

A detailed cyberpunk street scene. In the foreground, a person wearing a dark, high-tech trench coat with a glowing red and blue backpack walks away from the viewer down a wet, reflective street. To the right, a food stall or bar is visible with a bright yellow sign and a menu board. The background is filled with various neon signs in blue, red, and white, some with Japanese characters. The overall atmosphere is dark and futuristic, with a strong emphasis on neon lighting and reflections on the wet pavement.

A Shadowrunner's Meal

Meals from around the Sprawl

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Dedicated to my Wife and Son who willing ate these meals as I developed them. And to all the stranger and friends who dropped by for a free meal and to give me feedback.



Why should you listen to me, huh?

Well, pull up a crate and let me give you the rundown. Name's Neon Knife, "big-time" troll chef of the streets of Seattle. Didn't start out that way, though. First decade of my life, I was just another ordinary kid in a middle-class bubble. Dad was Japanese salaryman for a minor corp, Mom was Irish with a talent for making traditional dishes that kept our apartment smelling like heaven. Life was all schedules, school, and weekend treats. Then puberty hit me like a freight train at eleven – but instead of just growing a few inches and some voice cracks, I turned full troll. Horns, tusks, the whole fraggin' package. Dad couldn't handle it, ghosted faster than cred after payday. Mom tried to keep us afloat, but corp housing don't take kindly to "monstrosities" in their perfect habblocks. Two months later, we were SINless in the barrens with nothing but the clothes on our backs

Cooking? That started as a necessity. Ma was always out hustling, trying to keep us afloat in a world that wanted us flatlined. So, I took to the stove – an old, rusted piece of drek that leaked gas more than it burned it, but it worked when it had to. My first dish? Burned soy paste with rat drippings. But hey, you gotta start somewhere, right? Cooking became my thing, the one piece of normal in a life that was anything but.

The streets, they teach you fast or you end up cacked. By my teens, I was tall as a building and twice as sturdy. Used that to my advantage, scavenging parts, trading favors, occasionally smashing heads when diplomacy failed. Got tagged with "Knife" after separating some ganger's ribs for trying to jack my food supplies. Respect in the Barrens ain't given – it's taken, usually with bruises.

Then, fate hit like a wired samurai. Found an old, battered cookbook in a dumpster behind some fancy Bellevue joint – recipes from all over the world. That book, chummer, was my ticket to a new life. I started experimenting, mixing barrens' ingredients with these exotic recipes. Made my own version of street cuisine while dodging bullets and territorial fraggers who thought a troll shouldn't be anything but muscle.

My big break came when I turned an abandoned shack into my own little eatery. Didn't have much – a couple of pots, a grill, and some spices I'd traded three teeth and a favor for. But word got out faster than a new BTL. Folks started coming. Not just SINless wastoids, but ork foodies and even a few corp types slumming it for a taste of what they called "authentic street cuisine."

Had to learn about protection the hard way – paid off three different gangs before I realized I could just feed their lieutenants for free instead. Nothing says "don't torch this place" like being the only joint that'll serve your favorite noodle bowl at 3 AM after a druglab explosion. Business sense ain't just for suits.

Life on the street's tough, especially for the young ones with fresh trauma and empty bellies. So, I started taking in street kids, teaching them to cook. Call it my way of giving back, or maybe just making sure someone would remember my recipes if I caught a stray bullet. Each of them has their own story, their own touch in the kitchen. They're my crew now – my family. We're not just surviving; we're thriving.

Memorable encounters? Had my share of weird fraggers in my places. One time, a big-shot Yakuza boss came in, chrome-armed and stone-faced. Wanted the best meal I could make or he'd ventilate my skull. I whipped up a fusion of Eastern flavors with a Seattle twist that I'd been saving for a special occasion. Guy loved it so much, he became a regular. Even helped me out of a tight spot with a local gang once by making three of them disappear permanently. Customer loyalty means something different in the shadows.

Then there was this one night, a runner team came in after a botched job. Wounded, scared, hungry enough to eat synth-leather. I fed them, patched them up with what little I knew about street med. They paid me with a rare spice from the other side of the world – probably stolen from some megacorp R&D food lab. That spice? Changed my whole game, made me realize food could be more than filling bellies. It could be art, even in this concrete hell.

My life's been a wild ride on a rocket with busted steering, but if there's one thing I've learned, it's that food brings us together, no matter our story. It's more than eating; it's about community, sharing what we've got when most of us ain't got much. Whether you're an exec or a street kid with nothing but hope and switchblade, my kitchen's open to you. Just leave your heat by the door – nobody shoots nobody over my gumbo.

That's my story, chummer. Now, how about I whip you up something to remember me by? Something that'll make your taste buds dance like they're jacked on novacoke, yeah?

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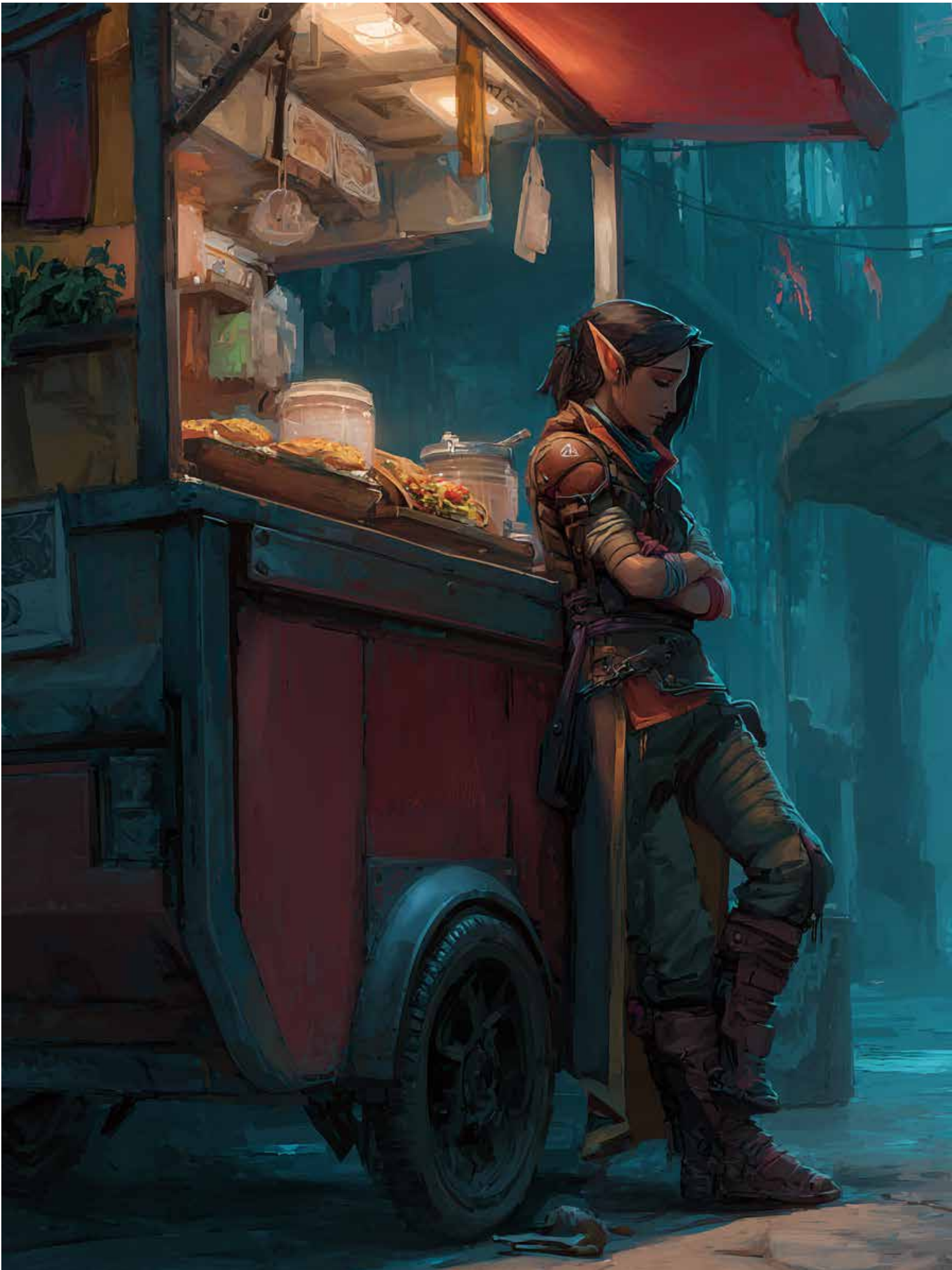
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Street Meals

There's a special kind of magic in a street cart when the rain's coming down sideways. Doesn't matter if it's high summer or the dead of winter – in Seattle, the sky's always got another bucket to dump on you. You duck under the awning, shake the water off your jacket, and there it is: heat radiating off the grill, the hiss of something hitting oil, the smell of spice and char that cuts straight through the wet.

