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A year off work, to think about work

By Chris Colin, Special to SF Gate

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I've noticed a funny thing since I began asking people about their jobs, and by funny I mean troubling and depressing: The careers that demand the most creativity and reflection — teachers, writers, entrepreneurs, etc. — often provide the least amount of time for those things. More than a raise, or better benefits, or a friendlier boss, people in these jobs tell me they long for one thing: a pause button.

A way to freeze that stressful frame. To climb out from under the cluttered desk and frantic timetable and just step away for a while. To see the job from a calm distance, then come back renewed, recharged and re-inspired.

Recently I spent time with someone who'd found this very thing. I'd like to report that peace and perspective are overrated, that being given a yearlong timeout to simply contemplate your work isn't as great as it sounds. But I'd be lying. Jessie Benthien scored a sweet gig.

A year ago the 25-year-old New Hampshire native was a Chez Panisse Foundation intern and a lunch line cook at Boulettes Larder in the Ferry Building, on track for one of the more hectic, fast-paced vocations around. She'd always been interested in food — its preparation, its provenance — but the path of the restaurant chef gave her pause. Ever demanding of more and more innovation, the career left less and less time for it with each rung ascended. The chef faces the same catch-22 that attends so many other vocations: Without creativity you're sunk, but creativity is the last thing you have time for.

"To be creative in the kitchen or anywhere, you can't be depleted all the time," Benthien said. "And that's what's ironic about working in a restaurant. It's just totally depleting."

Then she heard about an amazing opportunity at the Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga. In addition to offering more familiar fellowships to painters, poets, sculptors and other artists, the seven-decades-old arts institution advertised a culinary residency for early career chefs. For 12 months, the resident would be given room, board and a nurturing space in which to explore his or her culinary interests, outside the pressure cooker environment of a restaurant.

Or as I see it, a year to think about food — without worrying about paying the bills or keeping the boss happy.

Filling out the application and proposing menus was the easy part. Less easy was the audition, after Benthien made it to the short list: a dinner for 27 people.

I could tell you about how she dashed around town, collecting the perfect ingredients — the program has an emphasis on sustainable agriculture and cuisine — but it's hard to not skip to the menu. Braised pork on crostini with pickled red onion and arugula. Grilled fennel with fresh tomato salad and fiore sardo with chervil. Slow-roasted salmon with an oregano sauce and lemony green beans and crispy roasted potatoes. Walnut cake with honeyed whip cream and fresh mulberries. She got the gig and the diners even hugged her, Benthien recalls. I would have, too.

Benthien arrived in September and will stay through the summer. I should clarify that she isn't without significant responsibilities. Five nights a week, she prepares dinner for the handful of other artists at the colony — for this she gets a budget averaging $500 a week. She also teaches a class of second graders in San Jose periodically, and has begun tending a small garden. Still, to observe Benthien at work in this sun-drenched, bucolic setting is to observe a chef like you've never seen one: calm, relaxed and contemplative. In a sense, her most important job is thinking about her job.

Actually, seeing Montalvo's culinary residency up close is a little like hearing about Europe's sprawling maternity leave policies, or those fat grants that Denmark foists on its artists — the dull pain of someone else's good fortune. Tucked in amongst the eucalyptus and oak, a revolving collection of visiting artists has been whisked away from the hectic, humdrum routine of daily life. There in the Santa Clara Valley sun, as lizards scamper over tidy stone walls and hawks glide above, life is stripped down to something elemental.

Benthien, like the other artists, lives in a small cottage a few minutes from the wisteria-covered commons building, where meals are cooked and eaten. When I first arrived on a Monday afternoon, she was just putting away lunch. She has six burners and an extra sink and fridge at her disposal, but otherwise hers is a standard kitchen, light-filled and criss-crossed with wood beams.

As Benthien reviewed the contents of the fridge and pondered the evening's dinner, I asked what it was like to live with that pause button. Or at least a slow-motion button. She certainly plates more dinners in a day than I do all week, but it's a simpler life nonetheless. Emphasized here are qualities the average American workplace seems to value less and less. Slowness. Deliberateness. Thought.

"It's pretty amazing," she said. "I can take time to think, read cookbooks in the morning, write, take a walk every day. All in a rural place."

But what does that do to a person's working self? No question it's a lovely interlude on an otherwise busy career trajectory — but does it make a person better at his or her job, as I think many of us suspect it might?

Indeed, a sentiment I encounter frequently is that we'd do *better* work if we could get away from our work more often. OK, the accountants and garbage collectors of the world aren't likely to find many offers to go into the woods to ponder taxes and trash. But could a bit of Montalvo's pace and philosophy be exported to the workplace? If Slow Food can make us eat smarter, couldn't Slow Work make us work smarter?

In Benthien's case, the effects of the pause button are both abstract and practical. She's more grounded, she said. More intuitive with her meals, too — less reliant on cookbooks. She has time to focus on sourcing better ingredients, and getting to know the people behind them: the butcher, the person who raises the lamb, the driver, the ranch workers, the farmers who grew the lettuce, the rice growers. She's also had the freedom to explore working with bigger portions of the animal she's preparing, and by extension she has learned to work within her budget more effectively.

