

*"A true testament
to Rick's love of
the kitchen and
determination
to succeed."*

EMERIL
LAGASSE



SCARS OF A CHEF

The searing story of a top chef marked forever by the grit and grace of life in the kitchen

RICK TRAMONTO

WITH LISA JACKSON FOREWORD BY JOHN FOLSE

“*Raw* is the only word I can find to describe this piece. A journey through what many experience but are not brave enough to reveal . . . the dreams, the disappointments, and the ultimate triumph are so vividly recalled it’s as if Rick were sitting across the room speaking directly to you. A must-read for *anyone* who has ever wondered if their past truly defines their future.”

CHARLIE TROTTER

“Rick candidly shares his life journey as a person and a chef. This book is a true testament to his love of the kitchen and determination to succeed.”

EMERIL LAGASSE

Chef, restaurateur, television personality, and author

“Knowing where Rick came from, I’m even more impressed with what he has been able to accomplish. If you enjoy reading about food, restaurants, and the people who create them, you’ll find *Scars of a Chef* an interesting read. And if you are committed to personal growth and understanding, I think you’ll be touched by Rick’s journey. As he begins a new chapter in his life, I can’t wait to see what surprises Rick has in store for us.”

RICHARD MELMAN

Founder and chairman, Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, Inc.

“This book gives young chefs a peek into what it really takes, not only to be a great chef, but to be a great person.”

MICHAEL SYMON

Chef and owner, Lola and Lolita restaurants, Cleveland

2009 James Beard Award, Best Chef: Great Lakes

Author, *Michael Symon’s Live to Cook*

“*Scars of a Chef* looks deep into the soul of an iconic American chef. Rick Tramonto is both brutally honest and open in his tale of how he beat the odds in life and saved himself and his family. A beautiful testament to love.”

JOHN BESH

Chef/owner, Besh Restaurant Group

“*Scars of a Chef* is a page turner—not just because it details Rick Tramonto’s troubling times or glamorous moments but because of the deep honesty with which Rick shares all of his life with us. Rick is one of America’s most talented chefs; passionate, dedicated, and committed to the highest level of culinary art. And like any great artist, Rick is a complicated person with all the scars to show for his pain and passions. As we see him rebound and triumph even as his life takes new turns, we, too, find hope to dream new dreams.”

MICHAEL LOMONACO

Executive chef/partner, Porter House New York



SCARS — OF A — CHEF

RICK TRAMONTO
WITH LISA JACKSON


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I dedicate this book to my heavenly Father, whom I have a great covenant with, and my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who always leads me down the right road and who brings me through every storm every time.

To my best friend and wife, Eileen Tramonto, who keeps me on track. Thanks for your friendship and love.

Finally, to my mom and dad, Frank and Gloria Tramonto, who have both gone home to be with the Lord. I love you and miss you and wish you could have been around to see and experience what God has blessed me with, and the success I've found on my journey.

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Thanks to my supportive friends whom I rarely get to see but who I love to cook for. God bless you all and may the grace of God be with you.

—*Rick Tramonto*

FOREWORD

by CHEF JOHN D. FOLSE

It's been said that our palates are set at the table of our forefathers. They determined the foods we ate, the first tastes that passed our lips, and the dishes that were handed down as family traditions. The same can be said for our character, our personal style, and eventually our accomplishments. After all, the values we carry through life are also delivered to each of us at the family table. Rick Tramonto is certainly a great example of this philosophy, and so am I. I suppose this is where our commonality begins.

I remember precisely the day so many years ago when I took note of the man who was to become my partner in a restaurant company. I was eating at Tru, Rick's Chicago restaurant. He caught my attention immediately as I observed him gracefully maneuvering through the dining room. Oh, I had met him before, but this was the night I came to know him and understand his passion. His love of the restaurant, the food, and the guests was obvious.

The diners were starstruck; it was as though the great Talleyrand, Carême, or Escoffier were in their midst. I watched as Rick stopped long enough at each patron's table to adore and be adored. It was a

restaurant moment that we in the business all long for. Eventually he made his way to my table. After he greeted each of us with a gentle handshake and an attentive eye, I knew the rest of the evening would be magical. The artistic details, first-class service, and overall ambiance of that initial visit remain imbedded in my mind today, although I experienced that same award-winning combination many times afterward.

Once Rick and I became friends—or I should say friendly acquaintances—our respect for each other grew. I began to learn about his journey from obscurity to the pinnacle of the culinary world. It wasn't an unusual story—many people have faced similar journeys out of adversity. Yet few have reached the ultimate destination as Rick has.