These aren't meals for lingering over white tablecloths. They're for the times when the city's pressing in from all sides and you need to thaw your bones before the cold sinks too deep. They're food built to stand in one hand while the other keeps your hood up, food that wraps you in steam and spice until you can't tell where the rain ends and the aroma begins.

If you're lucky, there's a stool. A short one, dented from years of use, wedged in just far enough under the counter to keep your knees dry. If you're not, you hunch over with everyone else, shoulder to shoulder with strangers, the drip of rain off the awning forming a steady rhythm while you balance your bowl. Either way, the first bite sends heat down to your core, chasing the chill out like someone just lit a fire under your ribs.

Street meals are honest food. They don't pretend to be anything but what they are – hot, fast, and filling, with flavors bold enough to stand up to the weather. They carry stories in every bite: recipes smuggled from halfway around the world, adapted on the fly to whatever ingredients the cart owner could get that week. One stall might hand you a bowl of broth that's been simmering since dawn, deep with umami and salted just enough to make you want another sip before you've even swallowed the first. Another might slide you a plate of tacos where the tortillas are steaming from the griddle and the filling's spiced just enough to warm your face as much as your stomach.

This chapter's about those meals – the ones that feed more than your body. Every dish here is something I've eaten huddled under a tarp or an awning, steam curling up into the rain, watching puddles ripple with the passing of a dozen different kinds of footsteps. They're a reminder that good food doesn't need a perfect setting; it just needs to meet you where you are, cold and tired and looking for something to hold on to.

The menus in Street Meals each tell their own little story. Some are born from far-off kitchens and long-ago traditions, others from the collisions that only happen in a sprawl like Seattle, where Portuguese immigrants share alley space with Japanese noodle carts, and Korean griddle masters swap recipes with Mexican taco trucks. The fusion isn't just on the plate – it's in the people behind the counter, the customers pressed in close, the whole street-scene theater of it.

These aren't meals you carry far. You eat them right there, in the glow of the cart's lights, the rain softened to background noise by the sizzle of the grill and the chatter of the crowd. They're hot enough to fog your glasses and bright enough in flavor to cut through the grayest day.

And when you walk away, belly warm and fingers still tingling from the heat, you don't just feel full. You feel like maybe, just maybe, the city's got a little kindness left in it – and that's worth more than any stool.

Now, before you slot this chapter as being beneath you or your guests, let me let you into a secret. If I could only have food from one chapter of this book for the next month, this would be the chapter. It's not the fanciest food, or the tastiest, but it is the most honest and the ones that you don't get tired of. A second secret, if you're new to cooking or on a budget, keeping it simple and cheap is what street food is all about.

One last bit of advice, if your typical MO is to cook one dish and then throw the rest of the meal together, this chapter will give you some cred making whole meals. Even if you're an accomplished cook, cut your teeth on some of these meals before you tackle the more complicated one in Mr. Johnson Treat or Corporate Pinnacle, you'll thank yourself.

So get ready to earn your chef's knife and experience the gritty life on the street and in the shadows.

Lisbon Lantern's Daily Special #2

There's a food stall down in Tacoma's Portuguese Barrens that I always stop by when I'm in that neck of the woods. Lisbon's owner/chef is half Japanese, just like me, but her other half couldn't be farther away – Portuguese, of course, given where she lives.

She's got Raman lamps hanging on the corner of her stall (like my stand), so it's easy to spot the red amongst all the gray of the city. But you could find her place even if you were blind by following your nose. The aromas wafting from her grill and stove are chill.

While there are many great things on her menu, it's her daily specials that bring me back, time and again. And she cares so much about these specials that she doesn't sell their items individually. It was hard to pick just one to share with you, but I chose this one because of the soup, or the flan, or the corn.

Dirty Margarita and Pickled Red Bell Peppers

Miso Caldo Verde Soup

Sergio's Spiced Street Corn with Blackberry Glaze, and Grilled Fish with Chimichurri Verde

Lisbon Caramel-Chile Flan

To be honest with you, Joy's daily specials are what inspired this whole cookbook. I've had daily specials since the first taco I sold, but mine were only dishes. Joy features a whole meal, because she's an artist.

Joy's not just plating food – she's painting with flavors, timing, and intention. Her daily specials are more than the sum of their parts, because she's working from something older, something more profound. She once told me she builds each special like a kaiseki meal: not fancy or formal, but rooted in season, sequence, and soul. Every item talks to the next one.

The Dirty Margarita opens the experience like a sharp intake of breath – briny and fig-dark, the umeshu just a whisper behind the tequila. Then the Miso Caldo Verde hits – a silken fusion of Japanese comfort and Portuguese earth, where miso meets collard greens and chorizo, the umami laying the groundwork for what's to come. But it's not just the soup. It's the pause after – the warmth on your tongue, the way it slows your heartbeat. That's ma – the space between courses, between tastes, where you feel the shift before you even see it.

Next, the Pickled Red Bell Peppers slide in bright and clean, a contrast to the depth of the soup. Then Sergio's Street Corn, charred and spiced, sweetened with a blackberry glaze that lingers like an echo of summer on a rainy Tacoma afternoon. The Grilled Fish with Chimichurri Verde is the anchor – crisped skin, flaky inside, the herbal chimichurri singing bright against the smoke. She times it so you're ready for the flan, but still thinking about the soup.

And then, Lisbon Caramel-Chile Flan – burnt sugar and heat wrapped around creamy coolness. It doesn't fight what came before. It finishes it. Joy calls it closure – not dessert, not a final course, but a kind of good-bye you carry with you.

See, in Joy's world, every dish is a sentence. Every break between them, a breath. And the whole thing? A poem. That's what kaiseki and ma mean when she cooks: not a tasting menu or a tradition, but a way of telling a story where the reader doesn't just eat – they listen. And they remember.

Seoul Barrio Slam

Some of the best food happens when worlds collide, and in the Sprawl, worlds collide every damn day.

I was working a corner in the International District when this Korean ajumma – had to be pushing seventy but moved like she could outrun Knight Errant – set up her cart right across from mine. On the first day, we eyeballed each other like rival gang members marking territory. Second day, she started cooking, and the smell of her Kimchi hit me like a datajack to the brain.

See, I'd been slinging basic street tacos – good food, don't get me wrong, but nothing that'd make you write home about it. But watching this lady work her magic with fermented cabbage and gochujang, I began to think. In the barrio, if it tastes good, someone's gonna wrap it in a tortilla sooner or later. Why not Korean?

On the third day, I walked over during the post-lunch lull. She looked up from her prep work, knife in hand, and I held up a fresh tortilla.

“Trade?” I said.

She stared at me for a long moment, then started laughing. Turns out, her grandson had been begging her to try Mexican food, but she didn't trust any of the places around here. “Too much salt, not enough soul,” she said in perfect English. Meanwhile, I'd been craving proper Kimchi since a job took me through K-Town six months back.

We spent the afternoon trading techniques. She showed me how to balance the funk of fermented vegetables with bright, acidic flavors. I taught her how to get a proper char on corn tortillas without burning them. By closing time, we'd invented what we started calling the “Seoul Barrio Slam” – Korean soul food wrapped in Mexican tradition.

The Kimchi Salsa was her idea. Take the standard Mexican salsa verde concept, but swap tomatillos for the tartness and add chopped Kimchi for that fermented kick. The rice vinegar and sesame oil bridge the gap between Korean and Mexican flavor profiles, while the cilantro and lime keep it fresh and bright. It's like if Korea and Mexico had a baby and raised it in the Sprawl.

The pork belly tacos were mine. I'd seen Korean BBQ joints doing pork belly for years, but they always served it with rice. Wrap that sweet-soy-sesame goodness in a charred corn tortilla, top it with Kimchi Salsa, and suddenly you've got something that speaks both languages fluently. The fat from the pork belly mellows out the Kimchi's bite, while the tortilla gives you something to hold onto when the flavors hit.

