

LIVING LEGEND

CLOSE SHAVE BUT STILL NO BEARD FOR
PIONEERING NORTHERN CHEF LENNY RUSSO.

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY 2ND TRUTH

The first thing I ever saw of chef Thomas Keller was his butt. Though he'd already achieved legend status by the time I walked into his French Laundry kitchen in 2004, he was on his hands and knees scrubbing out a refrigerator.

No matter how big Food Network gets or how many seasons of *Top Chef* air, being a chef — even the most venerable, as Keller is — is a tough gig. You don't have to feel sorry for him. He does BMW commercials and has cookware and dishware lines. He's going to be OK. Then again, despite that success, he was 48 when I saw him working so hard. His profession of choice (and, to be fair, his leadership style) means he likely will be crawling on the floor to show his team how a good cook sacrifices until the very end.

Keller is one of the lucky ones. Most chefs don't get golden parachutes. Lenny Russo of St. Paul's recently shuttered Heartland isn't Thomas Keller, but he too is one of the lucky ones. Even so, after 40 years of cooking, the 58-year-old's knees sometimes would lock up as he ascended the steps of his acclaimed eatery during service. He has shooting pain in his shoulder, a perpetual hamstring strain and occasional high blood pressure.

Russo doesn't mind much. As he once wrote, "So why do we as chefs do it? In the words of Kinky Friedman, the only thing I can say is, 'You've got to find something you love, and let it kill you.'" In recent days, this has been the big question: Would Russo live by that motto or find a softer landing?





It seemed being killed or at least a little maimed by his profession would be the way Russo would go out. After all, brashness is his hallmark. He was born in a Hoboken, New Jersey, ghetto and raised above a deli in a lower middle-class Italian family hailing from Puglia. And though he hasn't lived on the East Coast for 40-plus years, he still has a bit of the joisy accent (and the attitude to match).

His wife and business partner, Mega Hoehn, admits she didn't really like him at first. "I was working at the Loring Café in 1994; it was this hip, bohemian place," she explains. "The kitchen was a mess. They brought Lenny in to clean things up, and he had all these rules. He was the only one who could talk to the cooks. One night, I went back and started talking to one of his guys on the line. Lenny put his hand in my face and started yelling at me about how he's the only one who talks to his cooks. He was finishing all the plates at the time with these fancy edible flowers, oils and crap. I laid into him. I was like, 'Look, garnish boy, I don't need to deal with this.' A few days later, my mom called and was like, 'How's the new chef?' I said, 'I don't know. I might have to quit my job. He's kind of a douche.'"

But Russo brought much-needed stability to the kitchen. He mentored such Twin Cities culinary talents as Steven Brown (St. Genevieve, Tilia) and Doug Flicker (Esker Grove, Piccolo). He also looked out for Hoehn.

"I'd have to break down the bar and take these crates of wine bottles out to the dumpster," she explains. "There was a guy who sat by the dumpster. He'd sling wisdom and call you Johnny Cash if you were wearing all black. Rather than carrying my books in high school, Lenny would help me carry the wine bottles to the alley to make sure nothing happened to me."



"Lenny doesn't suffer fools gladly, but that's because he walks the walk," notes Lynne Rossetto Kasper of public radio's *The Splendid Table*. "I've been doing this radio show for 20 years, and in the first five to seven years, I always had to explain what local and sustainable meant on air. Though most people didn't know what that meant, Lenny knew it was important and has been cooking like that forever."

Sure, Russo is confident and animated, but at his core, he's hardworking and humble. Most chefs are self-promoters, but his success has come because he is mostly a promoter. There is very little self.

Because of that, beyond chefs and food writers, outside Minnesota his name doesn't carry the cachet of a Daniel Boulud or an Alice Waters. "A few years back, I went down to Miami to run one of Allen Susser's kitchens as a favor," Russo says. "I called a purveyor at three in the afternoon and told him our reservation book was



filled and we had to double the halibut order. I asked him if he could send a delivery over. The guy said that all the delivery drivers had left for the day. I said, 'Well you're there — can you do it?' He laughed at me. He didn't care who I was. Here, if I made that call, they'd bring that order down no problem. I'm no Mario Batali."



