



Ken Oringer

**Chef/owner
Clio, Uni Sashimi Bar,
Toro, KO Prime, La Verdad
Boston**



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By Clare Leschin-Hoar

Unlike New York, Boston is not overrun by hotshot celebrity chefs, so the handful the city does have are able to shine a little brighter. Chef Ken Oringer, who's been decorated with James Beard awards, nods from The New York Times to *Gourmet* magazine, and who has garnered multiple "best chef" and "best restaurant" awards over the last decade, keeps Boston on the culinary map with his creative use of flavors and unusual ingredients.

His five-restaurant empire means you can munch on the best fish taco this side of San Diego before crossing the street to catch the Red Sox at Fenway Park, or spend a night near a warm fire and open kitchen nibbling tapas alongside the city's hip urbanites in the South End.

Oringer flourishes under pressure. He's walked away a winner on "Iron Chef America," and more recently he prepared a 30-course dinner for visiting Chef Ferran Adrià of El Bulli on Spain's Costa Brava. Adrià is often singled out as the father of molecular gastronomy and considered by many to be the best chef in the world.

But something new has snagged Oringer's heart. In late January, he became first-time dad to Verveine Marianne Oringer, adding one more tiny mouth to feed.

LESCHIN-HOAR: Your five restaurants have such distinct personalities. Is one most representative of you?

ORINGER: At 12 years old, Clio is still my baby. This was my first expression of creativity, and all the hard work here allowed me to open the other restaurants. Each of the restaurants represent food that I love and cook for my friends. The concepts are different because I don't want to be typecast as someone who only cooks fancy food, and I don't want to compete with myself.

How would you classify Boston as a food city?

It's come a long way from 10 to 15 years ago. It's one of the top

food cities in the country right now. Boston is a very young and very diverse city. There are people from all over the world who live here, which means you can find a huge variety of everything from Sri Lankan food to Japanese ramen noodles, and from oyster bars to Neapolitan restaurants.

What are a few dishes that you'd nudge a first-time visitor to try?

At Uni [see Dining Guide, p.30] they should try anything from the Tsujiki fish market in Tokyo. We get deliveries three times a week, and have some very exotic fish. At Clio, it would be the cassoulet of sea urchin and lobster with parsnips, crispy shallots and candied lemon. And at Toro, I'd

say definitely the paella Valencia. It's paella with shellfish, chorizo and chicken made to order. It's the best paella outside of Spain, and I'd even compare it to any [dish] inside of Spain.

How was the experience cooking for Adrià?

It was a thrill. I've known him for a long time, and worked with him at El Bulli about 11 years ago, so it was exciting to have him come to Clio, this little restaurant in Boston.

The dinner was for 12 people. We had our A team in the kitchen and we just wanted to show our style and show him some ingredients he doesn't see every day. Things like akayagara, a fish from Japan with a beak like a duck; to live abalone to pico rocco, a barnacle from Chile. He really seemed to love it, and ate with gusto, raving about the flavor combinations.

What's on the horizon for you in 2009?

A cookbook is slowly in the works. And as for new restaurants, with the current economy, I'm a little conservative right now, but deals are good and there are some concepts I'd like to pursue.

What do your customers look for in terms of fish? Is it difficult steering them away from the big three: tuna, shrimp and salmon?

We always have trouble steering them away. Customers are more savvy than they used to be, but it's not easy. As a chef, you have to make it taste that good, and you almost have to guarantee that if they don't like it you'll buy it. It's tough, but it gives us the opportunity to be more creative, and the costs are better for those lesser-known fish.

What are some challenges you face sourcing and serving fish today that you weren't dealing with three to five years ago?

There's nowhere near as much fish as we saw five years ago. The world is so small now. We try to be as sustainable as possible, but admittedly, sometimes we like to have something exotic from South America or Japan. But, chefs have the responsibility and challenge to sell what's in our backyards. We have some great

fish in our waters here — whiting, hake, skate, lemon sole, pollock, but it's a challenge selling those [species].

What's purposely not on your menu?
Chilean sea bass.

Certified sustainable sushi restaurants are new on the West Coast. How long until sustainable sushi comes to Boston?

I don't think it will be too long; [sustainability] is catching on. I just did some consulting for a restaurant in Miami called Area 31. They're featuring seafood caught in the U.N. designated marine fishing area off the coast of Florida.

Clare Leschin-Hoar is a freelance food writer in Massachusetts

Toro

A South End favorite



Want to know where the city's top chefs eat on their rare nights off? Frequently, you'll find them at Toro. A roaring fireplace, open kitchen and outstanding bartending mean this spot is nearly always jammed. The authentic Spanish-style tapas here are mouthwatering. Of course you'll find traditional Boquerones (white anchovies) and Gambas al Ajillo (garlic shrimp) on the menu, but there's plenty to make even the most seasoned foodie swoon. While the "no reservations" policy here very likely means a wait for your table, that's easily soothed by any number of the stellar hand-crafted cocktails.

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