The Neon Rice & Bean Stir-Fry originated as a way to utilize day-old rice, but it ultimately became the centerpiece of the meal. Gochujang and black beans shouldn't work together, but they do – the heat from the Korean chili paste plays perfectly with the earthiness of the beans. Add some kelp flakes if you can obtain them; otherwise, use soy sauce. Either way, it tastes like the future.

The Churros came from a night of just playing around. The old “What if” game.

Mrs. Kim – that was her name, though she told me to call her Halmeoni – and I ran our carts side by side for three months before she moved on. Family business called her back to K-Town. But those three months changed how I think about food.

The Seoul Barrio Slam isn't just fusion cuisine – it's what happens when people stop seeing differences as barriers and start seeing them as ingredients. In a world where corps try to keep everyone separated and suspicious, food has a way of bringing people together.

Share a meal that tastes like home to someone from a completely different world, and suddenly the Sprawl feels a little smaller, a little friendlier.

The Ginger Citrus Fizz was a late additions, things we developed when summer hit and people needed something cold and refreshing to cut through all that rich, spicy food. The fizz has just enough bite to

Off the Grill

When most folks picture Morocco in their heads, they see bright sunshine. Bright, hot, sharp-edged light, shadows cut in black on whitewashed walls. And yeah, I've seen that Morocco – the one the travel feeds love to sell you, all filtered sky and curated spice markets. But the day I remember most was nothing like that.

I'd been running with a fixer who swore there was a cart in Casablanca that made the best flatbreads in the hemisphere, worth the detour no matter how far out of the way you were. He claimed it was the kind of place you didn't just eat at – you paid respects, like it was part of the run. We were lying low between jobs, the crew was burned out, and waiting for the heat on a data grab to cool down. We got there late in the season, clouds hanging low, air heavy with the smell of salt and spice, that just-before-a-storm tension. The streets were already wet, puddles reflecting the neon signs and the glow of drone lamps, as if someone had spilled a box of light on the ground. And then it started raining.

Not a cold Seattle rain that seeps into your bones and makes your cyberhand ache, but a warm, dense rain that wrapped around you like steam off a grill. The cart's awning was packed, everyone pressed in close, strangers with dripping jackets laughing as if the rain was part of the show. The hiss of water on the griddle matched the rhythm of the drops on canvas, and somewhere deep in the alley, a vendor was shouting over the rain about fresh mint.

The air was thick with cardamom, charred bread, grilled citrus, and something green and unexpected – beans and pea pods snapping as they hit the heat, not the usual greens you'd find folded into bread. The cook was moving like a street samurai – fast and precise – laying each flatbread down over the flame until it blistered and bubbled, piling on spiced meat, vegetables, and a quick squeeze of tangerine, then folding and handing it off without breaking rhythm. The paper in my hands went limp from the steam before I even took a bite, juice running hot down my wrist. I caught my fixer grinning like he'd just scored a bonus – and maybe he had, if you count the crate of contraband spice tucked under the bench behind the cook.

It was the kind of meal you eat standing up, shoulder to shoulder with strangers, water running off your hair, and somehow every sense is awake at once – the spice, the heat, the rhythm of rain and fire, the low murmur of the crowd. I remember thinking it was a lot like Seattle in reverse. Here, the rain is cold, and the grill is the only warmth. There, the rain was warm and the grill was still where you went for comfort – not because you had to escape the chill, but because you wanted to step into the heartbeat of the street.

Back in Seattle, whenever I smell that mix of spice and smoke over a grill – vegetables you don't expect charring next to the meat – I think of that day. Sometimes I cook that way to bring it back. The tangerine juice searing on the griddle, the flatbread folding over the filling, the scent of mint and cardamom curling up in the steam – it's my warm-rain memory, wrapped in foil and handed across the counter.

And to drink? In Morocco, it was a glass of something cool and creamy, the tang of yogurt with just a whisper of spice. Here, I pour a Rainshadow Lassi – thick kefir base, a touch of honey and cardamom, with a ripple of dark marionberry juice through the glass. It looks like a Pacific Northwest raincloud layered into the Moroccan sun – sweet and tart, cool against the heat of the grill, with that faint spice that catches at the back of your throat and makes you take another sip.

When I put Off the Grill on the menu, it wasn't about chasing authenticity or perfect technique. It was about chasing that feeling – of standing in the rain that doesn't chill you, eating something hot enough to fog your glasses, and realizing that for a few bites, the weather and the food are working together, not against you. That's why I cook this way sometimes. To remember the rain, the street, and the warmth hidden in both.

On the Wild Side

Some meals happen because you're hungry. This one happens because you're alive.

I remember the night like it was tattooed on the inside of my eyelids. It had been raining for hours in Bangkok-on-Puget – not that lazy mist we get in Seattle, but the kind of downpour that bounces off the street and soaks you from below. The kind that makes the air steam and turns every bit of neon into a blurry watercolor. I was running on three hours of sleep, a pocket full of damp credsticks, and the high-pitched whine of a job gone sideways still ringing in my ears. My nerves were twitching, my stomach was an empty pit, and every sense I had was hunting for something sharp enough to cut through it all.

That's when I saw her – an old woman in a plastic poncho the color of wet asphalt, standing behind a battered steel cart. No sign. No menu. Just a half-dozen dented pots, a charcoal brazier throwing sparks into the rain, and smells so loud they drowned out the city. I ducked under the awning, shaking water from my jacket, and without a word, she handed me a small bowl of mussels swimming in a broth that smelled like lemongrass had married the sun.

The first sip hit like lightning – orange-sweet and basil-bright, but with a chili hum that rose slow and steady until I could feel it behind my eyes. I slurped the broth, sucked the mussels straight from the shells, and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. Somewhere between the heat and the steam, the night didn't feel quite so heavy.

While I was licking my lips, she pointed with her chin toward a younger guy grilling pork skewers over an open flame. The smoke curled into the rain like it had business there. He brushed each skewer with a tamarind glaze so glossy it caught the light like lacquer, then handed them over wrapped in yesterday's news. Sticky-sweet, smoky, and tangy enough to make me laugh out loud – it was like biting into the heart of the alley itself.

But the thing that sealed it was the drink from the stall next door. A plastic cup beaded with condensation, full of golden pineapple juice, punched sharp with lime. A bruised stalk of lemongrass stood in it like a flag, and just under the surface lurked enough ghost pepper to make my throat prickle and my pulse jump. I took a sip, and the sweetness hit first – sunny and tropical – then the burn rolled in slow, leaving me grinning like I'd gotten away with something.

By the time I found the last stall, I was already hooked on the chaos of it all. A kid with a scar over one eyebrow was shaping sticky rice into thick patties, frying them until the edges turned golden and crisp while the inside stayed soft and almost creamy. He ladled over a coconut-lime sauce so fragrant it cut straight through the steam, pooling in the nooks of the rice until every bite was a mix of crunch, silk, and citrus heat.

When I'd finished, I rewound my way through the dripping alley to the first cart, rain pooling in the cuffs of my sleeves. The old woman was still there, moving slowly but surely, ladling soup for a couple of students hunched together under one umbrella. I leaned in under the awning and asked her, "Why didn't you serve me the whole meal yourself? You could've kept me right here."

She looked up at me, eyes sharp as the chili in her broth, and gave a slight shrug. "If you eat only from me, you miss the rest. Food is like family – you take care of each other, not just yourself." She nodded toward the stalls I'd visited. "They have their strengths. I have mine. Put them together, you get something worth remembering."

I told her that wasn't how most of the world worked. She smiled, slow and knowing, and said, "Maybe not. But some nights, it still can."

I walked away with the rain in my hair and the taste of her broth still clinging to my tongue, carrying a meal that had been more than food – it had been a map of the alley, a chain of small kindnesses strung together in the steam. And every time I cook On the Wild Side, I remember that: sometimes the wildest thing you can do is share someone else's strengths instead of your own.

From the Fryer

There's a specific smell that rides the steam over the streets after a fryer's been running all day – hot oil, batter, spice, and that faintly sweet promise of something you shouldn't eat if you plan on living past fifty. Good thing we're not in this line of work for the pension.

Fryer food doesn't waste time. It's the kind of eating you do between moves – a grab, a bite, a wipe of the fingers on your jeans before you've even swallowed. You can hear it before you see it: the sharp hiss as something hits the oil, the staccato pop as moisture fights its way out. Then the smell rolls over you, riding the steam – fried dough, caramelizing starch, the edge of chili, the whisper of something smoky in the oil. It's not delicate. It's not polite. But in a city that runs on hustles and half-chances, it's exactly what you need.

