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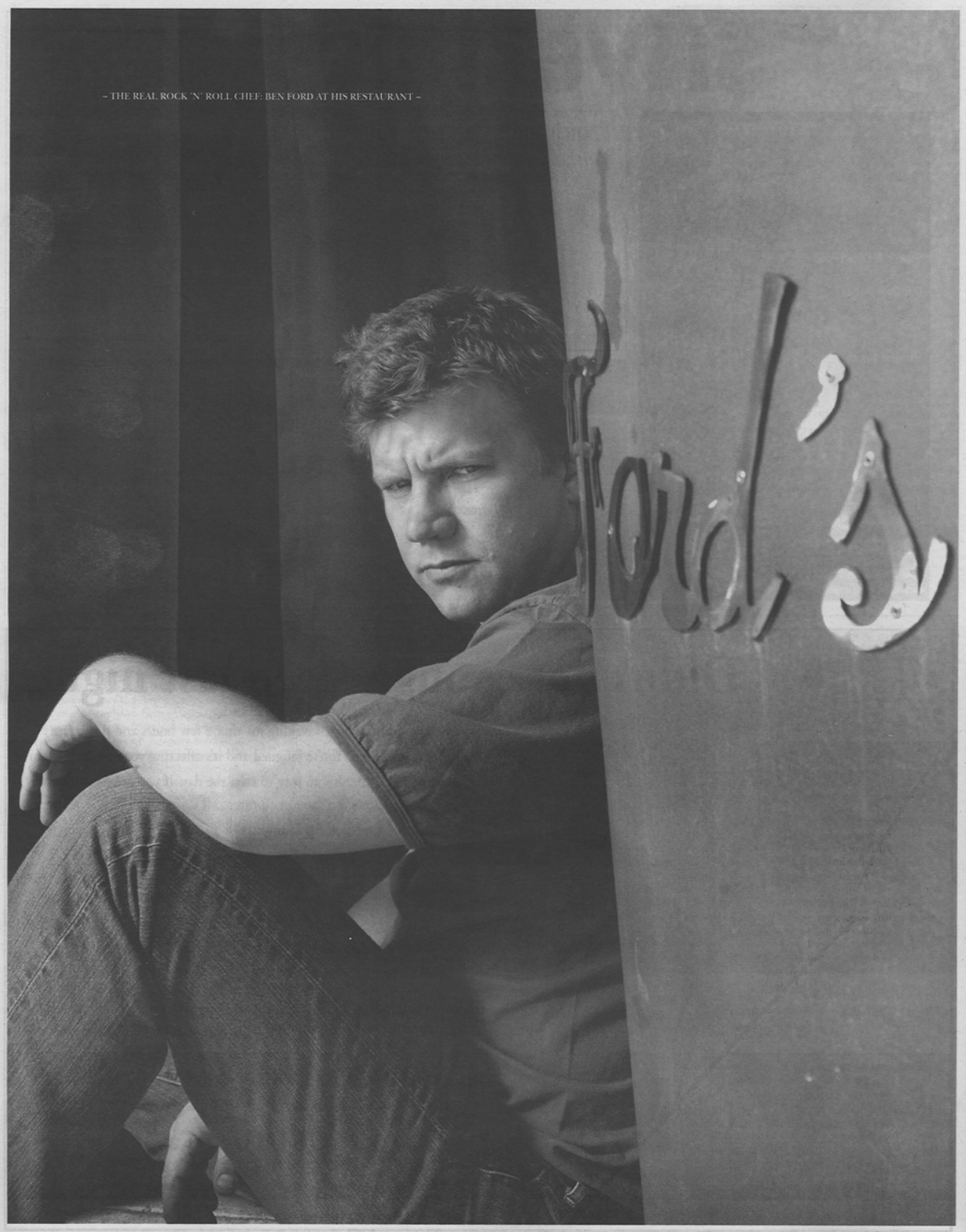

~ THE REAL ROCK 'N' ROLL CHEF: BEN FORD AT HIS RESTAURANT ~

Scenes from the Station

An inside look at chef Ben Ford and his red-hot restaurant

BY LONN FRIEND PHOTOGRAPH BY MAX S. GERBER

THERE IS A DIN AT DINNERTIME inside the earth-toned Culver City culinary enclave known as Ford's Filling Station. The aural landscape is not solely composed of clanging glasses, banging plates, shuffling servers, gnashing palates, and ch-chinging credit-card machines. On the contrary, it is the human vocal cord that vibrates loudest and proudest. Passionate conversation fueled by vintage grape, carefully selected musical grooves, and the ineffable essence of the wood-warm room – chef/owner Ben Ford's place is about people, a communion of consumption. And since the restaurant opened four scant months ago, you've practically needed a bullhorn to get a table. Unless, of course, you happen to live with the proprietor, as I do.