The grandson of Italian immigrants in the blue-collar town of Rochester, New York, Rick had few options when he was growing up. The lucky ones in his neighborhood could expect a life of factory work and the hope of a pension. Between running their own small bar and grill and working their factory shifts, Rick's parents worked eighteen hours a day. Rick was left to “make do” for himself. With no parental boundaries, Rick allowed his darker side to take control, and he began a downward spiral. When his father was sent to prison for embezzlement, Rick turned to sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, making them his new altar of worship. It's astounding that he made it through that time in his life.

Rick's inspiring story, told so honestly and humbly, unravels the mystery of how someone can rise from the depths of despair to brilliance. From the time he was a young kid walking into Wendy's to the day he planted his feet firmly in classical cooking at the Strathallan Hotel and Grill in Rochester, we see the steps Chef Tramonto took to leave the demons of his past behind. From his first experiences as an apprentice in New York and Europe to the day God entered his life, it's all here.

During his culinary journey, Rick has shared the table with the greatest chefs, culinarians, and restaurateurs in the world: masters like Alfred Portale of Gotham, Anton Mosimann of Mosimann's, and Rich Melman of Lettuce Entertain You, as well as culinary icons such as Pierre Gagnaire, Alain Chapel, Paul Bocuse, the Troisgros brothers,

and Michel and Albert Roux. The influence of these contemporary giants combined with Rick's drive to pursue greatness attracted Bob Payton of Stapleford Park Country House Hotel in Leicestershire, England. Rick's success there helped launch him to the top of his profession.

I knew nothing of Rick's story when I first observed him, the man whom I proudly call friend and partner today, during my first visit to Tru. I knew nothing of the trials and triumphs he personally had faced when he called to help during Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana's darkest moment. I knew nothing of his past when I joined him at a table in Osteria di Tramonto, his beautiful venture in Wheeling, Illinois. Rick's past didn't matter to me when he called me in December 2009, asking to talk during a low point in his life. The man I had come to know over ten years had such class and quality that I suggested a partnership between us called Home on the Range. It's the first partnership I've ever pursued in the thirty-two-year history of my company. I think that says it all about the character of Rick Tramonto.

Now it's your turn to read the story of this ne'er-do-well from Rochester who went from juvenile delinquent to the pages of *Esquire* magazine, from a hamburger joint to *Top Chef Masters*, and perhaps most important, from raucousness to redemption.

INTRODUCTION: A CHEF'S SCARS

People always ask about the tattoos.

I don't blame them for being curious. I've got twenty-four different tattoos now, running up and down both sides of my body, on my arms, my legs, my chest, my back; they're pretty hard to miss.

Not that I haven't already been marked by the profession. Take a look at my hands and arms and you'll see the cuts, calluses, burn marks—the scars—all symbols of a life that includes working with razor-sharp knives, red-hot cookware, and vats of boiling oil.

But my tattoos are more than just battle scars. Each one is an intentional representation of my commitment and devotion, both to my Creator and to my career. They reflect a thirty-year life journey, a great picture of where I've been and what God has taught me along the way.

Much like my physical scars, each one of my tattoos tells a story. This book is my attempt to flesh out those stories a bit more. Though my stories—like my scars and my tattoos—are unique to me, you just might recognize something from your own life here. And I hope you'll come away with the conviction that the same loving God who has filled my life with peace, promise, and purpose can do the same for you.

1

THE END

2008

*Come to Me, all you who labor
and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

MATTHEW 11:28

I stood inside my home office with my back against the heavy wooden door. I closed my eyes and sighed.

What am I going to do now, God?

I was so tired; the stress of the past few months was definitely catching up with me. Yet in spite of the exhaustion and physical pain, there was still a part of me that felt like I should be doing something—anything. I just wasn't sure what.

Right now, my staff at Osteria di Tramonto were wiping down the grill for the final time, boxing up the glassware and the china, and taking down the black-and-white photographs from the walls. One of the managers had called me earlier as I sat in traffic to ask me what I wanted to do with those photos—shots that I had taken on my many trips to Italy over the years. Beautiful Italian grandmothers rolling out pasta, smiling boys devouring slices of crusty bread, Italian families carrying bags of fresh produce home from the market—culture and food seen through the lens of my own experience. We had hung hundreds of them all over the restaurant, and they looked so striking against the exposed brick on the walls.

What use would I have for them now?

“Auction them off, give them away. I don’t care what you do with them,” I had said. “Just get rid of them.”