I didn't plan to make a menu out of fried bites. Like most good runs, it came together because the pieces fell into place at the right time – and because I was too hungry to think straight. The first hit was the bao. I'd been running deliveries for a contact in Redmond, cutting through an alley behind an old karaoke bar. Some grandma had a steamer going on one burner and a wok of oil going on another. She'd steam the buns just long enough to set them, then slip them into the oil, watching them puff and crisp while she told me, without looking up, that I looked like I needed two. She was right. One to eat while walking, one to pocket for later.

The prawns came from a different night, this one in Puyallup, under a tin roof that pinged like a drum with the rain. The vendor dredged them in something dark and spicy before dropping them into the fryer, and when I bit in, the shell shattered in a burst of heat and brine. Sweet meat underneath, hot enough to make me blink twice, and a crunch that stayed with me long after the last bite.

Polenta fritters showed up by accident – I'd been trying to make cornbread in a busted oven, gave up, and pressed the dough into patties instead. Fried 'em in the same oil I'd been using for chicken, and they came out with this crust you could hear crack when you bit in, hiding a creamy center that soaked up every drop of sauce in reach. Turns out corn, oil, and heat don't need much else to make magic.

And the lotus root chips... those were me getting cocky. I'd seen them once in a tiny stall near the docks, already pickled, bright and tangy, fried until they curled and turned into lacy little wheels. The guy shook them in a paper cone with salt and something green – I found out later it was wasabi powder. It was the kind of snack you think you'll share until you realize you've inhaled the whole batch before your friend's even turned back around.

Put them all together, and you've got something more than a random plate of fried stuff. You've got the city in edible form – quick, loud, a little dangerous if you're not paying attention. Each bite's a hit of salt and heat and crunch that makes you forget, for a second, that you're standing in the rain under a flickering streetlamp.

I didn't include a custom drink in this menu because, chummer, a cold beer is the best thing to pair with anything deep-fried – and Seattle's got a synth-beer selection that'll make you forget you're on a budget.

A good bitters brings a clean, sharp edge that cuts through the bao's soft richness, resetting your tongue for the next bite. Pale ales have just enough citrus and snap to stand up to the prawns' spice without smothering their sweet heat. A malty amber wraps around the polenta fritters like an old coat – deep, warm, and steady, letting that creamy corn heart shine. And for the lotus root chips? Go light lager or a dry pilsner – crisp enough to keep you reaching back into the cone without getting weighed down.

The beauty of it is you can mix and match. One pint to carry you through the whole meal or a tasting flight to chase each bite. Doesn't matter if it's brewed in a back-alley microbrew vat or pumped out of a corporate tap – if it's cold, fizzy, and bitter, it'll make the fryer's work sing.

Because at the end of the day, it's not just the crunch or the heat that makes this food work. It's that perfect, frosty swallow between bites – the pause before you dive back in. In the sprawl, that moment's worth more than gold.

Making the Street Your Home

When you're living on the street, you start collecting little anchors that make the chaos feel like yours. Some folks find them in the sound of a particular bus rattling past every morning, or the rhythm of rain hitting the same bit of tin. For me, a lot of those anchors came on a paper plate, balanced on my knees while I sat on a curb that had somehow become my curb.

I didn't know that at the time, of course. Back then, I was trying to make it to the next day without getting jumped, soaked through, or too hungry to think. My mom worked whatever shifts she could land, which meant I was on my own most days. I learned fast that a city can be cruel, but it can also hand you small mercies – like a food stall steaming in the cold air, its smells drifting far enough down the block to pull you in before you even see it.

The first of these bites was always the hot, portable kind. Gluten-free hot-pocket gyoza like the ones in this meal weren't on the menu yet back then, but I knew the feel: something you could hold in one hand, eat with the other stuffed in your coat pocket. It's the kind of food that makes you feel like you have something worth holding onto.

There was the peanut vendor who roasted his nuts over an old oil drum and tossed them in spices he swore were “secret,” but mostly smelled like chili, lime, and survival. He'd scoop them into a paper cone, and if you were short a few nuyen, he'd still make sure it was full – “because empty paper's bad luck,” he'd say.

The deep-fried egg puffs came later, when I was old enough to roam farther. A stall in the International District sold them, the batter hiding a whole world inside – mushrooms one day, shrimp the next, sometimes nothing but silky custard. You didn't know until you bit in, and maybe that was part of the fun.

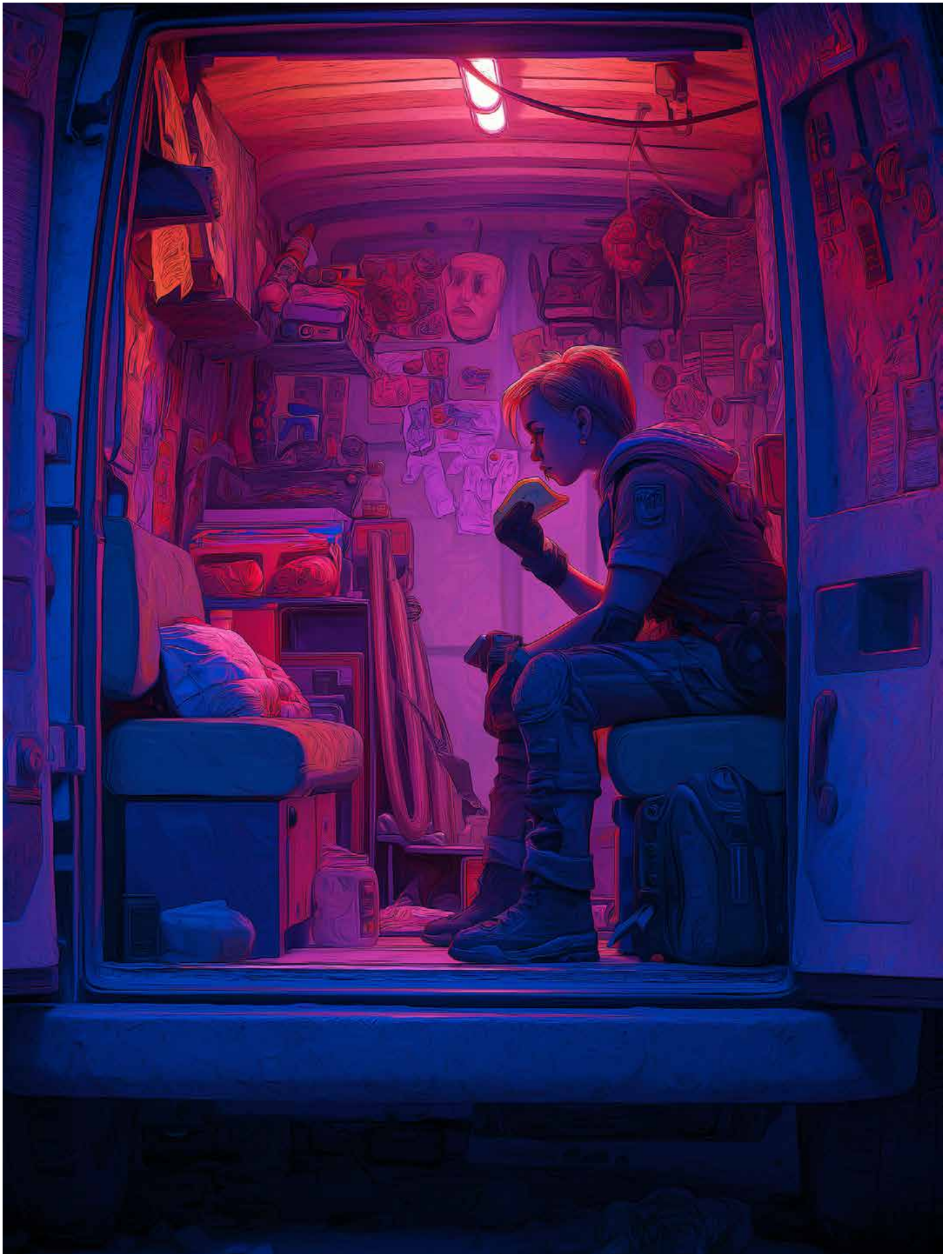
Crisp noodle nests were a different kind of comfort – messy if you weren't careful, but they always gave you that shatter of crunch before the soft center. If you'd been running all day, dodging trouble or trouble-makers, it was the kind of food that made you stop for a second, just to taste it properly.

