



# Jose SALAZAR

is BLOWING UP

A rare peak inside  
one of Cincinnati's  
best restaurants

## JOSE SALAZAR IS FOLLOWING

the wings of a fruit fly with his narrowing eyes. The little creature takes a nosedive down to the linen tablecloth, then darts up past his face. The incident has him distracted.

Here, sitting at a table in The Palace dining room, morning light streaming through the window, Salazar is displaying the temperament of a born perfectionist. He swats at the tiny bug, almost apologizing for its existence.

Undoubtedly, this mind set is why he's thrived working in some of the country's most demanding restaurant kitchens—including Jean George and Thomas Keller's legendary Per Se in New York. It also explains why he's earned national spotlight, most recently as *Food and Wine's* "People's Best New Chef: Great Lakes," a title he won by way of very popular vote.

That he was recruited here, plucked from Manhattan by management at the Cincinnati Hotel, says a lot. Not just about the hotel's commitment to luxury dining, but about Cincinnati as an emerging food destination. Nestled just around the corner from Jean Robert's Table, only blocks from Orchids at Palm Court, diners are getting a message from The Palace that sounds something like this: *Hey guys, Cleveland may have Michael Simon's "Lola" but we've got Salazar and that's a pretty damn good place to start.*

**For Jose Salazar,** wrestling with the heavy weight of perfection has him talking to himself, making deals.

"My New Year's resolution last year was to try and be more calm, take a deep breath," he says. "I think I'm known as kind of a hothead in the kitchen." But there's a reason for his short fuse, at least according to Salazar. "Cutting corners and going half assed is something that infuriates me. I give it my all every day and if

you're not giving your all, maybe this isn't the right job for you."

It's a curious thing to behold. Leaning back in his chair, Salazar has an easy presence, a neighborly, almost boyish charm. He's comfortable in his skin. He answers questions slowly and thoughtfully—cherry picking words and then carefully stringing them together.

"It's never a personal thing," he continues. "It's never about yelling to be mean or abusing power. It's about producing a great product for the guests."

So what really drives him crazy? "Attitude and effort say so much more than skill. In the end, I can always teach someone how to do things right but I can never teach them the desire."



## AFTER HOURS

### SPLIT PERSONALITY

*My wife would say that I'm a little bit like Jekyll and Hyde. I'm all business in the kitchen ... supremely serious. But at home, I'm like a normal guy.*

### EATING AT HOME

*When we met, she was afraid to cook for me. She thought I would criticize her. Now she uses a lot of Latin flavors. She makes a really mean rice and beans.*

### LIVING IN OAKLEY

*I got asked to do an interview and they wanted to photograph my four favorite rooms. I said, "I only have four rooms."*

### FATHERHOOD

*I only get one day off a week. Every day my son says, "Is today the day?"*

### NIGHTLIFE

*I don't go out much late at night. My friend owns Senate and Abigail Street and I'll hang with them sometimes.*


**It's seven p.m.** on Saturday night and the dining room at the Palace is packed wall-to-wall. Meanwhile, Salazar is back in the kitchen calling out orders like an air traffic controller.

"Garde manger, get ready, you're going to get an order, but that doesn't mean plate it yet," he instructs. Then he turns around, eyeing a line cook. "If you say you're going to do something, then do it right."

Salazar soaks the sweat from his forehead with his coat sleeve, which is rolled up, exposing the heavy ink on his arm. His cooks move around him quickly and purposefully, in spite of the choking heat—their faces a combination of red hot and pale white. Then, almost at once, the wait staff lines up in the window. They look like kids outside an ice cream truck—eager to carry off plates of braised venison and roasted marrow to the dining room. The pressure is on.

Salazar has completely zoned out of normal reality, turned instead into a mechanical bull. Read the ticket. Call the order. Flour the fish. Season the tripe. Garnish the bone marrow. Order after order after order.

I think back to what he told me in the dining room, just days earlier when he was sitting comfortably with one leg tucked under the other. ►►



*“ I think you should get what you pay for, which is why I’m on the line every single night trying to make people the best meal I can. ”*

"I can't see myself doing anything else. If I didn't love it, I wouldn't put in these hours. It's long, grueling labor. Most people don't realize just how physical it is. All these TV shows glamorize the kitchen and make it look like fun and games but it's a lot of hard work."