And then there are technical improvements:

"I've become more patient coaxing out the flavor in things. 'This needs to brown more.' Saying it's OK to wait for that to happen," she said. "I've done a lot of braises this year, *really* browning that stew meat. Same with rice timbale and with quiche. *Don't be scared of drying it out. Let it go longer*."

Even her salad dressings have improved, she added. "Balancing the sweetness with the saltiness with the acidity requires some attention. Now I get those macerated shallots in the vinegar 15 minutes beforehand and it makes all the difference."

As she explained it, deliciousness and franticness are often mutually exclusive.

"Flavors get compromised when you're caught in traffic on the way from your doctor's appointment, and you'd wanted to swing by the Cheese Board, but now there's no time," she said. "One thing I've gotten here is confidence to be uncompromised in making things taste good."

And for all the slowness here, she said she's gotten faster.

"Now, cooking for 27 people isn't such a big deal."

Being wholly ignorant of a chef's creative process, I asked Benthien if her remove has also given rise to whole new culinary inventions. Away from the hustle and bustle, does a cook start sauteing pinecones and broiling pocketbooks?

Not quite. But she does experiment. She recalled a particularly successful Szechuan peppercorn dish with Asian pears and celery root. She also came up with a new favorite: thinly sliced Tokyo turnips on a piece of fresh bread with goat butter and a little fennel pollen and sea salt.

The slowness at Montalvo is contagious. At 3:30 Benthien went to take a nap before the dinner rush. I took the opportunity to peruse a bookshelf near the dining room and then, right there in the middle of the day, found myself reading an E.B. White story in its entirety. Who does that?

Reads a short story during work hours? I told myself I was already a 4 percent better columnist. (Why are you making that face?)

Of course no residency in the world can soothe work anxiety completely. Benthien, when she returned to the kitchen, reported that a faro vs. quinoa debate had her tossing and turning during her nap. She rinsed off a knife now and began dinner. A salsa verde from lunch would be repurposed for an herb oil, to go with some roasted halibut. Arugula salad with watermelon radishes on the side. For dessert: strawberries with creme fraiche. I agreed to stick around for the meal. You know, to take notes and stuff.

It's not all mellowness and reflection for Benthien here. In keeping with Montalvo's culinary ethos, she's hard at work finding alternatives to the many environmentally — and economically — unsustainable cooking practices that have been standard so many years. Indeed, resisting the culinary status quo is a full-time job, even if it's a relaxed one at Montalvo. When the residency concludes in September, Benthien hopes to continue this kind of Michael Pollan-friendly cooking in one of her favorite Bay Area kitchens, under the guidance of a seasoned chef.

She cooked for the next two hours — a peaceful process, with music drifting out of her laptop and afternoon sun streaming into the kitchen windows. At last the artists began wandering in from their hillside studios: an architect from Paris, a painter from Bangkok, several Los Angeles actors working on a script. They had the dazed looks of people who've been immersed in the conceptual and removed from the mundane. They found the wine.

By 7:00 everyone was seated at two long tables off the kitchen, elbow-deep in dinner. Benthien was a quiet, kindly presence amongst them. The artists, now lubricated, gabbed about their hometowns, their processes, their next steps. Periodically, eyes would widen over a particularly astonishing bite; Benthien was thanked profusely.

"Should be sweeter," she whispered to me at one point, skeptically holding a forkful of halibut to the light.

I informed her, as politely as possible, that she was insane and shouldn't be dissing the fish I was devouring as quickly as possible. We all were. Slow food and slow work don't necessarily translate to slow eating, I observed.

When I'd confirmed that no leftovers remained, I set off on the long, vaguely disillusioning drive home from Montalvo — but first I convinced Benthien to let me publish her recipe for the salad. Make it tonight, as slowly as possible.

Salad of arugula, radish and toasted almonds

Benthien writes: "I like this salad for its assertive flavors. If you wish, add shavings of an aged cheese to the dressed salad. Piave, a cow's milk cheese, or Pecorino Toscana, a sheep's milk cheese, would be delicious."

1 cup blanched almonds*

1-2 cloves garlic

Juice of 1/2 lemon

Fine sea salt to taste

1 cup plus 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

1 bunch of radishes, sliced thinly

1 watermelon radish, diced

8 - 10 cups arugula, washed and dried

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

1. Toss almonds with 1 tablespoon of olive oil and season generously with salt. Toast in the oven until almonds are golden brown, about 10-15 minutes. Once they are cool enough to handle, coarsely chop almonds.
2. Crush garlic, along with a pinch of salt, with mortar and pestle. (Or mince finely with salt until nearly a pulp.) Place garlic and lemon juice in a jar and shake. Let sit for 10 minutes.
3. Add olive oil to lemon and garlic, and shake until blended. Season to taste with pepper and more salt, if necessary.
4. In a large bowl, place arugula, radishes, and most of the almonds. Add just enough vinaigrette to coat leaves and toss. Sprinkle salad with remaining almonds and serve at once.

* To blanch almonds: Place almonds in a pot with enough cold water to cover. Bring water to a boil. Remove from heat immediately and drain almonds. Rinse with cold water, drain, and pat dry with towels. Apply pressure on the almond with pointer finger and thumb to remove skin.

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