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### **How to run a great restaurant: The Knife's Top Five**



Restaurant years should be measured like dog years. Supposedly 80% of them close before the five-year mark, which is why the five-year anniversary of Grace Restaurant (celebrated in house Monday night) is such a big damn deal. A bigger damn deal: Owners Neal Fraser and Amy Knoll Fraser got married two weeks after Grace opened. Bigger still, they opened another restaurant, BLD, about two years ago. Biggest of all: The Frasers are still married.

All of which got me thinking: Why Grace? The food is great, but that's never been enough. The location is only OK (and was less so when they took the space). And Neal is no Wolfgang Puck; he'll make the rounds in his dining room, but anyone who looks at him expecting to receive the jolly-chef-song-and-dance will be rewarded with a pained smile. (And God bless him for that.)

So here are the Knife's top five reasons why Grace has been around for five years and stands to thrive for many more.

**1. The courage of his convictions.** Neal prepares what he finds interesting. This can mean locally sourced Santa Barbara prawns, serving water that's filtered instead of bottled, seared tempeh, Parmesan farro (which is like risotto with a conscience) or a black-chickpea salad with anchovies, which I ate at his bar a few weeks ago. It was really weird and it was really good; essentially, it was his way of having fun with the flavors of a Caesar salad. Of course, execution here is everything, but just as important is honoring his own instincts and allowing for inspiration, rather than dictation, by outside influences.

**2. It's a restaurant, dammit.** And in LA, that's a smart and counterintuitive thing. Opening any restaurant is an act of bravery, but in this city it takes real *cojones* to open a fine-dining spot that's "just" a restaurant, not a restaurant-lounge, or a tapas bar, or a small plates experience. Yes, there's a bar at Grace with a little lounge area, but it's the kind that restaurants used to have, when "Would you like a seat in the lounge?" meant you might want a glass of wine before your table was ready. 'Course, if you want to eat in the bar they'll be more than happy to whip out a placemat, but no one's going to mistake Grace for anything other than an honest-to-God restaurant.

**3. It's comfy.** The chairs have high backs and they're cushy. There's long strips of banquettes. The room is neither bright nor dark, noisy nor hushed. There's long, elegant tubular chandeliers that look like they might be made from mother-of-pearl (they're actually sheer fabric squares linked by staples). It's a nice trick: The space feels special but not pretentious.

**4. He's a real chef.** Ask any chef, any winemaker: Love and respect. He made his bones with Thomas Keller, David Burke, Joachim Splichal, Wolfgang Puck and Hans Rockenwagner. He's still on the line every night, next to a small army of loyalists in white cook shirts that snap up the front. All of his cooks look like Neal Fraser because that's exactly what they want to be.

**5. Amy.** Man, she has exquisite taste. The placemats, the water bottles, the silverware. Those chandeliers. The lines are clean and no one would call them stark; the dining room is practical and elegant. She's calm and cool and warm and runs two restaurants; most people can only claim one or two of those traits and they don't run any. The biggest testament: Grace still employs staff who have been there since they opened.

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