Those photos represented everything I had loved about Osteria di Tramonto. I had been a partner in several other restaurants, but none reflected my heritage, my roots, and my passion for cooking as much as this one. Some of my earliest and best memories center around my grandmother’s kitchen, where I watched my mom and grandmother transform fresh meats, seasonal produce, and aromatic spices into hearty and comforting fare. Whenever one of them invited me to help, I eagerly set about rolling out dough or stirring tomatoes into a sauce. Sunday dinners, which sometimes lasted all afternoon, drew our large extended family together for simple but satisfying food, laughter, and spirited conversation. Osteria di Tramonto featured homey family-style Italian cooking reminiscent of those dinners. In fact, some of the items on our menu had been inspired by the recipe cards passed down to me.

For years, I had made frequent trips to Europe, gaining the “continuing education” that is essential for any chef. Yet while building the Osteria, I had been drawn back to Italy again and again. Whether waiting at dawn for returning fishermen down on the waterfront, eating bread and cheese from small bakeries, or examining the produce at market stalls, I delighted in rediscovering my Italian heritage. And everywhere I went, I snapped photos. Each one captured some aspect of the country I had come to love. Now those photos, which I had so carefully framed and arranged on the walls, simply reminded me of the grief I felt over the Osteria’s closing.

Osteria di Tramonto had felt like home to me. In fact, I had spent more time there than in my own home during the past three years. My culinary partner, Gale Gand, and I had created the Osteria from the ground up. We selected the china and designed the interior. We developed the menu, hired and trained the staff, and searched high and low until we found the perfect wood-burning pizza oven for our exhibition kitchen.

I had spent every waking minute getting ready for our opening. But that was only the first step. When the doors opened at 5:00 p.m., October 12, 2006, the hardest work was still ahead. Once Osteria

went live, we quickly moved from planning mode to action mode. Our steps quickened, and our worry increased. We talked about food costs, labor costs, overhead costs, marketing costs. We dealt with the restaurant critics as we tweaked the menu, pouring everything we had—and more—into getting this new baby to stand on its own two feet. All in the hope that after more than a year of seven-day workweeks, we might eventually get a night off just to breathe.

And then we had to do it all again—in fact, we had to do it three times. Osteria had been part of a much larger project that included three other concept restaurants. As we worked with a large hotel conglomerate on Chicago's North Shore, our vision had been to create a Las Vegas-style hotel, where guests could enjoy a wide variety of offerings all in one location.

Opening four restaurants simultaneously had been a daunting task, even for partners who had been part of more than twenty openings in our careers. But I had hoped it would be the start of a new phase in my career, bringing me on par with other celebrity chefs in my industry who had built their own brands through multilocation restaurants, television programs, and national publications.

I knew the odds. The research says one in four restaurants never make it past the first year. Over three years, that number rises to three in five. Osteria di Tramonto's demise was nothing new in the restaurant world, especially in light of all the big businesses we had seen fail during the economic crash of 2008. But knowing that didn't make it any less painful.

I had been in the culinary industry for over twenty-five years, so I was used to the physical demands of standing on my feet from dawn until well after dusk. Years of standing on hard tile floors, lifting, and using my hands had resulted in double knee and numerous back surgeries, as well as a rotator cuff surgery. Treating minor burns and cuts was just a normal and expected hazard of the job. I didn't mind that I often had no time to eat—ironic, of course, when you're working with food all day—or that I smelled like fish or the grill, no matter how often I showered. Even on the days when I felt mentally drained and totally exhausted, I couldn't imagine ever wanting to do anything else. Until now.

I was spent, both emotionally and physically. This project had been

like a marathon for me, one I wasn't sure my body was going to recover from. Fifteen-, sixteen-hour days, seven days a week, I had been at the restaurant, carrying boxes, stocking shelves, moving equipment—whatever it took, I did it. I had lived and breathed that place, often fueled only by adrenaline, double espressos, and ibuprofen.

Now as I sat down at my desk, last week's special menu caught my eye. I read over the list of entrées we had so carefully created: the Tramonto pizza topped with olives, arugula, and a fontina-mozzarella mix; a carpaccio of sea bass sprinkled with a tart, red grapefruit vinaigrette; and the bistecca alla fiorentina, a Tuscan-style porterhouse grilled over a wood-burning fire with aged balsamic vinegar and extra-virgin olive oil.

Doesn't get much better than that.

Why, God? Was all that work for nothing? Was all that time spent away from my family for nothing? Missing my kids' school events, my wife's birthday, my wedding anniversary—was it all for nothing?

The reality of Osteria's closing began to sink in as I slid to the floor and began to cry. What happened? Where did I go wrong? And how was I going to fill my time now?

Cooking was the only thing I knew. I'd been in the restaurant business since I was sixteen years old. I didn't know how to do anything else. I never even had a paper route.

