



ODYSSEY

MAN VERSUS CHEF

An ambitious restaurant offers an all-you-can-eat meal. A competitive eater eats all he can. And the winner is? **BY MICHAEL NAGRANT**

SUGARTOAD, THE WELL-REGARDED RESTAURANT AT the Arista Hotel in Naperville, offers an all-you-can-eat prix fixe dinner for \$100 called the Toadal Experience, a crass gimmick that rubs me all kinds of wrong ways. I believe in letting a chef cook what he wants, but gourmet dining shouldn't be about stuffing yourself to death. To punish SugarToad for its hubris, I enlisted Patrick "Deep Dish" Bertoletti, the third-ranked competitive eater in America, to go undercover and find out if the restaurant really means what it says.

Bertoletti, a Palos Heights native who once threw down 263 jalapeños in 15 minutes and looks like the lost child of Johnny Rotten and Lady Gaga, loves a challenge. He has matted down his circular-blade Mohawk and donned nice slacks and a black dress shirt for the occasion. Our waitress tells us that most people do 7 courses, and a few maniacs recently downed 13; Deep Dish is shooting for 30 but doesn't want to piss off the staff. Geoff Rhyne, SugarToad's chef, stops by—blue bandanna covering his shaved head—and asks if we have any allergies or preferences. *We'll eat anything*, we say. He smirks and returns to the kitchen. Poor sap has no idea.

Though the regular menu features little offal, Rhyne somehow has more body parts in his kitchen than the

Regional Organ Bank of Illinois. He throws out corned beef heart (better than Manny's brisket), lamb liver (tastes like a peppery New York strip), pig "face" bacon, and a deep-fried pig's brain (eats like sweet custard). Rhyne, it turns out, is not a carnival barker hawking huge portions, but an offal magician. These are some of the best organ preps I've had anywhere.

Bertoletti likes them, too, and easily reaches the tenth course, slurping four liters of water along the way. The waitress brings another carafe and asks how we're doing, and Bertoletti mumbles something about maybe hitting McDonald's afterward. She bugs out her eyes, and after that, Rhyne fires back with near-entrée portions, including a bowl of puck-sized scallops with steroidal trumpet royale mushrooms. But by the next course, Bertoletti begins to slump and our waitress is sure he's done. Then he stands, stretches, cracks his neck, and looks refreshed. The waitress runs to the kitchen and tells Rhyne, "I think this dude is like that Kobayashi guy."

He is exactly like Takeru Kobayashi, the Michael Jordan of competitive eaters, and he powers through five more courses—plus a whole head of black garlic the chef brought out as a garnish. We hear later that at this point Rhyne is down to "a little lamb and a few 32-ounce porterhouses left over from Valentine's Day." His line cooks are itching to send out a steak to shut Bertoletti down, but Rhyne, bless him, wants to honor the deal with dignity. He marches over and tells us he's got just a few courses left. Bertoletti mows through four cheeses and a trio of chocolate desserts. Including the house-made brioche, he has had 18 courses—almost eight pounds of food—and eight liters of water. The waitress presents printed souvenir menus, trying to shove us out nicely, but Bertoletti requests one more dessert. "I'll ask," she says, grabbing his menu and returning shortly with a jiggly bread pudding. Child's play. Minutes later, Bertoletti idly sops up the remaining sauce with his finger.

By 11:30 p.m. (the restaurant usually closes before 11), Bertoletti stops out of mercy, and Rhyne signs Bertoletti's menu: "Much respect. Impressive." We feel the same toward Rhyne, who emerges, sans bandanna, looking beat, to ask if we're all right. I tell him Bertoletti is a ringer. Rhyne laughs, then a serious look creeps in. "If you had asked for another course," he says, "I was going to come out and say, 'You win.'"

Later, I ask Rhyne why he offers the meal as an all-you-can-eat affair. "It's about [offering the guest] freedom and no limitations," he says. "I hate confinement—it's why I dislike office work. And who else offers this?"

No one that I know of right now, but as soon as I hear about it, Patrick Bertoletti will be there. And he will be hungry. ■