And then there were the drinks. Back then, it might've been a warm soy tea or a watered-down juice, but for this spread, I've gone with a blackberry-soy kaffir cooler. It's smooth, tart, and floral all at once – the sort of thing that makes you pause halfway through your first sip, wondering why it feels like the city just took a deep breath with you.

Thing is, these aren't just snacks. They're the sensory map of a place you've claimed as your own. Every vendor's face, every smell of oil and spice, every moment where someone handed you food like you mattered – it all adds up. That's what I mean by making the street your home. You can't buy a front door out here, but you can still find your place.

When I look at this meal now, I don't just see deep-fried bites. I see the street kids I ran with, the aunties who made sure I got fed, the way steam curls up into night air after a sudden rain. And maybe that's why this is the right way to close the chapter – because when you're on the street, you learn fast that food isn't just fuel. It's proof you belong somewhere, even if that somewhere is only a patch of sidewalk you can stand on without looking over your shoulder for a minute.

And tomorrow? Tomorrow you'll be moving again. Which makes it the perfect bridge to the next chapter – because sometimes, home is just the place you're leaving, and the best meals are the ones you can eat On The Run.



On the Run

Most of the meals in this book? They're about connection. The food cart with friends leaning on the counter. The nightclub table with music vibrating through the floor. The quiet comfort of My Place. The calculated theater of a Mr. Johnson's dinner. Even the high-tier artifice of a Corporate Pinnacle spread – they're all about sitting down, facing each other, passing plates, and letting the food become part of the conversation.

This chapter's different.

On the Run isn't about conversation. It's about motion. It's for the moments when sitting down isn't an option, when you're halfway between where you've been and where you need to be, and the gap in the middle is too tight to stop. This is food built for alley shortcuts, rain-slick rooftops, cramped cargo holds, and late-night rides when the city blurs past your window. Meals where the table is whatever's in front of you – a stack of crates, the hood of a car, the passenger seat of a van – and the only thing you're passing around is the bag.

I included this chapter because for all the stories people tell about shadowrunners – the jobs, the shootouts, the big scores – what they don't talk about is the waiting. The downtime between bursts of chaos. The long stretches of getting from A to B, staying alert, keeping your energy up while your nerves hum like a live wire. That's when the right food can make the difference. Not because it's fancy, but because it's ready, it travels well, and it gives you exactly what you need in the moment – a boost, a breath, a bite that keeps you sharp.

That's the heart of a shadowrunner's meal. It's not just about flavor; it's about function. It's about the way the food fits into the job without slowing you down. In On the Run, every menu was built to be eaten with one hand, shared without ceremony, and stashed away at a moment's notice. Every bite has to earn its place – it has to hit quick, satisfy fast, and not get in the way when it's time to move. It's the memory when your fingers still smell like soy and ginger as you check your weapon, and you taste chili heat on your tongue as the bike roars to life.

And maybe that's why I think On the Run hits the theme harder than any other chapter. The food here doesn't just exist alongside the run – it's part of it. The Neon Fade in Wings and a Prayer that clears your head before the next push. The white-box fried rice from Food on the Run that still tastes good hours later. The Puffed Rice Clusters in Signal Boost you can pop in your mouth while checking a drone feed. The Pocket Feast you ration out through a long stakeout. These aren't just meals; they're tools. Edible gear.

And yet, even in all that motion, there's still a trace of the same thing every other chapter has – connection. Not the slow, leaning-over-the-table kind, but the quick handoff of a drink pouch, the shared laugh when someone nicks the last sushi bomb, the nod you get when you toss a snack into a partner's lap mid-drive. It's smaller, faster, but it's still there. Because even when we're moving too fast to stop, we're still sharing the same road, the same job, the same food.

So yeah, On the Run is different. But if you've ever been out there with the clock ticking and the city closing in around you, you know this is as real as it gets. You don't always have the luxury of a table. Sometimes the best meal you'll ever have is the one you eat leaning against a wall, chopsticks in one hand, your other hand ready for whatever comes next.

That's why this chapter's here. Because when the city's rushing past you, the food you pack becomes part of your run – and part of you.

Jake's Grab & Dash Pack

Alright, chummers, let me tell you about one of the best-kept secrets in the Seattle sprawl – Jake's Short Rib. Now, before you start snickering about the name, let me set you straight. Jake Ironforge picked that name with pride, not irony. See, Jake's about as tall as my cyber-arm is long, and he owns every inch of it. "Short and efficient," he says, "just like my ribs and my service." The dwarf's got style, I'll give him that.

I've been hitting Jake's joint for years now, and let me tell you something about eating before a run – it can make the difference between walking away with your nuyen and walking away period. Your body's about to go through hell: adrenaline spikes, extended periods of focus, maybe some parkour across Corp Plaza if things go sideways. You need fuel that works as hard as you do.

That's where Jake's genius shows. His Grab & Dash Pack isn't just four random items thrown together – it's a carefully engineered system. Every component hits a different need, and the flavors? They're complex enough to keep your brain engaged while simple enough not to weigh you down when you're moving fast.

Take that Synth-Smooth Runner's Shake. I've watched Jake perfect this recipe over months, adjusting the berry-to-lime ratio until it hits that perfect sweet-tart balance that wakes up every taste bud. The almond butter gives it body without making it heavy, and that optional espresso shot? Trust me, when you're three hours into a surveillance gig, you'll thank Jake for thinking of it. Best part? Make it the night before, toss it in your gear bag frozen, and it's perfect drinking temperature by the time you need it.

The Afghan Eggplant Sauce over fries is where Jake really shows off. This isn't some fusion experiment gone wrong – it's deliberate, calculated comfort food with serious flavor depth. Those warm spices hit different when you're stressed, reminding your system that you're still human underneath all the chrome and attitude. The yogurt cools the heat just enough to keep it manageable, and the whole thing works like magic over crispy fries. Jake batches this on Sundays, and honestly? It's better after it's had time to sit. The spices marry, the eggplant gets silkier, and by Tuesday it's practically singing.

Now, those Neon Yakitori skewers – these are Jake's love letter to the old-school street food tradition. Sweet soy glaze with just enough complexity to keep things interesting, chicken that stays tender even when you're eating it cold in some maintenance tunnel two hours later. Jake soaks his skewers properly, grills them with the patience of someone who takes pride in his craft, and the result is portable protein that actually tastes like something worth eating.

And that Chili-Spiked Grilled Pineapple? Genius. Pure genius. The sweetness gives you quick energy, the chili keeps your senses sharp, and the combination is addictive enough that you'll find yourself looking forward to it even when everything else is going to hell. Hot off the grill it's caramelized perfection, but cold? It's like having a secret weapon against stress.

Here's what Jake understands that most food slingers don't: runners can't always eat hot food. Sometimes you're eating in a van during surveillance. Sometimes you're grabbing bites between security patrols. Sometimes your whole plan goes sideways and you're living off what's in your pack for twelve hours. Every item in this pack works cold – not just "edible" cold, but actually good cold. Different textures, different flavor profiles, but still real food that keeps you functional.

I've seen runners grab these packs and vanish into the night knowing they're carrying something that won't betray them when they need it most. No mystery meat that'll have you sick in an alley. No sugar crash that leaves you sluggish during the extraction. Just solid, honest food that tastes like Jake gives a damn about whether you come back in one piece.

The dwarf's got a philosophy: "Feed them right, and they fight right." Simple words, but there's wisdom there. In a world where most food is processed, synthetic, or just plain garbage, Jake's putting real flavor and real nutrition into the hands of people whose lives depend on peak performance.

So next time you're gearing up for a run, do yourself a favor. Stop by the Short Rib, grab one of these packs, and taste what happens when someone who understands the street decides to cook for it.

Mama Jone's Underground Grill

The first time I found Mama Jone's, I wasn't looking for food – I was looking to vanish. I'd been running since sunset, taking rooftop shortcuts, crawling through utility tunnels, ducking past corp drones until my lungs felt lined with acid. My jacket was soaked, my boots were heavy, and my brain was buzzing with the kind of static that only comes when you've been a target for too many hours in a row. Another soybar in a safehouse corner wasn't going to cut it – I didn't want food that reminded me I was still running. I wanted something that reminded me why I kept running at all.