Russo has been nominated a finalist six times for the James Beard Awards, the so-called Oscars of the food world. He's been a semifinalist three other times. The joke is he's the Susan Lucci of the awards (the *All My Children* star won her first Emmy after 19 nominations). "I prefer the Leo DiCaprio of the Beard awards," he laughs.

Traditionally held in New York City, the awards ceremony has been moved to Chicago in recent years. "I told [James Beard Foundation executive vice president] Mitchell Davis, 'Thanks for moving the awards — now I don't have to go so far to lose,'" says Russo.

Every October, there's an open call for nominations, explains Phil Vettel, *Chicago Tribune* food critic and chair of the James Beard Restaurant and Chef Awards Committee. "We do that so someone who might get overlooked by the committee gets a chance to be in the conversation," he adds. "After that, the awards committee

(including regional chairs) gets together and creates a list of 20 semifinalists per region. I often bring 25 or 30 names, some of which I might not vote for myself, so we can have a spirited debate."

Once the semifinalists are released, a select group of chefs, food writers and other industry insiders as well as anyone who's ever won a James Beard award — some 200 people, all told — vote. The top five in each category are named finalists. A second vote determines the winner. Arguably, if a region or a restaurant group has a lot of former Beard winners, like say New York City's Union Square Hospitality Group run by Danny Meyer, it might have a numbers advantage.

During the process, many chefs hire agencies or turn on their PR machines, much like the Weinstein brothers and other studio execs do during red-carpet season. Vettel explains that promotions don't impact him much. "I've been on this committee for nine years, and I've been contacted maybe three times with the for-your-consideration stuff," he notes. "That's one of the reasons we don't make our panelist list public."

"I've taken a lot of flack from people who support me because I don't promote my candidacy," says Russo. "I just find it a little unbecoming. If my peers want to give me an award, they will. If they don't, it's not going to define me. I'm incredibly honored to be in the conversation. I'd very much like to win. But I'm not going to lobby for it. It wouldn't feel real."





Russo's roots are to blame for his humbleness. "When you grow up poor, nothing is given to you," he notes. "Privileged people don't have to wait for anything, and they don't appreciate what they have." His dad was a sheet-metal mechanic, making 100 bucks a week. Russo describes his childhood as "barely lower middle-class."

He got a paper route when he was 12 years old. He supervised park district basketball games and worked with children with developmental disabilities when he was 16. "By the time I was 18, I was making four bucks an hour, which was more than my dad was making," he says.

His work with those with development disabilities led Russo to study clinical psychology at New College of Florida. He paid his way working as an apprentice draftsman. Coincidentally, the architectural firm where he worked designed fast-food joints. "I'm pretty sure I'm guilty of a war crime, because I worked on the first-ever drive-through for a Burger King in 1975," he notes.

After that, Russo started his restaurant career. "It was 1976," he recalls. "I was out of cash, so I took a Greyhound to Miami, found a bicycle in my parents' garage and rode four miles to a French restaurant [Quintessence]. I was a hippie kid with long hair. I figured a restaurant was the only place that would hire me. I talked to the owner, this crazy Greek guy from Staten Island, and he said, 'What would you do?' Anything, I said. He threw an apron at me, and I started washing dishes that same day. About three weeks later, the *garde-manger* chef got in a fight with the owner in the parking lot. Punches were thrown. The owner came back into the kitchen and said, 'Can anyone do this asshole's job?' I volunteered."

Russo balanced dual jobs as a chef and a family therapist for almost 10 years before he chose cooking as his primary profession. "I was working at an adolescent treatment center in the 1980s," he explains. "I lost my enthusiasm. It's really hard not to leave work at work, especially when you're working with children. Large corporations started taking over. At intake interviews, I'd have a kid who was acutely schizophrenic with no insurance, so we couldn't take her. Then another kid got caught smoking dope and the parents wanted us to babysit her and they had great insurance, so we took her. I became a gadfly. I was up for a promotion and the company put me on probation, so I quit."

His humbleness can also be attributed to the reality checks he received along the way. "After I quit, I called my mom and told her what I was doing," he remembers. "She said, 'That's not a real job. What's your plan?' I told her I was going to work for a guy named Paul Palermo who opened Spago with Wolfgang Puck. She was like, 'Wolfgang who?' I said, 'He's Austrian, mom. You don't know him.' She thought I was crazy."



