

EATER INTERVIEWS BOSTON

Ken Oringer on Expansion, Boston, & Cooking for Ferran

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Chef Ken Oringer is the owner of Clio and six other distinct and acclaimed Boston restaurants; across the city, there's a Spanish spot, a sushi and sashimi bar, a taquería, an enoteca, and a steakhouse that all fall under his purview. In the following interview, Oringer discusses how it's possible to express yourself as a chef as you grow a restaurant group, how his flagship has evolved, what he loves about his home city, and what the future may hold.

Let's start by talking about how you went from having one acclaimed, personal restaurant to owning seven places.

Most of my restaurants are inspired by my travels. Clio, which is fifteen years old, reflects my French training, something near and dear to me. After a while, though, I wanted to venture out and start doing different things. I was cooking all sorts of stuff for gatherings and for my family, and then I spent lots of time in Asia, so I decided to open up Uni. I said, "You know what? It would be cool to break all the rules of a sushi bar and do the white guy from New Jersey's version."

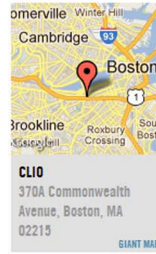
After doing lots of events in Spain — Madrid Fusión, Alimentari Barcelona, working with Ferran Adrià at the lab — I fell in love with the country and the style of eating there. And there was a void in Boston for a Barcelona-style tapas restaurant. That's how Toro came to be. I love traveling to Mexico and I've always wanted to open up a taquería, so I opened up La Verdad right outside of Fenway Park, a place inspired especially by the street food of Mexico City and Tijuana. A couple of years ago, I was spending a lot of time in Italy, and when I was younger, I worked at Il Forno, so I decided to open Coppa, a version of an Italian restaurant. It's the kind of place you'd find on a dead-end in Rome with small plates and our own prosciutto and salumi — a funky little neighborhood restaurant.

What I'm interested in is whether you can feasibly express yourself at all of them like you do at Clio, which, safe to say, is your baby.

Integrity and creativity are the words I use a lot in talking about this. These are not just genre-type restaurants. For instance, at Coppa, we may use Thai fish sauce to season cauliflower that we're putting on a pizza. Instead of using an anchovy, which might be the case in Italy, we do it this way since I think it really brings out a sense of umami. Everyone of the restaurants maintains an integrity and sense of creativity that reflects the way I like to cook and eat. Some of the food is a little less labor-intensive, but they all have an expressive spin that is mine.

What we're talking about brings to mind two Chicago chefs. We've got Paul Kahan, who recently told me that given the number of places he has in the city, he's sort of had to turn into a manager and doesn't get to cook as much. Then we have Grant Achatz, who has two extremely popular restaurants in addition to his flagship, yet can be spotted in the Alinea kitchen night after night. Which case is most like yours?

It's a combination of both. I still am at Clio every day, 90% of the time, but the other 10% I'm on the phone with my team from all the other restaurants. I pop into them on a daily basis. I'm not necessarily working the pass every day, but we're discussing different ideas for the menu and how the restaurants should run. The key is having chefs and managers that have worked with you long enough to be able to on their own develop ideas and dishes that reflect my style.



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In various interviews I've done with American chefs, the question of cooking food that isn't tied to your heritage comes up a lot. At all your places — the Mexican spot, the tapas bar, the Italian restaurant — do you go into it worrying about making it authentic or just making sure the flavors are there and putting your spin on it?

It's definitely making sure the traditional flavors are there and bringing in my vision. I'm not going to pretend to be a Spanish chef. We have the paella, the jamón, and the tortilla, but look at some places in Barcelona — Dos Palillos or even Ferran and his brother's places — they can serve very creative things and they're still considered tapas and have the feel of Spain. You can eat tuna with bean sprouts and yuzu and it's a tapa. It's about being inspired by great cooking more than it is about worrying about authenticity.

How has Clio changed? What are you focused on now there?

It's kind of a natural evolution, but I'd say that I'm trying to keep our food as gimmick-free as possible while focusing on unique flavor combinations. It's focused, interesting, the kind of cooking that is recognizable but has the "I can't quite figure out what this is" effect on people. It might be a stew of tripe with galanga and pickled pineapple and kaffir lime or a sea urchin dish with parsnip milk and crunchy shallots and a tiny bit of anchovy and jalapeño. I just like to build complexity while having the dish seem simplistic.

You describe your food as gimmick-free, yet you are often described as one of those molecular, modernist, or even gimmicky chefs. Do you care?

I don't care. You know, I just try to motivate myself to do something different and learn new things constantly. My food may have been a bit more molecular a while back, especially after working with Ferran, but all I care about is flavor. I'll do anything I need to do to a dish to make sure the flavor is there. I don't think it's gimmicky to create something that can be better than the sum of its parts if you're doing something novel and interesting. Say someone is making a mignardise of olive oil pâte de fruit with candied Buddha's hand and a bit of sea salt and chocolate, I don't think that's gimmicky because you are using gellan gum or something like that. It's just making something interesting and good.

Was the transition to becoming less "molecular" intentional or natural?

A combination of both. I didn't want to be the type of restaurant like a Moto, because I was trained to cook food by French chefs, and it's a tradition that I love. But I also wanted it to be a restaurant with a sense of freedom. It's evolved. Some things will have a molecular touch and some won't — it just depends on whether I think it needs it.

Ferran Adrià recently ate at Clio. Were you working that night?

Of course. You kidding me? [laughs]. If I wasn't working, I'd have made sure to go in and be there.

How was that experience?

He's been in a couple of times, and I know how hard it is to travel and be busy. You don't want to be eating for five hours. So we just cooked him things based on ingredients that he either doesn't see very often or are truly American. We gave him unique fish from Japan that they don't get a lot of in Spain. We did some geoduck, a comforting tripe dish done our way, with curry as opposed to the Spanish way. We did a venison with rose hips, since they don't have rose hips in Spain. We bombarded him a bit with white truffle, but for the most part, it was about keeping things light and interesting.

Let's talk about Boston. How would you assess it as a dining destination?

It was a conservative city for so long in terms of dining, and it's nice to see it come out of its shell. People are opening funky little bistros and neighborhood restaurants and serving sweetbreads and beef tongue. The community is great at supporting these people. In terms of the forward-thinking at places like MIT and Harvard, a lot of people are coming here and spending several days here and seeing what we can do — people like Joan Roca, Grant Achatz, Ferran.

What do you specifically like about it?

It's a small city, and I think that the camaraderie is unique. It doesn't feel like there is competition. In some cities, like New York, it can be cutthroat. Here it feels like everyone is supporting everyone else and praising. There is a great sense of community.

And finally, what plans do you have coming up?

I have a couple of ideas, but nothing's signed yet. With the renovation of Clio and Uni, which we start in a week, I'm just looking for some spots. But I would love to do a lot of different concepts.

What are some of them?

Any number of things, from Asian street food to a ramen shop to a little bistro to whatever. I'd love to open another Toro or even a patisserie.

And it won't get out of control?

I'm not saying I'm going to open these up. If I have the right partners and the right space, you never know.