Mama Jone's sits deep in the Orc Underground, beyond the well-lit markets, the tourist-friendly taverns with neon beer signs past the rowdy clubs with thrash-metal leaking into the streets, past the safe zones where you can still buy a branded soycaf without getting side-eyed. Down there, the tunnels are narrow and dark, lit by single strings of bulbs and the occasional barrel fire. The air smells of wet stone and old brick, and every sound echoes just a little too much. I didn't have a map, just a nose full of smoke and spice carried on the underground draft. It led me down a narrow side corridor, past a broken vending unit, and to a door wedged into a wall of black stone.

There was a line of warm light under the door and the unmistakable hiss of something hitting a hot grill – my nerves were shot. For a moment I stood there, hearing the quiet thrum on a grill on the other side, feeling the weight of the night pressing in, breathing in that mix of wood smoke and citrus and thinking how long it had been since I'd eaten anything cooked by someone who cared. Going inside felt like stepping out of the run entirely – like leaving the chase at the threshold.

Inside, it was all heat and shadow, but not the harsh heat of a safehouse stove. This was deep, slow warmth – the kind that sinks into your bones. The room was warm but dim, the walls hung with tools and iron pans polished black from years of use. There was no music, no shouting, just the crackle of the fire, the thump of a heavy knife on a cutting board, and a voice that said, "Sit. You look hungry." Mama Jone didn't smile, didn't ask who I was running from, didn't need to. She just pointed at the corner table like it had been waiting for me all along.

The table was old wood, scratched with names and knife cuts, solid enough to lean on without thinking it would give. The first plate hit the table before I even took off my jacket – charred peppers, bright and blistered, dusted with cyber-saffron so they glowed faintly under the overhead light. Then came zucchini seared until just soft, tossed with nori powder so it smelled like the sea and still had enough snap to make me slow down and chew.

The fish came next – skin-on, grilled until the edges curled and crisped, served with a chimichurri so green it looked alive. The first bite was sharp with herbs, bright with citrus, and hot enough to remind me I was still breathing. Each bite felt like peeling a layer of the night off my shoulders.

The Shadow Alley Cooler arrived in a battered glass, beaded with condensation. It was herbal, cold, and just bitter enough to make my jaw unclench. I didn't realize how tight I'd been until then.

And then, when I was full and warm and ready to sleep sitting up, Mama Jone brought out the grilled peaches. Hot, sticky-sweet, dripping juice that ran down my hand and made me laugh out loud. The sound startled me – I hadn't heard my own laugh since before the run went bad.

Around me, the room was quiet but alive – a couple of orks with their boots off, a decker scrolling something in the corner, a pair of kids asleep on a bench with plates pushed aside. It wasn't just a place to eat. It was a place to stop running for an hour, to be part of something instead of outside looking in.

That's what this meal is – a threshold, a reset button. The Underground saying, "You made it this far. Sit down. Breathe." It's food that puts you back together – not just calories, but something that reminds you what it feels like to be human before you head back out into the night.

The Pocket Feast

Jinx had a rule: if it didn't fit in the shotgun satchel, it didn't come. No exceptions, no "just this once." The bag was patched canvas, straps stitched and re-stitched, one corner dark with soy sauce. You could tell where we were in the night by the sound it made – the thump when she tossed it onto the seat, the zipper hiss when she needed something fast, the soft clatter of containers when the run was over.

"I travel light," she said once, sliding it across her lap. "But I travel fed."

I laughed. "What's in there, a picnic?"

"Bars are for people who gave up," she shot back, pulling out a pouch of cold-brew soykaf. "I don't run to feel empty."

Her van smelled like coffee grounds, solder, and wet pavement. Stickers crawled across the dash, a kettle was bolted to a shelf next to a portable burner, and there was always a blanket or two stuffed into the corner. Jinx didn't just pack food – she packed sanity.

"You ever notice how the worst nights feel twice as long?" she asked one stakeout while rain hammered the windshield. "It's not the job. It's hunger. Hunger makes time meaner." She nudged the satchel toward me. "So I fix it."

She had rules for what went inside. "One-hand food," she said. "If you need a fork, it's dead weight. Pouches, pies, strips, bites. The other hand has to stay free for doors, comms, or hanging on."

"And no crumb avalanches," she added. "If it leaves a trail, it leaves the satchel."

"And no glass," I teased. "You're picky."

"I'm alive," she said, grinning.

She showed me the system one night when we were running late and starving. Four containers, each labeled in her sharp handwriting. "Kick, carry, chew, coast," she said, tapping each one. "The kick wakes you up. The carry fills you without putting you under. The chew keeps your brain from chewing on itself. The coast... that's dessert. The soft landing."

I watched her pack them with the precision of someone loading a rifle: warm things wrapped so they stayed warm, cold drink pouch tucked where it could chill the bag, jerky nested where it wouldn't rattle, sweet bite on top like a promise. Napkins and wipes lived in the front pocket with a lighter and a note that just said BREATHE.

"Why the ritual?" I asked. "Superstition?"

"Structure," she said. "You need muscle memory when everything else is falling apart."

We argued about the contents sometimes – I said the jerky was too tough, she said that was the point. "If it goes down easy, it doesn't last," she said, handing me another strip. "Chew slower. Gives you time to think."

That's Jinx in a nutshell – practical, sharp, and stubborn enough to make sure you survived whether you wanted to or not.

This meal is me trying to honor her system. It's not plated, not polite – it's a kit. Something you can cook on Sunday, pack, and live out of all week. It doesn't slow you down; it keeps you standing. It's food you can eat on a crate, a curb, or the back bumper of a still-running van. Food that reminds you you're not just surviving the night – you're making it yours.

White Box Tradition

You know you've been in Seattle too long when you can hear the clatter of chopsticks and smell sesame oil before you even spot the delivery bike turning the corner. The rider's always got that stack of squat, iconic white boxes strapped down tight – still steaming in the cool night air, their wire handles bobbing like the antennae of some delicious insect. Those little folded paper boxes are older than most of the corps, older than the Matrix, older than half the tech we take for granted. They've been carrying hot meals through rain and traffic since before the Sixth World woke up, and somehow they've survived every trend, every economic crash, every attempt to replace them with "innovative" packaging. You can print soy-steak in the shape of a unicorn now, but if it shows up in anything but a white box, it just ain't the same.

There's a reason for that. The white box is a miracle of design – flat when it's made, origami'd into shape when you need it, with just one tiny tab holding the whole thing together. It's leak-resistant without plastic, sturdy without bulk, and the paper keeps your food hotter than it has any right to. Back in the bad old days of the 20th, they were meant for Chinese-American takeout, and they worked so fragging well that they never went away. You can fill them with noodles, rice, stir-fry, dumplings, bao, even soup if you're careful, and the box doesn't care. It's a portable plate, bowl, and serving dish all in one – just pop the top, fold the sides down, and you're ready to eat anywhere from a corporate plaza bench to the back of a moving van.

But it's not just the portability that makes them special – it's the way they invite sharing. Maybe you've noticed it. One person orders noodles, another gets fried rice, someone else has dumplings, and before long you're passing boxes back and forth like they're precious loot. You grab a bite from one, pass it on, take a bite from another, pass again. It's not like a plated dinner where everything's yours and yours alone – the box is meant to be opened, tilted toward a friend, chopsticks extended in silent invitation. In a city where half your meals might be eaten on the run, those moments of passing and sampling are little acts of connection.

And chopsticks – don't get me started. People who grew up with them know this already, but for the rest of us, the first thing you learn is that chopsticks slow you down. Doesn't matter how hungry you are – you can't just shovel. You have to pick, balance, lift, chew. That rhythm makes you notice the food, and it makes eating together feel like a conversation instead of a competition. In the Sixth World, where most meals come from a dispenser slot, that's not nothing. Passing a box back and forth is saying, Hey, we're in this together.

Of course, in 2070 Seattle, what's inside those white boxes has evolved. Real meat's rare, seafood's a luxury, and vegetables might've been grown in anything from a rooftop greenhouse to a biotank in Redmond. Recipes have adapted to what's available, what's affordable, and what's smuggled in under the radar. The result? Takeout that blends tradition with whatever the market – or the black market – offers. Mango with smoked salmon in your fried rice? Sure. Sweet potato noodles with beet-red chili shrimp? Why not. Neon-glazed chicken with a burn that sneaks up on you? That's just Tuesday.