Beard best chefs must have "set new or consistent standards of excellence in their respective regions." By any measure, Russo has certainly set a standard for Minnesota when it comes to local, sustainable fare. Today, when so many restaurants hawk farm-to-table offerings, he remains one of the most steadfast in the region.

Yes, there were pioneers of cold-climate sourcing in the North who came before him, such as Minneapolis restaurateur Brenda

Langton and Odessa Piper of L'Etoile in Madison, Wisconsin. But since the mid-nineties, Russo has consistently been one of the most provincial chefs.

Many chefs cook locally and sustainably for 75 to 100 people, but Heartland could accommodate 400. The restaurant's most recent incarnation was situated in a 114-year-old structure designed by architect J. Walter Stevens in St. Paul's Lowertown. Lined with Minnesota red pine, the towering dining room was once home to a textile manufacturer as well as a fur and furniture warehouse.

The eatery originally opened in 2002 as an intimate 50-seater in the city's Macalester-Groveland neighborhood. It was supposed to be a much bigger affair. Friends Bob and Sandra Cornelius had pledged \$2 million toward the endeavor. But when Russo went to sign the lease for a spot in the Minnesota World Trade Center (now Wells Fargo Place), the landlord asked for a guarantee beyond that figure. Russo put the contract on hold, explaining he was getting married in Tuscany and would think about it.

Russo and Hoehn were wed on September 10, 2001. The Corneliuses were celebrating with them in Italy when the attacks of 9/11 occurred. Their money was tied up in the plummeting stock market. "I now had \$300,000 left to build the restaurant," notes Russo. "So I found this small spot in St. Paul, walked in, gave the owner \$100,000 and said, Get out."



Led by Dan Stepaniak, the charcuterie program at Heartland was world-class. The team would butcher whole animals and had two curing rooms filled with Red Wattle hog prosciuttos and salt- and sugar-cured duck eggs, a poultry analog to bottarga. There were boxes of turkey feet ready to be transformed into thick, collagenous stock and turkey cracklings ready to be candied and used as a garnish.

In 2007, health inspectors came in and tried to throw out a huge batch of duck confit. There was nothing wrong with it save for it didn't meet state standards, which required prepared foods be tossed after one week. "That was front-page news," Russo remembers. "The mayor was emailing me, saying he'd come in and eat everything I had. People descended on the place and ate it all that night."

In response to the incident, Russo helped write Minnesota's standards for curing duck confit. He created a Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point plan, a system developed by NASA governing food handling. And he helped develop the state's mycology curriculum to certify local foragers.

In the winter, when most Northern cooks employ West Coast produce, the Heartland team would garnish plates with pickled ramps and gild desserts with currant jams they had cured from local produce in the spring and summer.

"I've worked with a lot of chefs, and most of the time, it's just lip service," explains Ann Houghton of Deer Creek Farm. "They buy a little local, but their cooler is filled with California-grown produce. Lenny is committed to Minnesota."



Russo also knows you get what you pay for. He has long been a staunch advocate for paying a living wage to his staff and

indulging in fair trade with his vendors. The federal minimum wage has long been \$7.25, yet his kitchen workers were making \$10 to \$18 an hour. He scheduled his cooks four days a week, giving them three-day weekends.

"Lenny was an early pioneer and a strong advocate for fair trade," says Steven Read of Shepherd's Way Farms. "As a farmer, you're used to being paid whatever someone will give you. The cost of the product is usually independent of the expense. Chefs see commodity prices, and that's what they want to pay. But if national lamb prices go up a dollar, that has nothing to do with what it costs me to produce a pasture-raised lamb. Lenny was one of the first guys to ask me, 'What does it cost you to make this? That's what I want to pay.'"

Not only would Russo pay fair-trade prices, but he didn't dictate terms for his orders. "Some chefs tell you they want a tomato that's the same size every time or that they want it in April," notes Herby Radmann of Bullfrog Fish Farm. "Lenny would create around you. He didn't ask for specifics. He took what was good and did something artistic with it."

