one of the best in the country. Trotter, the first modern Chicago celebrity chef, was an extremely difficult man (he died in 2013, age fifty-four; a recent documentary on him, *Love, Charlie: The Rise and Fall of Chef Charlie Trotter*, is worth watching). Whatever his flaws and demons, Trotter was a successful entrepreneur. But his negative traits harmed him, and ultimately destroyed him. Which goes to show another important principle—having the positive characteristics of an entrepreneur is necessary, but not sufficient, for success, especially ongoing success.

Chief among Trotter’s flaws was that he irrationally abused those who worked for him. This flaw is common and often fatal among high achievers, though it can sometimes avoid terminal consequences if paired with respect and praise for work well done. But random abusiveness is intolerable, most of all to the people in the organization who are highly valuable and often have entrepreneurial desires themselves, who will desert you if you cannot lead. Leadership, to be sure, can never be taught in any significant degree. It is inborn. Yet perhaps the core external aspect of leadership is loyalty, meaning protection and care for those whom you lead, and abuse shows that you cannot be relied upon to be loyal. This, along with that Trotter no longer cooked himself (a leader who can’t or won’t do the work himself will always lose respect), meant that Achatz quit after only a few months, even

though his job with Trotter was prestigious and a possible opening to many other desirable jobs. (Trotter responded by saying, “You’re dead to me.” And he was, even when Achatz exceeded Trotter’s fame.) As with all successful entrepreneurs, Achatz has always been willing to take risks—not stupid risks, but risks nonetheless. To do this, one must have self-confidence. Anyone who often doubts himself, or consumes anti-anxiety medication, is better off working for others.

At this point, Achatz was only twenty-one, and looked younger. With his girlfriend and some saved-up money, he went to Europe to sample top, Michelin-three-star restaurants, hoping to get inspiration. He was disappointed again; the food was adequate, at best, and prepared and served with no “passion,” one of Achatz’s favorite words. Everywhere he turned, it seemed, resting on one’s laurels was the default position (which means that opportunity always exists for those who seek to bend the world to their will, and are both capable and willing to pay the cost). He applied for a job at The French Laundry, in California, at the time in the course of its rise to also becoming one of the top American restaurants (where, in the 1995 description Achatz quotes, the five-course menu cost forty-nine dollars). The chef, Thomas Keller, gave him a tryout, after Achatz wrote him a letter every day for two weeks (showing persistence in the face of possible humiliation—you can never be actually humiliated if you are sure enough of yourself, at least if your confidence has a basis in reality). (The French Laundry was where, during the Wuhan Plague, the odious Gavin Newsom and his cronies infamously had a mask-free dinner while locking California down.)

Here Achatz finally found himself, and the model he needed. He says mentor, but that is not really correct. Entrepreneurs do not and should not mentor in the sense of formal mentoring, a suggestion beloved of management consultants (who are poison to entrepreneurs—never have anything to do with them). They do mentor by example, which is what I mean by modeling. But the obsessive nature of entrepreneurship does not leave the extra mental bandwidth necessary to formally mentor others. It is a costly distraction. However, in some trades, notably those which rely on specific skills, tacit knowledge gained over a long time, it is invaluable to have a model who will teach by doing, because reinventing from scratch the skills necessary in a particular line of endeavor can be difficult or impossible.

Most of all, the extremely high standards set and demanded by Keller inspired Achatz. Keller accomplished this, unlike Trotter, not by being abusive but by being consistent. He fired anyone who could not get with the program, even the extremely talented, who sometimes thought they were above the rules. This cannot be tolerated; all must pull in harness. “‘Yes, Chef’ was the only proper response to any request.” Achatz flourished. But it wasn’t enough. “I knew that I wanted something more. I wanted a place that was mine.”

He left after two years, and experimented by taking a job at a winery, including the agricultural aspects. But soon enough he returned, in 1999, to The French Laundry. And while he greatly enjoyed working for, and respected, Keller, Achatz began to realize that what he wanted to do was push the boundaries of creativity with food and its presentation. He could not do that at someone else’s restaurant, which was already the fulfillment of another man’s vision, even though he was raised to sous chef (the second-in-command). So in 2001, having obsessively scanned job opportunities to become a chef, the man in charge of a restaurant, he moved back to Chicago, to the suburban restaurant Trio, whose owner, not a chef, wanted a complete makeover and who was willing to let Achatz implement his still-developing vision—with the owner’s money, given that Achatz didn’t have his own.