## To talk to Salazar is to get the distinct impression

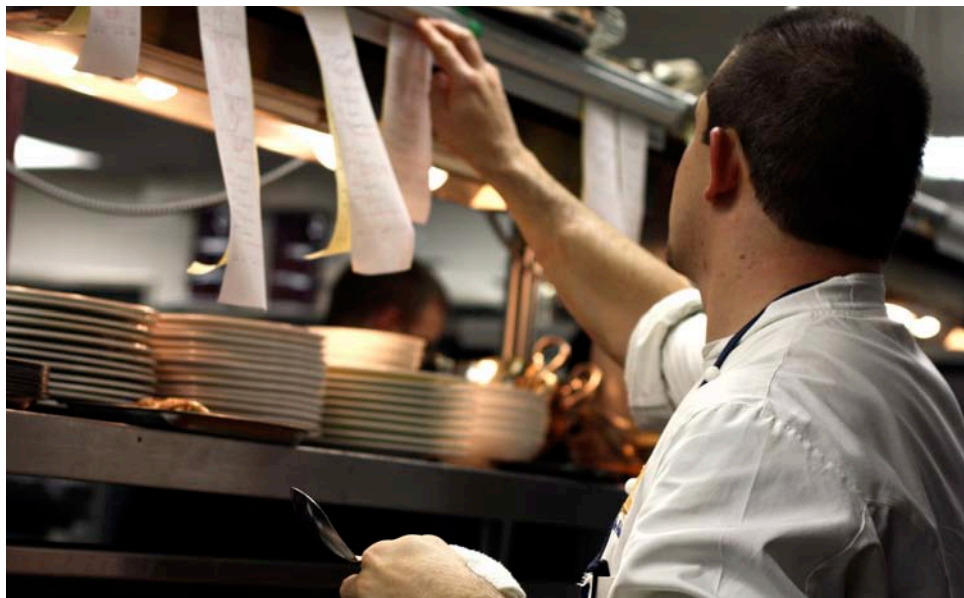
that you're either born with a hard working gene or you're not. The way he tells it, he grew up poor in South America. When he turned four, his family came to the United States, moving briefly to Pennsylvania, then settling down in New York. When his parents divorced, his dad returned to Columbia and his mother made ends meet as a social worker, giving aid to homeless people and battered women. "It was heavy stuff," he says, "but she never brought it home with her."

Coming of age in the boroughs of New York gave him the chance to explore countless varieties of cuisine in close proximity.

"The neighborhood I grew up in was so diverse," he says. "When I was 18 I went to a Tibetan restaurant and it was eye opening. I realized *you don't even have to travel when you live in New York.*"

He started out in the industry as a bartender, then quickly realized he didn't care for it. "I was more interested in what was going on back in the kitchen. I'd go home and try to cook. Some of it was pretty awful but I liked doing it. Then I decided to go to culinary school."

After the New York Restaurant School there was a succession of high profile restaurant gigs—including Town, Jean George and Blue Ribbon Sushi. Then there was the life altering experience of working for Thomas



Keller at Per Se.

"The first year I wanted to quit every day. Then it started to be more fun. I stopped cooking with blinders on. I started to see everything around me." Salazar maintains that the experience of working for Thomas Keller will always run deep.

"A great deal of what I know today is because of him," he says. "Like, there's no such thing as perfection, but that's what you strive for. And also, it's a business regarding food and service. You could walk into his kitchen and hear a pin drop. It was only the clank-clank-clank of pots and pans, the chef calling out orders and the cooks calling back."

**It was just over three years** ago when Salazar came to Cincinnati to take over at The Palace. He just had a baby with his wife and wanted to escape from the stress and demanding pace of New York City.

"When I landed in Kentucky, I thought maybe I got on the wrong plane," he laughs.

Now, back in the kitchen, he's melding American, European and Asian cuisine with hyper-focused

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simplicity.

Ingredients on the plate actually taste like themselves—none more notable than the humble carrot, cut into meticulous oblique shapes, brimming with natural sweetness. Of his style, he says, "I've been told that my food is feminine.

A lot of people think

of French-style cooking as being laden with cream but my approach is more delicate. I try not to overwhelm the food with too many bold flavors."

Then, he tries to zero in on something more specific, something that demonstrates the real meaning behind his life's work. "If someone says that this is one of the best meals they've ever eaten, that means a lot. Cooking is about making people happy."

But there's another obvious reason why he cooks and it has to do with a word that keeps coming up in conversation. He says what he's seeking is unattainable but he hunts it anyway—searches for it in those around him, digs deep to find it within himself. Here at The Palace, that word is perfection. ■

COURTNEY TSITOURIS