Read agrees: "We were one of the first people in the United States to make a traditional ricotta from sheep's milk whey," he says. "It takes 800 pounds of whey to produce 20 pounds of ricotta. But it's special stuff. Now, you can get factory ricotta, which is made much more efficiently, for a few dollars a pound. Our stuff was \$10 a pound. Lenny bought everything we could produce."

Russo demurs at the idea that these practices are special. "Fourteen years ago, when we opened Heartland, we wanted people to adopt our principles," he explains. "And they did. We're no longer in front of the curve. We are the curve. My wife was a punk rocker. She used to have a rubber dress. She was one of the few. Now all kinds of people wear rubber dresses."



Although Russo's techniques are generally old-school, he's no fuddy-duddy. Case in point: He uses transglutaminase, essentially meat glue, as a tool of kitchen efficiency to bond rabbit loins and pancetta.

Like the late Charlie Trotter, he changed his menu every single day. Most restaurants alter their offerings by an ingredient or two, or they evolve every few weeks or once a season. At Heartland, the cooks met every day two hours before service to create a menu based on what was in their larder or was coming in from the farms.

For a guy who cooks with the soul of an Italian grandma, Russo is also pretty hip. In the summer, he sports a seersucker chef jacket trimmed with pearlescent buttons. He favors thick hipster glasses and rocks a goatee. He showed up to the 2016 Beard awards ceremony in a natty Dolce & Gabbana suit.

He's known for being quite fastidious — and a little foul-mouthed. When I observed him before a service last year, he noticed some liquor bottles weren't in their usual spots and busted his bartender's chops. Walking through the kitchen a few minutes later, he watched his line cook coax a separating vinaigrette back together and said, "Is that sauce OK? Don't fuck me in the middle of service," followed by a raspy guffaw.

Russo is also friends with Senator Al Franken. "His daughter, Thomasin, is a chef," he notes. "She was here once on Labor Day weekend meeting with me. Al comes to pick her up and asks if I have any beef tongue — he loves my beef tongue. So I give him some. He reaches in his back pocket, pulls out his wallet and asks, 'How much?' I'm like, 'It's a \$2 beef tongue. He says, 'Lenny, I'm a U.S. senator. I need to pay for it.' So I take the tongue back, hand it to Thomasin and say, 'Do what you will with this. I basically laundered a beef tongue.'"

Random House once offered Russo a \$40,000 advance to write a cookbook. He turned it down because he was too busy. When he finally got around to writing *Heartland: Farm-Forward Dishes from the Great Midwest*, he did it on his terms, donating all profits to St. Paul's Urban Roots, whose mission it is to build community through food, conservation and youth development.



When I dined at Heartland last year, I was served a bowl of roasted fingerling potatoes loaded with a quivering cloud of whipped ham butter. Russo's cooks would collect the rendered drippings from their house-cured hams and churn them into a high-fat condiment, creating the best porky elixir that has ever graced my lips. It was addictive and exciting, the kind of thing that might soon find itself spiked with brown sugar and shoved into a hipster donut. If David Chang of Momofuku fame got his hands on this ham butter, I have no doubt it'd grace the cover of every national food magazine.

Russo's bone-in pork chop, meanwhile, was textbook, crosshatched with grill marks and juicy to the bone. It was perched on a nest of charred Romanesco. The plate was swooshed with a mushroom duxelles sauce.

In fact, it was a pork chop that convinced Paul Berglund of the Bachelor Farmer that he had to work for Russo. "I tasted the best pork chop I ever had in my life at Heartland," he recalls. "I was moving from America's pantry, California, to the cold Midwest. I could not believe how good the pork was. I felt Lenny and I had similar values, so I asked if I could work for him." Berglund, who had served as sous chef at Oakland's famed Oliveto, had the qualifications to run his own kitchen but instead apprenticed as Russo's bread baker.



If the respect of your peers is a qualification for a James Beard Award, Russo has that in spades. Not only does Berglund admire him, but Spoon and Stable's Gavin Kaysen also holds him in high regard. "Lenny was one of the first guys to skip the usual purveyors and go straight to the source," he notes. "He stands by his mission statement. He's one of the rare souls who doesn't change based on what other people do or what the trends say."

