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BILL
BUFORD

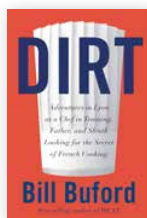
La naissance d'un chef

A Chef Is Born

BY CLÉMENT THIERY

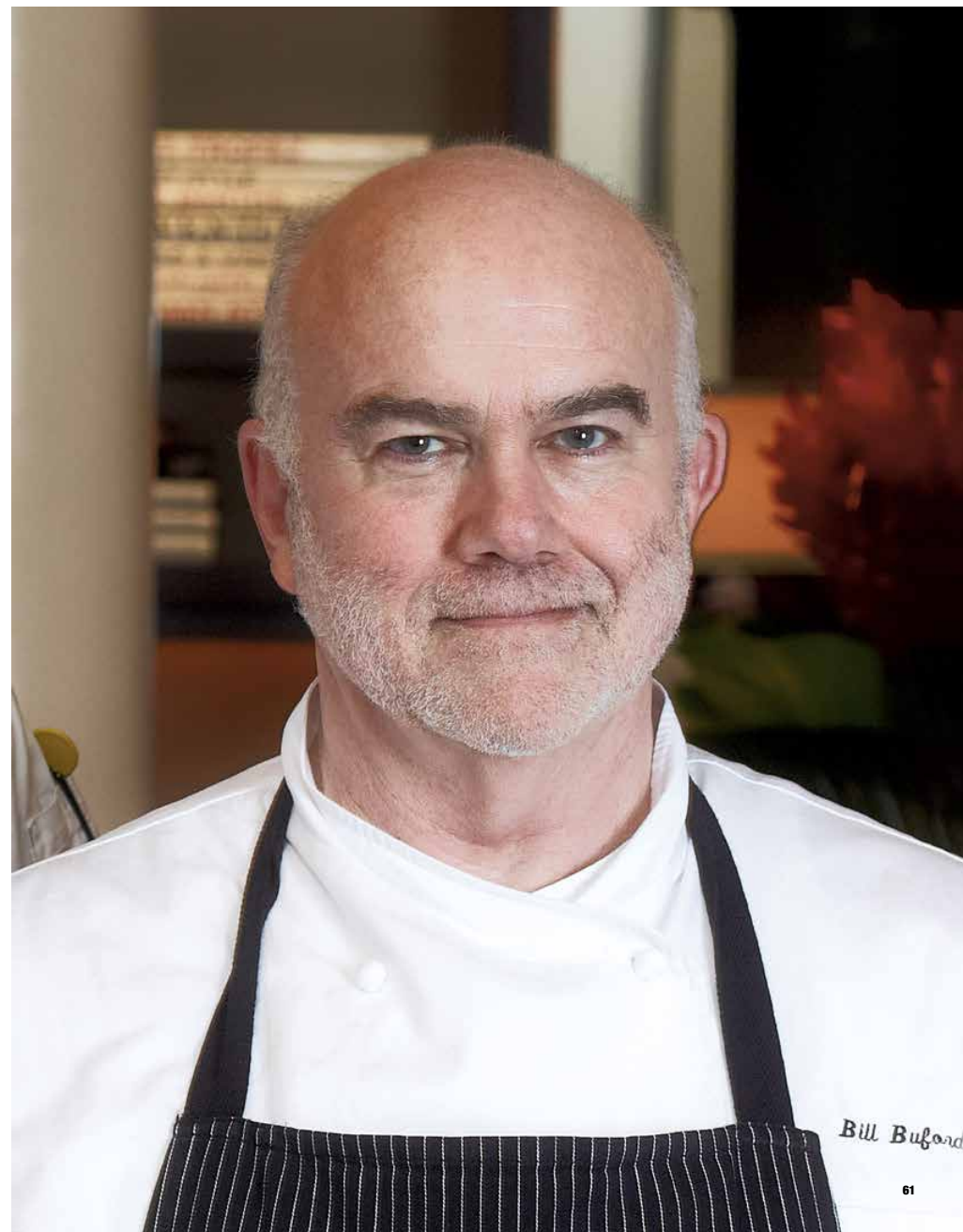
Un Américain rêve de percer le secret de la cuisine française et part vivre à Paris pendant trois mois. Le scénario est connu. Le dernier livre de Bill Buford aurait pu retomber comme un soufflé de clichés, mais le journaliste, fin cuisinier, sauve adroitement le repas. Il passera finalement cinq ans à Lyon. Au fil des rencontres et des embûches, tantôt reportage, tantôt recueil d'anecdotes cocasses, *Dirt* se lit comme l'initiation d'un chef amateur.

An American dreaming of discovering the secrets of French cuisine and going to live in Paris for three months is a well-worn story. Bill Buford's latest book could have been yet another cliché-packed yarn, but the journalist and skilled cook has served up a pièce de résistance inspired by what became a five-year stay in Lyon. Offering exciting encounters and obstacles in a blend of report-style accounts and funny anecdotes, *Dirt* is the story of how an amateur chef learned the ropes.