For this meal, I wanted to build a spread that celebrates the box as a carrier and the table as a community – even if the "table" is an alley crate or the hood of a Jackrabbit. We start with Mango & Smoked Salmon Fried Rice – a salty-sweet balance that eats just as well hot as it does cold. Then there's Soy-Ginger Soykaf Sweet Potato Noodles with Beet-Chili Shrimp, slippery and savory. The Sichuan Green Beans & Burnt Orange Eggplant give you crunch and silk in the same bite, spiked with a little numbing heat and citrus lift. Sweet + Sour + Hot Neon Chicken brings the crackle, the gloss, and that tangy-scorch balance. And finally Fennel + Maple + Almond Cookies, crisp and nutty with an herbal note you don't see coming.

This isn't a meal you sit down with a knife and fork for. It's a meal for running, ducking, waiting out the heat, killing time between contacts. It's a meal you eat in shifts – one hand on your food, the other your gun. And it's a meal meant to be shared, passed from hand to hand until everyone's tasted a bit of everything.

If you're cooking this at home, don't serve it plated. Serve it the way it's meant to be – in boxes. And here's my recommendation: for date night, a long stakeout, or just a cold Seattle evening, pack a box of each dish. Five boxes, two pairs of chopsticks, maybe a thermos of tea or soykaf. Sit together somewhere quiet, open one box at a time, and pass them back and forth. Eat slow. Talk. Steal the last bite without asking. That's the tradition. That's the point.

Wings and a Prayer

Some meals are about comfort. Some are about celebration. Wings and a Prayer? That one's about survival – and not the polite kind you read about in corp HR manuals. I'm talking about those nights when you're running on fumes, counting every cred, every bullet, every second until daylight, and you need food that reminds you you're still breathing.

The name came from a night in the Ork Underground when we were pinned down by a couple of local gangers who didn't like our faces or our business. Our decker kept muttering, "We're flying on wings and a prayer," over the comms, which didn't make any of us feel better. Somehow we made it through – barely – and ended up in a half-legal food stall tucked under a rail support, the air thick with fryer oil and chili steam. The old ork behind the counter handed me a paper basket of wings so hot the bones almost glowed, plus a drink in a chipped highball glass that felt like it had been pulled from another century. We ate with the kind of focus you only have when you know you're still alive because you're chewing.

This meal keeps that spirit – fast enough to eat between trouble, portable enough to carry in one hand, memorable enough to make you forget for a minute what you're running from.

We start with the Neon Fade, a drink that's more than just a pretty face. Gin, loquat syrup, lemon juice, and a whisper of orange bitters make it sweet and floral, but it's the butterfly pea flower that gives it that deep cyberpunk glow. Then there's the menthol – just a pinch – that opens your lungs and cools your nerves like a deep breath in clean air. The trick is in the serve: lemon juice in a side shot glass. You take a sip of Neon Fade, then chase it with lemon – sharp, cleansing, ritual. In Tir circles, they call that "closing the circuit," resetting your head before moving on. I'm not saying I believe in that stuff... but I'm not saying I don't, either.

The main trial comes next: baked chicken wings, two ways. We don't do just "mild" and "hot" here – this is a test. One sauce comes in sweet, then turns the screws with slow, building heat. The other hits fast with vinegar bite and chili sting, then eases off like it's letting you go... before circling back for one more hit. Both sauces cling to the wings like they mean it, the kind of glaze that leaves your fingers sticky no matter how careful you are. That's part of the fun. Wings aren't polite food – they're primal, messy, and best eaten leaning over the box with your elbows out, the sauce running down your wrists.

Now, if you stopped there, you'd be limping into the rest of your night with your mouth on fire and your stomach growling for something crisp and cool. That's why the Cooling Redemption Slaw exists. Napa cabbage for crunch, cucumber for chill, mango for a whisper of sweetness, and kaffir lime leaves so thin they almost disappear into the mix – but the scent stays, like a ghost of citrus that clears your head. Tossed in a sesame-lime dressing and topped with toasted coconut, it's the exact opposite of the wings: calm where they're loud, smooth where they're jagged. In the Underground, some crews serve slaw like this at the end of a hot meal as a sign of peace – you survived the fire, now here's the breath that follows.

The rhythm of this menu is deliberate. Starts off cool and curious, a slow build toward something bolder. The wings are the trial – the fight, the rush, the mess. And the slaw? That's the exhale, the breath you take after you've made it through. Eat it all and you'll feel it: the arc from sharp wake-up to fiery test to calm reset.

And here's the thing – you don't eat Wings and a Prayer alone if you can help it. The Neon Fade looks better when the glass catches your friend's grin across the table. The wings are more fun when you're passing the box back and forth, daring each other to take the last one. And the slaw tastes better when you're laughing about how you both look like you just fought a small war and lost.

So if you're cooking this at home, do it right: make the drink, bake the wings, toss the slaw, and then box it all up. Give each person their own drink, but only one box of each food between two of you. That way you're passing it around, eating with your hands, and stealing bites without asking. That's the whole point – not just feeding yourself, but sharing the survival, the trial, and the relief that comes after.

Because sometimes, all you've really got left are wings... and a prayer.

Kreuzberg-Alfama

Runners' Bundle: Emergency Rations

Some meals are a pause. A quiet place to sit down, shake off the night, and let the world slow to a crawl while the food warms your hands. This isn't one of those meals. This is a meal you eat with one eye on the exit, one hand still on your kit. This one's for when the run goes sideways, the radio's hot with chatter, and you're still sweating off the adrenaline while trying not to leave a trail behind you.

I call this the Runners' Bundle because that's exactly what it is – food built for motion. Not the careful, planned motion of a corporate gala exit, but the frantic kind: vaulting over chain-link, ducking under streetlights, pushing through a crowd at the bazaar. The kind of night where stopping isn't an option and your stomach's growling just loud enough to get you caught if you don't shut it up.

The first time I put this bundle together, it wasn't a chef's experiment – it was survival. We'd just pulled a job in Kreuzberg, an ugly one, full of bad leads and badder luck. Extraction went loud, back routes got burned, and we ended up racing south into Alfama with half the metroplex looking for us. By the time we hit the market district, we were hungry, wired, and running on fumes. And that's when I saw it – the stall with the pretzel wraps steaming in the cold air.

Picture this: I'm crouched behind a delivery van with Jinx and Beast, heart still hammering, smelling ozone and gunpowder on my jacket, and this vendor's handing me a wrap the size of my forearm, glossy brown from the soda bath, stuffed with chorizo, kraut, and mustard that bit like a rattlesnake. Beast and I split it while we ran – two bites each, pass it over, keep moving. By the time we made the docks, the panic had burned off and we were laughing like idiots. The fritters we grabbed on the way became our “don't stop running” food, popped between breaths. And that fizzy spritzer? That was the moment my head finally came back online.

This meal isn't just fuel – it's an anchor. Every piece of it is meant to hit a different switch in your brain. The pretzel wrap gives you something to hold on to – heavy, salty, warm – it tells your body you're not starving anymore. The fritters are fast energy, crispy little packets of salt and protein that keep you upright when your legs want to give out. The Glowphokraut snaps you awake – bright, acidic, and just weird enough to shake you out of whatever spiral your brain's running. And the spritzer? That's your system reset. Cold fizz, fresh herbs, a quick jolt of sugar – suddenly you can see straight and think two steps ahead again.

You don't eat this one sitting down. You tear into it on a loading dock, leaning against a stack of crates while someone watches the alley. You eat it in a van with the engine still running, everyone taking bites in turn. You eat it on a rooftop, feet dangling over the edge, watching the city spin out below you. This is food for the gaps between chaos – the moments where you're not safe yet, but you're alive, and you've got enough of a break to taste it.

I built this menu to be portable because life on the run doesn't give you room for anything else. The pretzel dough bakes up sturdy enough to ride in a pocket for an hour without falling apart. The fritters stay crunchy even when cold, and they taste even better dipped in a little leftover piri-piri. The Glowphokraut can sit for days in a jar, picking up flavor, and it only gets better the longer it waits. And the spritzer is so easy to batch that you can keep a couple bottles on ice in the fridge and grab them when it's go-time.

But more than portability, this bundle's about ritual. You've got to have something to pull you out of the run. Some crews drink, some hit stims, some just crash. For me, it's always been food. Bite by bite, this meal walks you back from the edge: first the salt, then the crunch, then the acid, then the fizz. You finish the last sip, wipe your hands, and you're steady again.

And maybe that's why this one sticks with me so hard. Because every time I make it, I remember that night – the fear, the running, the moment I stopped looking over my shoulder and started looking ahead. It wasn't just a meal. It was the proof we made it out.