If influencing the next generation of chefs is a prerequisite, Russo has that box checked, too. "Lenny had a pretty big influence over the direction we took at the Bachelor Farmer, the preservation culture we pursue and the seasonality," explains Berglund. "Lenny is a human being who lives life with open arms. Yeah, he's a smart ass, but he taught me generosity of spirit, allowed me to work on something I was committed to learning and supported me getting on my own two feet when I wanted to go back to cooking. Our industry can be very transactional, but there's nothing transactional with Lenny. Locally, so many cooks stand on Lenny's shoulders. They're very broad shoulders."

Berglund beat out Russo for last year's Best Chef: Midwest award. "I'm really proud, but I also really wish he had won," he says. Russo didn't dwell on the loss. He was proud of his protégé, and he took Berglund to an after party at Rick Bayless's new Chicago restaurant, Leña Brava, where Bayless and Berglund danced until 2 a.m.

On the flip side, location might have been a strike against Russo. Unlike Berglund and Kaysen, whose restaurants are in the hot North Loop of Minneapolis, Heartland sat in St. Paul's less trendy Lowertown. But Russo was acutely aware of that. "Minneapolis gets all the voters," he notes. "I told Paul [Berglund] he had a good shot at winning because Gavin's restaurant [Spoon and Stable] is getting all the Beard voters to

come out and dine. Then they go across the street and eat at the Bachelor Farmer."

Regardless of why he hasn't closed the deal on a Beard award, Russo isn't obsessing over it. "Who's really the best chef in the Midwest anyway?" he extols. "It's probably some grandma in a Latino restaurant rolling out tortillas and cranking out the most fabulous pork dishes and mole that no one knows."



As it turned out, Russo wouldn't be nobly killed by his profession. A few months after the Beard loss and my visit to Heartland, he announced he would be closing up shop at the end of 2016. He and his business partner had received an offer on the St. Paul property, allowing him to wind down operations and give his staff a bonus.

When I first met Russo, I didn't see the long, slow goodbye happening. Neither did he. "When I announced, I was nervous people would say good riddance and that the restaurant sucked," he recalls. "But there was an outpouring of love for the restaurant and for me, which I have a hard time understanding."

But the thing I learned about Russo is that although he is a chef, running a restaurant isn't his only trick. He's represented the State Department at the World Expo in Milan. He's helped put together a dinner with immigrant Muslim chefs to promote cultural understanding through food.

He describes the need for a statewide cooperative for farmers so they can compete with big agribusiness. He outlines the path to success, and it sounds like he's the guy to do it (if only someone would fund it). He talks about helping with Minnesota's bid to host the 2023 World's Fair. Russo, it seems, has been busy making other plans.



Though Russo never won his Beard, the closing of Heartland gave him some local due and appropriate closure. Whereas most restaurants shutter with only a few days notice or, as is sometimes the case, employees show up to find a locked door and bounced paychecks, his staff had three months to find new jobs. Almost everyone stayed on board until the very end, and they left with bonuses for their service.

Loyal patrons came to say their goodbyes. "I saw some people four or five times after we announced the closing," Russo notes. "Some people came three times in December. On New Year's Eve, when we closed, people were still here at 2:30 a.m. I joked that our liquor license only went until 1, so everyone had to leave."

At 3:30 a.m. that night, he opened a bottle of Champagne with his wife at home and said, "We did it." To which she responded, "Yes, we did."

He was emotional about saying goodbye to people he'd worked with for more than a decade, but the closing in and of itself wasn't as difficult. "We precipitated this," he explains. "It was our decision. We wanted to close. It wasn't like we were forced to do it. If we had been, maybe it would have been harder."

But then the unexpected plot twist was revealed: The property sale had fallen through in early December. As of this writing, Russo and his partner are looking for a new buyer. He has been sanguine about the whole thing: "Well, I told my wife the worst thing that can happen is we walk away with nothing," he says.

Not only is he chill about the closing of Heartland, but when I nudge him a bit, it seems there's still a possibility he'll cook again someday. "You know, I do have a fantasy," Russo muses. "I imagine this little house with a garden in the back where I cook a set meal for maybe two dozen people who sit and leave at the same time. We will use only what's from the garden and from a few select farmers. We'll only cook a few months a year at peak season. But for now, that's just a fantasy." ●