

# Chefs With Tattoos

## A colorful rebellion against kitchen rules

By Amy Scattergood

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Eddie Garcia, sous chef, Nickel Diner

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Ludovic LeFebvre, chef-owner,  
LudoBites

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Steven Fretz, executive chef, XIV

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**Amid the fire and steam** of the kitchen, the metal flash of pans and knives, the ironwork of the stoves and the immaculate white of the jackets comes a movement of worked color on an arm.

Calligraphy runs down from one chef's shoulder. The painted whorl of a fish flashes as another chef flips a sauté pan. A pastry chef plates a dessert, a network of tattoos on her arm. A prep cook measures knife cuts by a ruler inked into her hand. A chef barks orders, his forearms a kaleidoscope of women, knives and trees.

This artistry is common in professional kitchens these days. Cooks turn to tattoos as a preferred expression of individualism, a form of rebellion against kitchen environments that demand conformity. For chefs, as for prisoners, soldiers and NBA point guards, a tattoo is a mark that can be worn with the uniform.

It is often the only one that can. In culinary schools and in working kitchens, chefs are stripped of rings and watches, of earrings and bracelets. Clothes are traded for chefs whites, checkered pants, the uniform of the apprentice. Le Cordon Bleu schools forbid perfume and cigarettes, at least in theory, because they inhibit the senses of taste and smell.

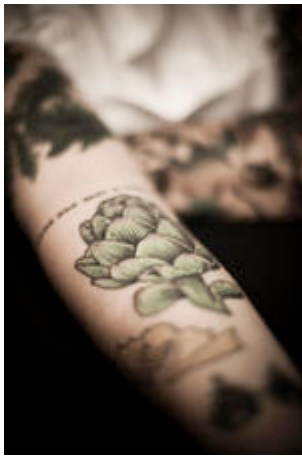
The hierarchy in a kitchen is specific and extreme, often laced with sexism and racism — both very much alive beyond the dining room doors and over the pass — and if the structure seems strangely militaristic, that's because it is. Escoffier's French kitchen brigade is modeled after the military, a chain of command, a specific system of kitchen government.

Yet in such an environment, the conceit that chefs are artists — the plate a palette, etc. — is not wrong. To the paintbrush, add some OCD, issues of control and temperament, often a little unrestrained self-medication. And if that creativity goes onto the blank slate of the plate, it also goes onto that of the body.



Michael Brown, executive chef, Red o

**PHOTO BY KEVIN  
SCANLON**

Carolynn Spence, executive chef,  
Chateau Marmont

**PHOTO BY AMY  
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Monica May, chef-owner, Nickel  
Diner

**PHOTO BY AMY  
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"We don't have time," says Michael Voltaggio, executive chef of The Langham in Pasadena, who has tattoos over much of both arms, his chest, one hand and his legs. "Tattoos are our hobby."

Voltaggio pulls up the left sleeve of his chef's jacket to reveal the Morton salt girl, circa 1952. "I got it so I don't have to tell them to put salt in the food. Most of the guys are to my left."

Voltaggio has a knife and fork on one hand ("this is about the guest") and a light bulb on his arm for inspiration.

Once, after a bad day at work, he went out to get another tattoo, for the pain, perhaps, or its clarity. "An hour later, I'm bleeding through my chefs whites," says Voltaggio, back in the kitchen.

The world of the professional kitchen, for the vast majority of chefs, is not a glamorous one. It is a world of hard work and brutal hours, performing mundane tasks (peeling vegetables, monitoring stock pots, washing dishes) in numbing repetition. For the young, the pay is minimum wage, if there is any pay at all.

Many chefs, particularly those whose careers began in Europe, come up as apprentices in kitchens that are still vaguely Dickensian. The child labor laws governing teenagers are obscured by Old World guild traditions.

Wolfgang Puck remembers peeling potatoes in an Austrian hotel kitchen for days and, at the age of 14, considering suicide when the chef fired him and told him to go home.

Tattoos are an antidote for chefs, and while that has been true for many years, three changes in the last decade have made kitchen tattoos more noticeable. The art has gotten better, chefs have been glamorized (blame the Food Network first, *Top Chef* second) and tattooing has gone mainstream, whether for chefs, teenagers, executives or school teachers. Where once a chef might hide a tattoo under the sleeve of a white uniform, now the sleeve is one of ink, displayed without prejudice.