Dirt: Adventures in Lyon as a Chef in Training, Father, and Sleuth Looking for the Secret of French Cooking by Bill Buford, Alfred A. Knopf, 2020.

© Thomas Schauer



Bill Buford



Casser un œuf, laver une fraise et « tourner » un artichaut : voici quelques-uns des gestes essentiels que le journaliste américain Bill Buford a appris pendant son passage à l'Institut Paul Bocuse de Lyon. How to break an egg, clean a strawberry, and "turn" an artichoke are just a few of the essential techniques American journalist Bill Buford learned during his time at the Paul Bocuse Institute in Lyon. © Jean-Yves Lemoigne

Une ratatouille, un soufflé aux trois fromages, des tuiles de pommes de terre et des crabes farcis. Voici quelques-uns des plats que Bill Buford a appris à cuisiner chez Citronelle, le restaurant le plus en vue de Washington. (L'établissement a fermé ses portes en 2012.) L'apprenti cuisinier a passé huit mois en compagnie du chef français Michel Richard, multipliant les voyages en train depuis New York, jusqu'à atteindre le poste de poissonnier dans sa brigade. Mais ce n'était pas assez. Admiratif des cuisiniers américains qui ont fait leurs classes à Paris – comme Dan Barber, élu meilleur chef des États-Unis en 2009 –, Bill Buford décide de poursuivre son apprentissage gastronomique en France. « C'est une éducation, raffinée pendant plus de 300 ans, permettant de cuisiner tous les ingrédients du répertoire français », explique Bill Buford. (Il était en train de réduire un fond de veau pour accompagner un plat d'agneau lorsque notre appel l'a interrompu.) « C'est apprendre les cent manières de cuisiner une pomme de terre ; c'est découvrir un nouveau langage, une discipline, une rigueur. »

Ratatouille, three-cheese soufflé, potato tuiles, and stuffed crab are just a few of the dishes Bill Buford learned to cook at Citronelle, the most fashionable restaurant in Washington before it closed in 2012. The apprentice cook spent eight months alongside French chef Michel Richard, traveling back and forth from New York until he finally became the head of the fish station in the kitchen team. But he wanted more.

Driven by an admiration of American chefs who had cut their teeth in Paris, such as Dan Barber, voted Outstanding Chef in the United States in 2009, Buford decided to continue his culinary education in France. "This method has been perfected for more than 300 years and enables you to cook every single ingredient in the French repertoire," he says. (Our phone call interrupted him as he was reducing a veal stock to accompany a lamb dish.) "It means learning the one hundred different ways to cook a potato; it means discovering a new language, discipline, and rigor."

Ce n'est pas la première fois que Bill Buford se prend de passion pour une culture étrangère. Le journaliste a suivi pendant six ans des hooligans (et s'est fait tabasser par la police) pour son livre *Among the Thugs* (traduit en français par *Parmi les hooligans*). Quelques années plus tard, il quittait son poste d'éditeur au *New Yorker* pour rejoindre l'équipe du chef italo-américain Mario Batali à Manhattan. Une première expérience en cuisine qui donna naissance au livre *Heat* (*Chaud brûlant*).

Boudin noir et côtes-du-rhône

C'est le chef français Daniel Boulud, propriétaire de sept restaurants à New York, qui conseille à Bill Buford de s'installer avec femme et enfants à Lyon, la « capitale mondiale de la gastronomie ». Il aidera même la famille à obtenir un visa. Mais les débuts en France sont difficiles... Aucun restaurateur ne veut embaucher un Américain sans formation. Pas du genre à renoncer, le journaliste se lie avec un boulanger qui l'initie à l'alchimie du pain et aux coutumes locales. Il assiste à une « tuaille » et, entre deux verres de côtes-du-rhône, apprend à transformer en boudin noir le sang du cochon fraîchement égorgé.

Mais pour entrer dans la confrérie des chefs, Bill Buford doit s'inscrire dans une école hôtelière. À Lyon, son choix se porte naturellement sur l'Institut Paul Bocuse : là, il apprendra à casser un œuf (sur une surface plate ; jamais sur le bord de la poêle !), à tendre l'oreille pour écouter le « chant du beurre » (voir page 64) et à dresser une assiette selon trois principes : la couleur, la dimension et la texture. L'apprenti s'en sortira avec la note de 11/20. Et sera finalement embauché chez la Mère Brazier, un bouchon traditionnel fondé en 1921 et décoré de deux étoiles Michelin. Une institution lyonnaise !