I supposed I could spend more time focusing on Tru, the fine-dining restaurant Gale and I had opened in downtown Chicago nearly a decade ago. Or maybe I could write another cookbook. I looked around my office at the thousands of books that lined the walls, six of them with my own name on the front. Six hundred magazines were organized by category and issue date—every *Gourmet*, *Bon Appétit*, and *Food & Wine* printed in the past ten years. Culinary awards and recognitions filled in the empty spaces, a record of my accomplishments and successes.

It had been a good run. I had really made something of myself. I had worked with the best of the best; I had cooked for royalty, dignitaries, celebrities, and three U.S. presidents. I had been on more television programs than I could count and in more food magazines than I could stack on my shelf. I had written books and earned the highest culinary accolades. I had done it all—and done it well.

But now I wondered, *What if I've reached the end?*

BRUSCHETTA WITH OVEN-DRIED TOMATOES AND GORGONZOLA SPREAD

One element of the Osteria that I loved was the wood-burning oven. It cooled down slowly overnight, so I'd slide trays of sliced tomatoes into the oven soon after closing time. The next morning, I'd pull out perfectly dried tomatoes—the inspiration for this tasty bruschetta.

Garlic oil is one of the cooking staples I keep in my refrigerator at home, and it can be prepared the day before you make the bruschetta. — *SERVES 4*

Loaf of sourdough or baguette, cut into eight ½-inch slices

1 c. olive oil

1 clove of garlic, smashed

Extra-virgin olive oil, to drizzle

1 Tbs. flat-leaf parsley, chopped

For the oven-dried tomatoes

12 ripe medium Roma plum tomatoes

½ c. extra-virgin olive oil

1 Tbs. fresh thyme, minced

½ tsp. red chili flakes, crushed

6 garlic cloves, crushed

½ tsp. sugar

½ tsp. kosher salt

¼ tsp. ground black pepper

For the Gorgonzola spread

6 oz. Gorgonzola cheese or Gorgonzola dolce

2 to 4 Tbs. heavy cream

2 Tbs. basil, chopped

2 Tbs. large green onion, minced

Kosher salt, to taste

Ground black pepper, to taste

Combine and refrigerate for at least 24 hours.

TO PREPARE GARLIC OIL

Combine 1 c. olive oil and 1 smashed clove of garlic. Refrigerate for at least 24 hours.

TO PREPARE OVEN-DRIED TOMATOES (can be made one day in advance)

1. Preheat oven to 250°F.
2. In a pot of boiling water, blanch tomatoes. Drain, refresh in ice water, and drain again. Peel and core the tomatoes; cut them into quarters and remove seeds.
3. Line a baking tray with parchment paper and arrange the tomato quarters on the tray, cut side down. Drizzle generously with olive oil. Sprinkle with thyme, chili flakes, and garlic. In a small bowl, combine the sugar, salt, and pepper, and sprinkle the mixture evenly over the tomatoes.

4. Bake until tomatoes begin to shrivel, about 1 hour. When the tomatoes are cool enough to handle, transfer them to a container. Drizzle with more olive oil and cover. Refrigerate until needed.

TO MAKE GORGONZOLA SPREAD

1. In a small bowl, use a fork to mash Gorgonzola cheese with enough cream to make a spreadable consistency. Add basil, green onion, salt, and pepper to taste.
2. Refrigerate for at least 24 hours.

TO SERVE

1. Slice bread.
2. Lay on sheet tray. Brush liberally with garlic oil on both sides.
3. Grill both sides of bruschetta on pan grill or outdoor grill until crusty.
4. Top bruschetta with 1 Tbs. of Gorgonzola spread. Add 2 to 3 pieces of tomato and drizzle with oil from tomato marinade. Garnish with parsley.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

On August 25, 2010, John Folse and I officially announced the formation of a new restaurant development company, Home on the Range, LLC. Our first project is Restaurant R'evolution, a two-hundred-seat establishment in the French Quarter's Royal Sonesta Hotel.

The press conference was held at the historic Cabildo building in Jackson Square, where the transfer of the Louisiana Purchase to the United States was made in 1803. After a speech by New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu, John talked about our plan to combine his expertise in Creole cooking with my ability to adapt and present classic dishes in new formats, and I told the crowd of my love for the city and people of New Orleans. Following the announcement, eighty guests and members of the press boarded limousine buses and drove to the Royal Sonesta, where we were greeted by Louisiana and Dixieland bands. It was quite the party.

I now commute back and forth between Chicago and New Orleans, but we have already begun putting down roots in our new hometown.

Restaurant R'evolution is scheduled to open in 2011.