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If anyone epitomizes the modern culinary equivalent of a Dadaist artist—a chef who celebrates the idea of constantly evolving cuisine while scoffing at its fundamental core—it would be Roberto Cortez. But the very idea of an anti-chef’s chef sounds like such a tired nonconformist cliché today it hardly has the resonance that the century-old art movement once did.

Cortez is unwavering. “I hate the whole idea of a restaurant,” he says, as cocktail hour wanes at the Hollywood Hills home of celebrity hairstylist

Anne Morgan. On this balmy summer night, Cortez has transformed Morgan's garden patio into a backdrop for one of his CR8 (pronounced "create") events.

"Even if you change the menu, a restaurant by definition is essentially the same dining experience over and over," says the 44-year-old former private chef, cradling in his palm what appears to be an egg. It is actually a white porcelain orb designed by Katja Bremkamp, a young avant-garde tableware designer based in London. Her work will serve as the gateway to an eight-course dinner that by evening's end feels more like a Marcel Duchamp assemblage of mixed sensory experiences than yet another chemistry-driven molecular gastronomy attempt.

"Most chefs stop being involved once that plate is out of the kitchen," says Cortez, removing a small stopper shaped like an elongated face from the porcelain orb. He drizzles a few drops of its truffle oil and inhales deeply, before replacing the rubbery rendition of Constantin Brâncuși's *Sleeping Muse*. Cortez will instruct the evening's 10 guests—an eclectic mix of gallery owners, artists and film-industry entrepreneurs—to smell the truffle oil, then taste the accompanying cauliflower "cappuccino" with hazelnut "foam" (cauliflower soup frothed with hazelnut and served in a pyramid-shaped glass designed by Slovenian designer and installation artist Tanja Pak).

"I want to keep going deeper into the whole dining experience, to a place we haven't gone before as chefs," says Cortez of his emphasis on the visual as much as the edible. "Taking food presentation to a new level is part of that."

The idea that a chef can change not just how we taste what is on our plate but how we *experience* food, after so many years of inculcated social norms, inevitably comes with a hefty dose of artistic egoism. The potential is a rare moment of artistic or culinary brilliance— perhaps even both. At the very least, what evolves during a CR8 dinner is uniquely entertaining.

Cortez's self-described "dining experimentals" at first appear to be little more than part of the burgeoning pop-up restaurant trend or yet another

underground restaurant (meals created in unlicensed spaces, often by amateur cooks). In years past, he has participated in both styles of impromptu dining in L.A. and abroad. And CR8 is certainly roving—the chef prefers to host his prix-fixe tastings at galleries, but if those are unavailable, a rec center or private home will suffice.

Yet on this night, there are hints throughout that something more significant is at play. Among them is the moment Cortez pours steaming shiitake consommé into what looks like the vessel of a wineglass attached to a stainless-steel spoon handle. When the servers set these whimsical utensils at each place setting (resting on its side), the diners let out gasps.

What follows is a series of changing “experiences,” as Cortez would call them. Guests’ elation turns into an analysis of the logical contradiction of a utensil that is neither a wineglass nor a spoon but rather more of a bowl. But then confusion sets in: How does one eat from a wineglass spoon? (As Cortez tells them, you pick it up by the cutlery handle like a spoon, then tilt the glass upright to drink from it like a glass.) The diners swirl the contents to take in the aromas, before imbibing that first sip of pure mushroom essence. The soup could stand alone, but it is in fact a sensory segue to the featured dish, a buttery risotto studded with crushed coffee beans that Cortez presents with a brushstroke of Syrah sauce painted on each plate’s rim.

“I want to create a dining experience that doesn’t just have that art element but actually *becomes* the art,” says Cortez of the changing emotions, thoughts and textural sensations derived from even a few sips of the shiitake consommé and bites of the silky yet crunchy risotto.

The chef credits such artists as Andreas Fabian, the London-based designer behind the wineglass spoon, for getting him to this place of aesthetic and sensory creation: “Designers like Andreas go down to the absolute core of an object before they [create] something. As chefs, we are taught to go to the farmers’ market, select beautiful produce and create a dish around what we find. What if, instead, we started by going to the very core of the idea of *dining*?”