D'abord assigné au garde-manger comme responsable des entrées, des viandes et des charcuteries, Bill Buford finira chef de partie, un poste à responsabilité. De retour à New York, il signe une série d'essais pour le livre somme de Daniel Boulud, *Daniel: My French Cuisine*, et recrée avec lui vingt plats anciens dont le turbot soufflé, le jambon au foin et le canard à la presse. Il écrit depuis peu une chronique gastronomique pour le *New Yorker*, « Kitchen Notes ». Le journaliste est devenu gourmet ; le chef amateur a gagné en confiance. « La cuisine française, qui avant mon séjour en France me semblait incompréhensible et menaçante », dit-il, « est devenue libératrice et excitante. » ■

This was not the first time Buford had developed a passion for a foreign culture. While working as a journalist, he followed gangs of hooligans for six years (and was beaten by the police) for his book *Among the Thugs*. Several years later, he left his job at the *New Yorker* to join the team headed up by Italian-American chef Mario Batali in Manhattan. A first experience in the kitchens that led him to write his book *Heat*.

Boudin Noir and Côtes-du-Rhône

French chef Daniel Boulud, who owns seven restaurants in New York, advised Buford to move with his wife and children to Lyon, the "world capital of gastronomy." He even helped the family with their visas. But the early days in France were difficult... Restaurants were wary of hiring an American with no training. Determined to carry on, the journalist befriended a baker, who taught him about local customs and the alchemy of breadmaking. He attended a *tuaille*, a pig slaughtering event, and between glasses of Côtes-du-Rhône red wine, learned how to make boudin noir from fresh pig's blood.

Before he could join the chefs' inner circle, however, Buford had to attend a cooking school. As he was based in Lyon, he was naturally drawn to the Paul Bocuse Institute. While there, he learned how to break an egg (on a flat surface; never on the edge of a pan), to listen to "the butter's song" (see page 64), and to present a dish according to three main principles: color, volume, and texture. The apprentice graduated and was finally hired at La Mère Brazier, a traditional *bouchon lyonnais* restaurant founded in 1921 and the proud holder of two Michelin stars. In short, a local institution!

Initially appointed to the pantry and put in charge of appetizers, meats, and charcuterie, Buford ended up as a line cook – a senior position. After returning to New York, he wrote a series of essays for Daniel Boulud's compendium, *Daniel: My French Cuisine*, and helped the chef recreate 20 vintage dishes such as turbot soufflé, hay-baked ham, and pressed duck. He has also recently begun writing the culinary column "Kitchen Notes" for the *New Yorker*. The journalist has become a gourmet, and the amateur chef has come into his own. "Before I went to France, I thought French cooking was unknowable and threatening," he says. "Today, it is a liberating source of excitement." ■

THE BUTTER'S SONG

BY BILL BUFORD

One morning, I was sharpening a knife, running it up and down flat against a steel.

Le Cossec¹ interrupted. “Yes, you may start with the blade flat, but finish at an angle, moving up and down lightly, like a breeze.” (*Comme une brise.*) The angle hones the blade. When I touched it, I felt the fragility of the edge and its danger.

I asked to cook the steaks.

“*Regarde,*” he said.

He put a sauté pan on the fire, waited, and confirmed the heat with his hand just above the skillet.

“Listen to the butter.”

He dropped in a spoonful — “Not much.” He paused. “Do you hear? It is singing.” (*Il chante.*) The sound was like a muted babbling. “You hear this singing just before you add eggs to make an omelet. You hear it just before you set meat down on the pan.” If it is too hot, the butter steams and burns. Too cold, and the protein sticks to the surface. He leaned over the pan with his ear. “You want it to sing.”

He left the butter there.

It carried on with its soft tune — the temperature hot but not too hot — until it frothed up.

“This is a mousse.”

He gave the pan a shake. He turned down the flame.

He waited. The butter changed color. “This is *beurre noisette*.” Brown butter.

He poured the butter from the pan and started over. He dropped in butter, it sang, and he added the filet. It had been bundled up with a crisscrossing string to keep its shape and looked like a small parcel. He added more butter. It melted quickly, and he spooned it over the top of the meat.

“This is *rissoler*.”

Rissoler means to cook an ingredient in a small amount of liquid, usually fat. The technique is an item in the *Vocabulaire culinaire*². In practice, it involves a lot of spooning. You cook your ingredient from underneath by direct heat (in a pan; in effect, sautéing it) and from above, indirectly, by ladling the fat over it. Once the ingredient starts to brown (*colorer*), you turn it over. You see the technique in French kitchens, in movies, and in a parody: someone tilting a pan, pooling up hot juices along the lower rim, frantically spooning.

Le Cossec corrected my posture. “Stand tall and make small, deliberate movements. Be easy on your body when you cook.”

¹Alain Le Cossec, the executive chef and director of culinary arts at the Paul Bocuse Institute in Lyon. He was awarded the Meilleur Ouvrier de France (Best Craftsman of France) title in 1991.

²*Vocabulaire professionnel de cuisine et pâtisserie*, a five-page glossary of culinary terms students at the Paul Bocuse Institute have to memorize before their first class.

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Bill Buford et ses amis, Daniel Boulud (à droite) et Joel Buchman (à gauche), au restaurant Daniel à New York, en 2013. Bill Buford and his friends, Daniel Boulud (right) and Joel Buchman (left), at the restaurant Daniel in New York, 2013. © Courtesy of Bill Buford