I like sitting at the bar or on the patio, right on the sidewalk, European-style, elbow to elbow with the brothers and sisters of our Westside 'hood. It can get just as noisy outside as inside. I dig the unique fish and chips. The kitchen throws a tempura asparagus and prawn into the basket to hobnob with the tender spud wedges. The marinated carrot is a wicked crunch sensation.

Thomas is the main man behind the bar. He's tall, buzz-cut, and overtly confident. "The women come here for him," says Ben. Thomas ran one of the hottest clubs in Hollywood but decided life on the Westside at the Station held some new hues. "He's a total rock star," Ben adds, "aloof, detached, and a little bent."

Buffy is Thomas's feminine counterpart at the cocktail hub. She's blonde, enchanting, and funny. "I'm working on a treatment for a sitcom about a group of twentysomething dog walkers in the midst of a quarter-life crisis," she confesses boldly.

Michael is the most down-to-earth of the silver-goblet trinity: "Have you ever tried a lemon meringue martini, Lonn?"

The staff all came here via a relationship, word-of-mouth, or a slam-dunk interview with the boss. Remember, this place is about people and personality. Marie is a French waitress with a can-can-girl swagger; Felicia is an ebony model with a toothy, radiant beam. Lorena the hostess hails from El Salvador, she's shy but subtly sexy. A waiter named Blue looks and glides like an actor on stage doing Noël Coward. Nathan the manager cracks wise and can schmooze the blues out of anyone within three minutes of entering the establishment.

A sense of live theater takes hold in here when the clock is striking 8 p.m. and the room is shake, rattle, and rolling at top RPM. Dudes in suits are bouncing from table to table, flirting with the sirens, buying drinks, laughing at jokes that probably aren't funny, but it doesn't matter because the environment alone puts a smile on your face. And amid this beautifully orchestrated chaos, where is the man in the white coat, the host with the most who will never feign a toast? Where else? In the kitchen.

The Filling Station's design allows for anyone facing north to bear witness to the goings-on in the spotless sanctuary where the real magic, the *meal* magic, takes place. Fire burns in the hearth while bodies are in constant motion, filling orders that are coming at breakneck speed. The chefs are well trained, some notables in their own right who left solid gigs at other eateries to follow their mentor.

"Most of my chefs will have their own restaurants in two to three years," says Ben proudly. They're not here, however, to experiment or get fancy. They're here to channel his recipes, creating one savory plate after another. Ben recently said in an article that he's trying to "intellectualize American cuisine." The Filling Station is called a gastropub, a dining concept for which we have Merry Olde England to thank: Take the archetypal tavern, cacophonous and friendly, and spruce up the notoriously mundane eats. I've been to London eight times and never had a grilled shrimp with hummus and cilantro flat bread or a Kobe beef cheek that dissolves in your mouth like a marinated mint.

Those conscious of great songs can't help but dig the tuneage. Mixmaster Ben crafts the play lists for each night's audio ambience. Joan Osborne's cover of "Son of a Preacher Man" lands gently on my ears. "She covered 'Make You Feel My Love' by Bob Dylan," observes Nathan. "We played it at our wedding." A Ben Harper tune follows. Chef Ford saunters out of the kitchen to do the handshakes with his patrons. He brings me a specially prepared dish of chicken and mashed potatoes. "I've followed Ben Harper since Spaceland, 1992," he offers with grin. "He's a prophet. Gotta get him in here one night."

A line is forming on the sidewalk, but no one's complaining about the wait. The clear night air and bustling, consciously renovated Culver City downtown make you feel like you're in the east village of Manhattan. Da Vinci coders are scrambling out of the multiplex. They'll be up for a nightcap. Strangers are morphing into friends; the community of cool has found its new town hall.