It is a question best answered by exploring Cortez’s own career path. “I

was your pretty ordinary private chef,” says the El Paso, Texas, native, who has always been more comfortable in motorcycle boots than the stereotypical cowboy staple. After graduating from culinary school, Cortez spent the last half of the 1990s in Seattle as chef for Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen, as well as several years of what he calls “standard” multicourse, white-truffle dinners in L.A. for celebrity clients (Eddie Murphy and Antonio Banderas and Melanie Griffith among them). For the past four years, he has been working privately, alternating between the Santa Barbara area and Berlin, while perfecting his CR8 faux “noodle” technique (foie gras cooked sous vide, then given a soft noodle-like texture using hydrocolloids and other now standard molecular-gastronomy techniques).

It was during those early years that a seed was planted. While working for Allen, pastry chef Albert Adrià published *Los Postres de El Bulli*, an exploration of the cutting-edge techniques he and his brother, Ferran, had so famously developed at their restaurant in Spain. The now ubiquitous El Bulli principle of pushing the limits of food science—converting liquids into powders, using savories as the base for sweets, playing off varying textures on the plate—is very much a part of the CR8 cooking style.

But for Cortez, there was something about El Bulli’s approach to pastry that ventured beyond the oft-discussed chemical focus of molecular gastronomy. “Seeing what Albert Adrià was doing with pastry really changed my direction to the art side of things in my cooking,” he says.

It wasn’t until 2009, when Cortez began traveling to Berlin and London between private-chef commitments, that he first collaborated with other artists pushing the envelope of their work. Lacking the necessary visa to work in a restaurant abroad, Cortez turned to hosting pop-up dinners and private events with designers.

During the London Design Festival, he created a series of desserts using several designers’ works to characterize contrasting emotions for a series of tastings at Somerset House and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Each guest was instructed to choose one “emotion” for a dish, and then that

would be followed by its contrasting emotion.

Fabian's wineglass spoon was used for Cortez's Love Fragments (Amedei white-chocolate cream, crumbled marscarpone, lychee gel and rose petal with Golden Xuan tea mousse), while Frozen Despair (yogurt panna cotta, icy coconut fragments and frozen blueberry champagne puree) was served on a "plate" of ice.

"Seeing how open the European diner is to creativity gave me the confidence to change how I work," Cortez says.

Unarguably, the meal delivered the desired effect. Hans Stofer, who heads the metalwork department at London's Royal College of Art and attended a Cortez event at the V&A Museum, says the experience was "like entering Roberto's culinary universe... like walking on clouds."

When he returned to Southern California, Cortez knew Santa Barbara was not the place to showcase his contradictory culinary concepts. So he settled in L.A., the city he still considers home but had left years earlier with mixed emotions. "L.A. used to be a city of picky diners who tell you what they won't eat as soon as they sit down," he says. "And yet the city has always been a place that embraces creativity, whatever is new and different in the entertainment industry. The food scene is finally catching up."

Though the chef has hosted only a handful of CR8 dinners over the past year, all have sold out weeks in advance. Earlier this year, he was asked to create Lady Gaga's birthday desserts: a coconut mousse-passion fruit cream faux egg, Lavender Lust chocolate-mousse cookies, a beverage dubbed Blood Suck and a cappuccino crème brûlée raspberry mousse Rebirth cake.

In keeping with Cortez's likening of the L.A. food scene to showbiz, he now has an agent, having been signed by David Schiff, now a principal at his own eponymous company, after a dinner last year. "That someone in Hollywood understands what I do means this idea of experiencing food differently must be working," says Cortez, still somewhat puzzled by the idea that he has representation.

Even at his most restaurant-averse moments, Cortez admits CR8 cannot exist as a wandering dinner club forever. The logistics of always cooking in a temporary kitchen and borrowed dining space limits how far he can take his concepts. He talks of opening his own gallery space, complete with a professional kitchen to cook and assemble each multicomponent course—such as the Santa Fe Clash (prawn cakes with poblano veloute, puffed red and black quinoa, “powdered” feta and avocado gel). He sees it as a haven where he would always find new artists to inspire experiences that are as olfactory as they are gustatory, as tactile as they are visual.

For now, after years of working in a business that aims solely to please the customer, Cortez is reveling in the satisfaction that, like the designers he admires, the chef has finally learned how to create something for himself. “The most important question for me when I cook is Why?” says Cortez. “And my answer to that will always be changing.”

For information on CR8 dinners, visit robertocortez.com.

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