Yes, tattoos are about creativity, about control, about art. They're also sometimes about pain.

"It fucking hurts," says Steven Fretz, executive chef at Michael Mina's XIX on Sunset Boulevard, a street with an inordinately high number of tattoo shops as well as award-winning restaurants. "As



Ludovic LeFebvre, chef-owner,  
LudoBites

chefs, we're always in the shits, we work our fucking asses off, but yet I inflict pain on myself every three or four weeks."

Fretz, who has worked with Mina for two dozen years, rolls up his uniform sleeves to reveal two full sleeves of artwork, some still works in progress: a cross, flowers, a koi fish, a snake, the Buddha, a woman whose stunning portrait has been built with a palette of 16 colors.

For the most part, youthful or drunken exploits notwithstanding, these are not haphazard markings any more than the work on the plates is haphazard. Nor are they, for the most part, kitchen clichés.

"Man, I work with food 18 hours a day, six days a week," Fretz says. "I don't need to see food on my arm." Nonetheless, certain tattoos function as recurrent motifs among the men and women on the brigade: knives, salt, flames. The tools of the trade worked into the skin like the scars and burns that are just as common.

Carolynn Spence, executive chef at the Chateau Marmont, rolls her sleeves up to show a lattice of thistles and leaves, a Kikuichi knife, the artichoke logo from a bottle of Cynar and the lyrics to a Beirut song. On her palm are the concentric circles that measure the cupped amount of a tablespoon, a teaspoon and a quarter teaspoon.

"When I was young, I was a hardcore punk rocker," says Spence, who is from New Jersey. "They [cooks] accepted me, blue hair and all."

Evan Funke, executive chef at Rustic Canyon, has a network of 3s on his arms, two crossed knives (one his mother's, one his first Henkel Santoku), the French words for *salt* and *fire*, and his father's signature.

"A lot of my time at Spago was based on superstitions," says Funke about the restaurant where he worked both while in culinary school and afterward. "Hat on correctly. We used to initial all our vinaigrettes in *garde manger*. Thirty-three is my lucky number."

For many chefs, a tattoo is as much a rite of passage as the burn marks, knife wounds and cultivated insomnia that come with the job.

Brendan Collins, chef-owner of Culver City's newly opened Waterloo & City, got his first tattoo at 17, exactly half his current age. He may have grown up working-class in the north of England, but Collins is classically trained and started out as a pastry chef. You wouldn't know it from his body, which is a lattice of drawings — a huge tree trunk, a dragon, Chinese writing, Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* — much of them hiding a long, thick scar from a brutal rugby injury.

Collins says he doesn't want the food or tools he uses in his profession pictured on his skin ("I could always put a fucking serrated knife down my arm: Look at me with my fucking

Wüsthof!"), and that he considers the predilection for tattoos to suit the adrenalin-fueled autocracy of the kitchen.

"We're all degenerates at heart. If I hadn't found cooking, I'd probably be in prison."

Chef Ludovic Lefebvre's body is etched in a network of words and colors: a Buddhist prayer in the chef's native French, a koi fish, a dragon, a Hawaiian hula girl, a cross, his sister's name on his wrist, his wife's name on his chest. And on his elbow, the most recent piece, a rooster that is both the symbol of France and of Lefebvre's traveling restaurant, LudoBites.

"Tattoos are like a drug. You can't finish. It's never the last one," says Lefebvre, who got his first tattoo 13 years ago, shortly after he'd arrived in America.

In France — where Lefebvre was first a teenage apprentice, then a culinary school student, then trained under iconoclastic chef Pierre Gagnaire — tattoos were not accepted the way they are now, in either country.

"At that time in France, it was jail guys" who had the tattoos, not trained chefs, Lefebvre says.

As he worked the line on a recent night, French rap blaring from the playlist, a *mise en place* cup of white foie gras powder near the work station like the lost contraband from a meth lab, the artwork that fills both of Lefebvre's arms down to his wrists looked in the candlelight like two complete multicolored sleeves. They were, of course. Of his own uniform.