

Backstage at Market Restaurant

Inside a kitchen five years in the making



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Chef Carl Schroeder, center. Behind him is sous chef Ted Smith and against the wall, chef de cuisine John T. *Gastaldo*

The guest chef

“Tonight we’ve got a guest chef. She’s cooked all over New York and San Francisco,” Carl Schroeder told the his kitchen. They looked admiringly at the sheepish woman next to them: Me.

The guest part was true.

By that time Schroeder and his cooks had already welcomed me to [Market Restaurant \(http://www.marketdel](http://www.marketdel) me a Japanese knife longer than my forearm, and let me prep a few of their very-seasonal dishes.

“I can’t believe you’re going along with this,” Schroeder interrupted his padded introduction, and addressed m

Of course, I’d never worked in a professional kitchen before that night. I’m a writer. This was participatory jou

The journalist in the soup

I was there because weeks earlier, Schroeder, Market’s executive chef and owner, said, “Come see how a re

professional kitchen works.”

Schroeder casually invites people – restaurant regulars, mainly – interested in day-long work in his Del Mar—a payment is a meal. In the food biz this kind of apprenticeship is called a “stage,” and culinary school students usually do months of it.

“You made it!” Schroeder bellowed to me from across the kitchen when I first arrived that afternoon. It's a mock built around a 15-foot-long hot line – the grill, ovens, fryers.

My first thought: Pictures don't do justice to this chef's size. The 6-foot-3-inch Schroeder was a tight end at the Redlands. Even now, at 42, he darts around quickly and speaks like he's running a football play:

“OK. Here's the plan,” he told me. “You're going to work prep a bit back here. Stick around for when dinner service we'll sit you down to try the food.” Got it? Break.

I was bundled up in an apron and given a side towel that I promptly misplaced. No formalities. Just a quick de asparagus and chop them for that night's soup.

Then I was left alone at a cutting board placed on the pass, and faced the men who work Market's hot line.

Guys worth their salt

The core characters in Market's kitchen wear black short-sleeve collared shirts – Chef Works clothing inspired apparently. They don't wear chef coats or toques. Just white aprons with the bib folded under so that their pants

It's less intimidating, having contemporary dress in a fine-dining kitchen, I thought at first.

Then I got a closer look at the intimidating Friday-night crew, the guys Schroeder calls his A-team.

“Introduce yourselves!” Schroeder goaded his kitchen staff like it was a workplace retreat and this was the core exercise.

At the grill station, against the wall, was Ryan Lopez, 28, a lead line cook. Under his dark, wavy hair was a veil that he kept throughout the night's nearly 200 covers.

Next to him, was Nick Martinez, 26, a lanky line cook who kept dutifully quiet as he worked on vegetables and fight, and his jaw was wired shut.

David Conde, 28, was the stout lead line cook with sculpted hair. When Schroeder asked for the latest update “Jersey Shore,” Conde succinctly said, “Sammi and Ronnie, at it again.”

Conde also curtly called out the tickets – “Tender!” (for the cast-iron roasted beef tenderloin) or “Cap!” (for the steak) – as orders piled in. During “the push,” when dinner service got heated, I caught Conde singing a few lines of a song: “*Simply the best/better than all the rest.*”

Higher up the chain of command was the stoic and sun-tanned Ted Smith, 30, the sous chef. I helped him prep think they were for that bright-flavored apple compote that came with a mustard-crusting petite rack of lamb. I tell me.

Playing all positions that night was the chef de cuisine, John Thompson, a 29-year-old who exudes Midwestern Schroeder and Thompson have worked together since Market opened almost five years ago.

“The relationship we have is so tight,” Schroeder said about his chef, Thompson. “He's the most loyal, trustec

I helped Thompson chop and juice oranges for an amuse-bouche, a refreshing "margarita" made of Serrano | zest and blood oranges and served in a porcelain spoon.

The orange zest was made gummy-sugary after being boiled in simple syrup and baked. He told me it was in he liked in Michigan. When the wait staff arrived to hear all the new offerings on the menu, he described the c inspiration.

Then came the announcement from the chef: 10 minutes before dinner service. New people tumbled into the eagle-eyed expediter, the managers, the food runners and later, even a couple of regular diners. The line coo away food products like a sheriff had given them minutes to leave the premises.

"You're stepping into a kitchen five years in the making," Schroeder confided to me, in the midst of all that act this two years ago." Then he and his crew got into their fighting stances and started knocking out dishes, whil apron and watched in awe.

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