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*The first time we were scheduled to do this interview, Tyson Cole stood me up. He called half an hour later, truly apologetic: he'd taken his daughter to Gymboree and then simply lost track of time poking around the Hong Kong market. He was really sorry. Could we meet the next day? Of course. One must forgive something so downright charming. If you are into food on any level and curious about all that swirls around the culture of restaurants and chefs, then you too could spend an afternoon talking with Cole and, like me, be a little disappointed when it's over.*

## TYSON COLE / uchi

story *gracie salem* photography *matthew mahon*

If you keep up with the industry then you know a lot has been written about him and you probably know these facts: he's only 35 years old. He was named Best New Chef earlier this year by *Food and Wine* magazine, one of the top honors in his field and only given to two other Austin chefs in years past, and only ever to one other sushi chef. He started out as a dishwasher at Kyoto and learned sushi technique in a hands-on setting as opposed to signing up for a formal culinary education. He furthered his studies at Musashino and then in Japan where he learned to speak the language fluently. He opened his own restaurant, one of Austin's hottest, in 2003.

Then there are the things you may not know. He was a latch-key military kid who eventually landed in the suburbs of Houston and had virtually no food involvement as a child. He says that at the age of nine he was diagnosed with aluminum poisoning: too many tv dinners.

Before he found his calling, he had over 40 different jobs between the ages of 12 and 22. A baseball umpire. A kayak instructor. A construction worker. He is wildly in love with his wife Rebekkah. He's a romantic. He's been pursued heavily and offered six-figure jobs since the *Food and Wine* award. For various reasons, including a request for a cold edamame soup recipe, he said "no." "Not a chance in hell," he says emphatically. "Life is about quality of living." Meaning he couldn't see himself isolated in some test kitchen creating recipes that would ultimately have to pass the taste buds of some board of directors. He would never be behind a sushi bar in the trenches with his chefs on a Friday night. He would never see a guest. "I would have felt like a traitor giving up all that I had worked for in Uchi and giving up my amazing staff if I left to go work for a corporate giant."

He could go to bigger markets like Houston or Dallas. He could probably go anywhere he wanted. But ask him about Houston and

he'll tell you that traffic and obesity are intimately linked. Houston, he'd tell you, is "exemplary of everything the Japanese hate about America." Austin is his style. It's his home.

Still his love affair with Japanese food wasn't an overnight thing. "I took baby steps like most people. Fish in a roll, then with rice and eventually on its own," he says. "But then I began to literally crave it. I became addicted." He means that. He talks about sushi like it is a drug. He is entranced, obsessed. So he became a dealer. "I wanted sushi to be accessible to the American palate. That's what I want for Uchi. This has been a 14-year journey for me."

His latest ideas include an expansion of Uchi: a private backroom where he would sit face-to-face with guests and simply prepare food for them. Small numbers. The best of the world's best fish. Human interaction. A dream of a chef's table.

As for the Best New Chef nod from *Food and Wine*, he's pleased, of course. But it's not the be all end all for Cole. When the call came, he was excited indeed, whooping and hollering out in front of Uchi, but booled down he was acutely aware it didn't mean a whole lot more than, "From that day forward, I knew I would always have a job."

It's statements like these that make you sit back and consider Tyson Cole: there seems to exist a paradox within him.

He is humble, truly, when it comes to his craft. But if you sit with him long enough, you sense an enormous, if nearly silent, confidence. It lurks beneath the surface. The kind of confidence where you don't have to shout about your talent; it's just there.

In this most recent culinary world where top chefs can become famous as rock stars, complete with agents and groupies, Cole is a bit of an oddity. Despite the wildly bright nature of his future, he will be the first to tell you, "I never went into this to be noticed." GS