~ Sweetness and Solitude ~

Ben and I live five minutes from the restaurant on one of Harry Culver's most authentic, tree-lined, bohemian avenues. He moved into the townhouse last fall, while I was still treading sand in Las Vegas, where I'd spent the past two-and-a-half years personally deconstructing and professionally composing. When I finished my book, *Life on Planet Rock*, it was time for the pilgrim to return home. Ben had an extra room and bath with a private entrance downstairs. Two miles from our kids and exes, in Cheviot Hills, it proved to be the perfect reentry point.

I met the eldest son of Han Solo (i.e., movie star Harrison Ford) in 1994. A mutual friend from the music business introduced us at The Farm on Beverly Drive. He brought me the best Caesar salad I'd ever tasted, accentuated by a four-inch-high crispy Parmesan wedge that danced on the tongue like a Cirque du Soleil clown. We bonded over our love of rock 'n' roll and golf. When he opened his ambitious Beverly Hills five-star experiment, Chadwick, I talked him up big to everyone I knew with a fat wallet and an adventuresome appetite, even bringing Roger Daltrey in for dinner one evening. Govind Armstrong was running Ford's kitchen that night. He went on to open Table 8 on Melrose. Talk about spotless.

After Chadwick went under in the light (or darkness) of 9/11, Ben and I really got to know each other. I'd cruise by his house, five blocks away, and snatch off the grill whatever it was he'd been concocting. When he bought the Cheviot house, he gutted most of the living area, designing a new entry space that opened directly into a massive, state-of-the-art kitchen.

For Ben Ford, life is lived in the kitchen. That's the room where he dons his conductor tails, wizard's hat, battlefield flak jacket, Moses staff, and Indiana Jones whip. He wields a ginzu knife like Uma Thurman handles the samurai sword in *Kill Bill*. When Ben cooks, he runs roughshod through fridge and cabinet, grasping what his instinct tells him will elevate the dish to sumptuous heights. It takes the housekeeper three hours to clean the kitchen, to make it spotless, so he can go back, jack, and do it again.

Ben is an anti-celebrity, soulful, slightly dysfunctional, yet completely committed to his craft. Cooking is his mission, but music is his life force. He is the most knowledgeable fan of authentic roots rock 'n' roll I've ever met. Our place has thousands of CDs and gigabytes on iTunes. Reality-show pretenders have nothing on the real rock 'n' roll chef.

Ben's five-year-old son is over tonight. (He never divulges his boy's name in interviews; neither did his dad when he was a tyke.) The chef doesn't feel like cooking. It's been a long, insane week at Ford's. They averaged 250 "covers" a night, a remarkable number of meals for a humbly sized eatery. So he's ordered takeout from India's Grill near the Beverly Center. "It's the best in the city," he says. "I give the guy a big tip to drive it out here."

He rented *Raiders of the Lost Ark* from Netflix. His kid's never seen it, and it seemed like the right time. Ben never offers the media much about Pop when discussing the Filling Station, which he financed through his own resources, vowing at all costs not to tap the family till. But I'm his roommate, so he coughs up a tidbit from growing up on the *Millennium Falcon* for me, in the wake of his offspring's virgin *Raiders* screening.

"I was thinking about how he was relating the film to the ride we were on at Disneyland last week," says Ben. "I wondered if he understands that the hero on the screen doing all those impossible things is his grandpa. There's a sweet sense of solitude in my dad's performance in *Raiders*." I point how much grandpa resembles dad in the celluloid classic, probably because Harrison Ford was in his mid-30s when *Raiders* was released in 1981. Ben turns 40 this year.

"I'll tell you something not too many people know," he teases. "I was in fifth grade going to Highland Hall in Northridge, and we had *the* premiere of *Star Wars*, the first showing anywhere in the world. It was screened as a benefit for Highland Hall. The movie's producer Gary Kurtz's daughters went to school with me. I was 11 years old, and it was the first time I ever rode in a limousine. What a surreal time."

As the night winds down with stories and anecdotes of an era long past, the iPod delivers a prophetic tune – Pearl Jam's "Thumbing My Way Back to Heaven." Ben's had a second wind in the kitchen and makes his final announcement of the night: "Dessert's ready." Heaven, indeed. ✶

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L.A. native Lonn Friend is a veteran music journalist and media personality. His memoir, Life on Planet Rock *(Morgan Road/Random House), comes out July 11. Find him at* Myspace.com/lonnsworld.