He assembled a team, and he made clear to the team what his goals were, and what he expected. He wanted to create the best restaurant in Chicago. Every single detail mattered. His expressed credo was “The only way to do it is the right way.” That doesn’t mean there were no problems—there were many problems, demonstrating what I determined early on in my own experience, that running any business is dealing with a rolling series of little disasters. Worst of all, the September 11th attacks took place shortly after Trio re-opened. And his first child was born two weeks later. There is something to “dense pack” as a strategy, facing down multiple challenges simultaneously to most efficiently clear the decks, but this was, let’s say, a real test.

The restaurant business is made or broken on publicity—both word-of-mouth, and even more by reviews in powerful publications. (I am not sure if this is still true; it was in the early 2000s, certainly.) Fortunately, the new Trio garnered glowing reviews in the *Chicago Tribune*, which helped it bridge its growing pains. It was here that Achatz began showing

off his own original style in food, what he calls “creative freedom,” “different mouthfeels” and “unusual flavor combinations,” on which Achatz has built his subsequent success, and many of which he describes in loving detail in this book. (I believe some of this is sometimes called “molecular gastronomy,” but Achatz does quite a bit more than that.) Creating something such as he envisioned involved an around-the-clock focus, what I call the “racetrack” in every entrepreneur’s mind—in Achatz’s case, on creating new, highly original food offerings. He supplemented his own thoughts by frequenting then-cutting edge message boards, interacting with questions asked by those online. In his own telling, at least, Achatz was never too proud to think he could not do better, or to reject outright what others had to say.

It was at Trio, in 2003, that Achatz met Nick Kokonas, a successful sometime securities trader, who became Achatz’s business partner. Kokonas wrote sections of this book, which is an interesting and effective device. He provided not just financial backing, but financial and accounting expertise, something Achatz lacked. (Knowing what you cannot do, and filling the gap, is just as important as seeking perfection in what you can do.) After several dinners at Trio, Kokonas (and his wife) approached Achatz, offering to back a new restaurant. The second third of the book, therefore, is a more detailed chronicle of how Achatz became an actual entrepreneur—before that, he worked for others, after all. Such an arc is normal for entrepreneurs, who rarely can be successful until their late twenties, at the earliest. Obtaining experience and wisdom, and learning what you don’t know and need to know, has to happen sometime, and it’s better to do it when you’re not walking the tightrope of being wholly responsible for your own venture.

Achatz and Kokonas (mostly the latter) wrote a detailed plan, and rounded up investors. At Achatz’s suggestion they named it Alinea, after what’s usually called the paragraph symbol in typography, which indicates “a new train of thought.” The partners found a location, built it out, and dealt with all the myriad frictions of opening a business in Chicago, where the government is ludicrously corrupt and stupid (no doubt more so today). Again, they obsessively focused on perfection and originality in details—even on investor presentation packages. They rethought everything. For example, they rejected linen tablecloths,

expected in high cuisine, realizing that they could build excellent and eye-catching mahogany tables for less than a year's cost of laundering.

Alinea opened in 2005, and even before opening received intense attention, including from all the relevant national publications. The restaurant attracted some controversy with its radical innovation, which displeased a few critics, especially since Achatz refused to toady to critics he found annoying. Agreeableness, that is, conformance to social norms that prize smooth interaction, is not a virtue in an entrepreneur. He was duly rewarded; in 2006, *Gourmet* magazine named Alinea the best restaurant in the country, a singular honor. Kokonas immediately gave out cash bonuses to everyone who worked there; "Nothing says thank you like money, Chef." He based the bonuses on how many days an employee had been with Alinea, thereby building loyalty and preventing unnecessary perception of favoritism, which encourages toadyism. Ever since, Alinea has stood atop the Chicago heap; it received three Michelin stars again last year.

The book is full of useful thoughts, only some of which I can present here, all derived from the extremely high-pressure, demanding, always-changing restaurant environment. "It is impossible to try to innovate. You can't decide to turn creativity on or off. All you can do is present yourself with interesting problems and try to find solutions. Then you refine those solutions again and again." The racetrack: "Everything that I see, hear, and feel I relate to food." "Most people think that the constant evolution of Alinea's cuisine is the result of one person—me—being struck by original ideas at every moment of the day, even when I sleep. . . . Sometimes that happens, but it's very rare. Most of the time the ever-changing menu, the tireless pursuit of being constantly new, is the result of hard work." Achatz wisely does not, or did not (this book is from 2011), have an office, either. "If I'm behind a desk somewhere, I'm in the wrong place." An entrepreneur who separates himself from those who are essential to the business, preferring a "white collar" environment, harms himself.

