

FEAST

THE BAY AREA, CONSUMED

Silicon Bayou

THIRTEEN YEARS AFTER HE OPENED MANRESA, DAVID KINCH BRINGS BONS TEMPS TO THE LAND OF BIG DATA.

By **Rebecca Flint Marx**

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALANNA HALE

The Bywater's gumbo.

It's

a beautiful afternoon in late October, and David Kinch is feeling like crap. “I don’t do colds well,” he says, settling his six-foot frame into a plush leather banquette in Manresa’s empty dining room. “I’m a big baby.” Only a few days earlier he’d been making his way through Europe, cooking at the Milan Expo’s American Pavilion—“We had John Kerry at dinner”—and speaking at an Irish food symposium in Galway.

He was on the flight home when the news broke that Manresa, his pioneering, eternally innovative Los Gatos restaurant, had racked up its third Michelin star, becoming one of a small handful of Bay Area restaurants to do so. The chef’s comments on the honor are typically Kinchian: modest and muted. “I’m incredibly happy for the staff, because it really is all about them,” he says. “But personally it hasn’t sunk in. I’ve been walking around in a daze.”

The combination of NyQuil and a third Michelin star could make anyone light-headed, but then, so could much of what’s happened in Kinch’s life over the past year and a half. In July 2014, a two-alarm fire destroyed part of Manresa, shuttering it for six months while it was rebuilt and remodeled. This past February, Kinch opened Manresa Bread, a bakery down the street from his restaurant. In November, he was one of the subjects of the new season of PBS’s *The Mind of a Chef*, starring in an eight-episode arc that thoroughly explored the spotlight-averse chef’s life and work. And this month, with his business partner, Andrew Burnham, he opens the Bywater, his first new restaurant in 13 years. Located not far from Manresa, it will be a decidedly casual place, its food and ambience dedicated to New Orleans, the city where Kinch spent a portion of his teen years and got his first restaurant gig, working the garde manger station in the kitchen of the legendary Commander’s Palace.

Although he hasn’t lived or worked in New Orleans in decades, the city still holds significant real estate in Kinch’s heart. “It was where I fell in love with the industry, fell in love with cooking, with the cult of restaurants,” he says. “I’d always try to think about what I wanted to do and end up coming back to my early days in New Orleans.” The Bywater will be a place to drink, he adds. David Morgan—who cooked in New Orleans at John Besh’s August—will be in the kitchen making po’ boys and fried green tomatoes and gumbo. Brunch will come with beignets, and the bar with a frozen-daiquiri machine. During Mardi Gras, there may be beads.



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But right now, Kinch isn’t particularly festive, the matching diamond studs in his ears notwithstanding. If anything, he’s kind of cranky. How he came to open the Bywater, he says, is “not a really interesting story”—he just wanted “a place I’d want to go and eat myself.” Should you be tempted to assume that Kinch’s decision to open a second restaurant was somehow connected to damage wrought upon his first, he will flatly disabuse you of such a poetic notion. The idea for the Bywater predated the fire; he just felt ready to do something new. Asked how he knew he was ready, he responds with a grain of impatience: “I have no idea. You just feel it.”

Kinch is likewise uninterested in talking about public expectations of New Orleans food, an underrepresented cuisine in these parts. “This project doesn’t have anything to do with showing how it’s supposed to be done,” he says. “It’s merely my interpretation of a place I love and have tremendous respect for. If people don’t like it and say it’s not real New Orleans, I’m perfectly OK with that, too.”

Long one of the Bay Area’s freest culinary thinkers, Kinch no longer concerns himself with other people’s opinion of his work or, really, with anything he can’t control, including how he’s portrayed in the press. “I can’t control what you write,” he says. “I mean, I can answer your questions, and it could be good or bad, but it’s something I can’t control. I’m not going to lose sleep over it. No offense.”

Trends, hanging out with chefs, opening a restaurant in San Francisco (which he “wouldn’t touch with a 10-foot pole”)—these things likewise don’t merit his attention. What Kinch does care about are his restaurant and his industry. He likes to surf and travel and read; he’s working his way through Haruki Murakami’s fiction and enjoying “that Japanese book on tidying up.” And he’s happy to be in Los Gatos. At Manresa, he says, “I’m not trying to feed the masses. I’m doing my thing. It’s our own little world. And if I approach it that way, then there’s not much that can stop us.” ■