He developed relationships with crucial suppliers, both of food and of specially-designed presentation implements, an Alinea signature. Every entrepreneur learns early on that most suppliers are unreliable, because the majority of people in business, including seemingly successful ones, are plodders. A critical skill to develop is how to sense if

a supplier is reliable, and even more, in some businesses, if a customer is reliable. Only experience can make this possible.

And he built teams. Teams, in the sense so beloved of business schools, where a group of co-equal people work toward a goal without a leader, are wholly worthless. But a team, or teams, under a clear leader is the only way to grow. (In my business school, the University of Chicago, where at that time no class could have an average GPA above 3.25, I used to tell those on my teams, "It is not enough that we succeed. Others must also fail.") Again unsurprisingly, Achatz does not claim to manage in the way that books will tell you to manage. There are no "360 reviews" or similar stupid devices beloved of HR harridans. He sets the vision, and asks if people are willing to join him in making it real. Whether someone is willing is very obvious, at least in any venture that has no more than fifty people working for it. The end product is not a group of friends, but a winning combination of people. "I'm not really friends with any of my coworkers. We work. We don't really hang out."

No surprise, it appears that Achatz's intensity has harmed all of his relationships with women, although he has children and recently married (again). It is a rare woman who is willing to maintain support, and to share the risks and psychological burden, for a man who is an entrepreneur, and being a chef is in some ways particularly difficult, because the times of day at which you have to work are crushing and preclude any normal life. He certainly didn't take paternity leave. There are definite costs to being an entrepreneur.

Refreshingly, Achatz says not a word about politics. As far as I can determine, neither he nor Kokonas has ever made a political contribution. During the Wuhan Plague, Achatz made a coronavirus-shaped amuse bouche, and did not apologize when women and feminized men complained. In the book, he correctly uses "he" as the generic pronoun. I doubt if he regards himself as politically right-wing; probably he is apolitical. But understanding and only dealing with reality is crucial for an entrepreneur, and reality has a strong right-wing bias, so Achatz appears to end up at much the same place. This is supported by looking at Achatz's Instagram feed. There is no politics; notably, there are no black squares from 2020, merely one anodyne statement about opportunity made by Kokonas (whose X feed definitely skews Right, though he's not likely to become a Foundationalist soon).

The last third of the book is mostly about Achatz's struggle with tongue cancer. He ignored a sore in his mouth for a year, and when he got medical advice, it was stupid and wrong (including a false clean biopsy). One lesson I have learned, fortunately without tragedy resulting, is never blindly trust doctors, or other "health professionals." Always, and continuously, second-guess and double-check them. (And this was before the current crisis of competency caused by anti-white hatred and general decline of standards in America.) The doctors he consulted all wanted to cut out his entire tongue, leaving him unable to taste or speak. By great good chance, he found a program at the University of Chicago, where they used a grueling regimen of chemotherapy, radiation, and the then-experimental drug Erbitux to save much of his tongue. He took the risk of dying, and won the coin toss, which is why he is still able to execute his passion today.

Achatz has since expanded his restaurant empire; he runs five (depending on how you count) permanent restaurants (which include two specialty bars), and various pop-ups and other experimental venues. He and Kokonas also designed an innovative reservation system, involving prepayment and variable pricing, which software they sold for a great deal of money. Achatz may have changed since he wrote this book; I don't really know. He seems to have avoided a problem for many successful entrepreneurs, and for great men more generally—that there is always an apogee, following which the best a man can hope for is high steady state. But the steady state is alien to such a man, to whom fresh accomplishment is a sort of drug. What does a man do when he has achieved what he has directed his entire life to? This is, no doubt, why you sometimes see serial entrepreneurs, who sell one business and try to start another. That's a different topic, for a different day, however.

I have always said that a restaurant is a dumb business to choose to start. I still think that's true. I don't recommend it, because it is very difficult to make money consistently. Achatz is obviously an exception, and if you have the necessary talent and drive, maybe it is the path for you. Especially if you aren't in it for the money (I was always in it for the money), but for other inborn goals. Every man has a different set of internal springs, after all. You need a lot more than just an interest in food, however, as this book shows all too well. Either way, entrepreneurship

isn't for most people, but if you think it might be for you, you can do much worse than read this book to understand what it takes.