Signal Boost

There are days when a runner's whole schedule gets blown to hell. You plan on three solid meals between recon, legwork, and the meet, but instead you get one cup of soykaf and a handful of vending machine soy-curls before it's already midnight and you're still moving.

That's where Signal Boost came from. I didn't plan it, exactly – I pieced it together one job at a time, from four different corners of Seattle, each one when I needed a push to keep going.

First time was a late morning in Touristville, the rain coming down so steady it blurred the whole street into gray. I was cold, soaked, and my head felt like it was wrapped in static. Ducked into a hole-in-the-wall bodega just for shelter, but the kid behind the counter hands me a glass – tall, icy, fizzing – and says, "Try this." Lychee-lime with tonic. First sip was all sweet, then the lime snapped my brain awake, and the tonic bit down like a reminder to keep moving. I walked out of there warm inside and clear-eyed, rain be damned. Filed that one away: when you need to flip the switch, get a Lychee-Lime Fizz.

A couple months later, I was running a quiet job – which usually means trouble waiting to happen – in the Docks. Had to blend in, so I sat down at a stall where an old Japanese guy was working with a stack of nori sheets. He wasn't rolling sushi. He was making these little tied bundles – looked like rice grenades – each one with a bite of crab, avocado, and ginger hidden inside. High nori content, chewy, salty, briny. He sold 'em in bundles of four, tied together so you had to untangle them to get at one. Ate the first without thinking, the second because I couldn't stop, the last two just so I wouldn't be carrying them into a meet. That day I learned that sometimes it's not about portion size, it's about concentration – one good bite can carry you a long way.

The pudding came later, on a scorch-hot day in August when the Barrens were baking and the air smelled like asphalt and ozone. I was there to hand off a package – no time for a meal – but the stall was right there, cold cups lined up in a cooler like treasure. Coconut milk, pineapple juice, big tapioca pearls. First spoonful was like stepping into shade you didn't know was there – sweet, cool, tropical. It was gone in under two minutes, but the memory of it made the rest of the day feel about ten degrees cooler.

The last piece came from a night op up in Everett, when we were burning through calories faster than we could replace them. A fixer friend handed me a small paper sack before we split up. Inside were clusters of puffed rice stuck together with honey, mixed with smoked pecans, tart dried cherries, and shreds of dried pork. I didn't even know I was hungry until the first bite. The crunch, the chew, the mix of sweet, smoky, and sour – it was like my body recognized every nutrient in there and decided we weren't quitting tonight.

It was months later, sitting in my own kitchen, that I realized each of those things had pulled me through a job. Not as a full meal – none of them were more than a snack, really – but as a hit of focus, of energy, of something to keep me moving. And I figured, why not put them together? Four small hits in one bag, each with its own job: the fizz to wake your brain, the sushi bombs for salty, umami fuel, the pudding for cool calm in the middle of chaos, and the rice clusters for the last push when you're running out of steam.

That's Signal Boost. It's not a sit-down, talk-about-your-day kind of meal. It's something you keep in your bag for when the night runs longer than you expected, when you've got blocks to cover and nowhere to stop. It's not meant to fill you up – it's meant to keep you sharp until you get somewhere safe.

And maybe, just maybe, it's a reminder. That even in this city, even when you're running on fumes, you can find those little moments – a cold drink under rain, a bite of perfect sushi by the docks, a cup of pudding in the summer heat, a bag of smoky-sweet crunch in the dark – and pull them together into something that'll keep you moving until the job's done.



Night at the Club

People think nightclubs are just neon traps – places you go to get loud, get lit, and maybe get lucky. Sure, there's plenty of that. But in the shadows, clubs are more than bass and booze. They're crossroads.

You want to meet someone who doesn't want to be found? Lose a tail? Pass off something too hot for daylight? You go to the right club. In the day, the city belongs to the corps and the wage-slaves. At night? The clubs are ours.

Why the Food Matters

I know what you're thinking – “Neon, club food is reheated dumplings and limp fries.” Not in the clubs that matter. The good ones keep their runners standing. They serve plates that reset your head, slow the booze burn, and keep you sharp when the night turns.

Food is also cover. Linger too long without something in your hands and you stand out. But sit over a plate and you're just another crew eating wings. Nobody notices the credstick under the napkin, the datachip in the sauce dish, or the code scrawled in wasabi on the rim.

What All Clubs Have in Common

Doesn't matter if it's a chrome palace or a dive with sticky floors – the lifeblood's the same:

Noise: Thick enough to hide in. Crowds: Packed enough that faces blur. Flow: Music, lights, and service keep you moving.

Even the quiet corners are just there to reset you before throwing you back into the current.

What Makes Each Unique

The flavor. Every club pulls from its city, its people, its history – and the global bleed-over of 2070.

Club Asphyxia in Lagos serves survival in bite form – bites, fritters, rice balls. Grab it, eat it, vanish.

The Cathode Glow in Berlin mashes history into neon – currywurst spring rolls and pho-spätzle.

The Snake Pit throws back to the land – smoke, desert heat, and corn and sage older than borders.

Dante's Inferno seduces – food you eat with your hands, moving you from want to need to obsession.

Hell's Kitchen is collision cuisine – immigrant flavors crashing together in borough-style chaos.

Club Penumbra is the Northwest distilled – salmon three ways, a drink that pops in your mouth like roe, the clientele split between boardroom and back alley.

Each one serves more than what's on the plate – they serve their story.

Why These Meals Made the Cut

I picked these menus like I'd pick a crew for a run: they've got personality, purpose, and staying power. They're built as meals, not random snack piles. Starters pull you in, mains carry the weight, desserts or drinks close the deal.

You could hop clubs all night, letting the flavors tell you where you are and who you might meet. Or you could post up in one, ride the menu like a set list, and see what opportunities drift your way. Because in the shadows, a nightclub isn't just where you party. It's where you survive, connect, and disappear.

If you're doing all that, you might as well eat something worth remembering.

The Cathode Glow

Berlin. Fraggin' beautiful and fraggin' dangerous in the same breath, like a synthpop diva with a monofilament garrote hidden under her skirt.

I was in town running a "culinary exchange" – which is to say, my fixer dumped me here after a bad job in the Redmond Barrens and told me to lay low 'til the heat cooled. I found my way to The Cathode Glow 'cause it's the kinda place that makes you feel like you're inside a datajack – all green neon lines, blue flicker, and bass so deep your cybereyes auto-focus just to keep the room steady.

This joint's wedged between a pawnshop that only deals in obsolete commlinks and a squat full of anarchists running an illegal mesh network. You walk in, and it's all chrome-and-graffiti, booths lit from underneath like they're floating, and a stage where some chromed-out ork girl plays a theremin hooked up to a drum machine that sounds like a hundred rotodrones landing at once.

The air's thick with curry, cigarette smoke, and the kind of ozone smell you get when somebody's running a hot-wired deck too close to the wall socket.

Food here's not just for soaking up the synth-beer. Nah. It's Berlin street bites jacked with flavors that've hitchhiked in from every fraggin' corner of the Sixth World. See, Berlin's like that – Turkish grill masters sharing an alley with Vietnamese noodle carts, bratwurst stands parked next to North African spice vendors. The city's an open-source codebase for flavor, and The Cathode Glow's kitchen runs it like a pro hacker on triple-dose Jazz.

Currywurst Spring Rolls: Now, I know what you're thinking: "Neon, spring rolls? That's not Berlin." But lemme tell ya – you drop bratwurst and knackwurst into a rice wrapper with curry-spiked cabbage, dunk it in a sauce that's half Berlin curry-ketchup and half vinegar bite, and suddenly you're chewing on the Spree's greatest hits. It's messy, handheld, and disappears faster than a credstick in a Barrens bar.

Pho-Spätzle: This one's the mad science project. Picture the soul-soothing beef broth of Saigon's back alleys crashing head-on into the chewy little noodles your oma used to drop into brown butter. Only here, the spätzle's gluten-free – 'cause the punk elf who runs the kitchen has an intolerance – and they're drizzled with curry-leaf butter for a little data-spike of flavor. One sip, one bite, and you're in two worlds at once.

Harissa Carrot & Chickpea Salad: Gotta have something fresh to keep the runners from overheating. Roasted carrots, chickpeas toasted just shy of burnt, tossed with a harissa dressing that sneaks up like a silent Johnson – warm, smoky, and not afraid to leave a mark. Mint and parsley cool it down so you can get back in the fight.

German Turkish Delight: This is dessert for people who don't frag around with subtlety. Rosewater or pomegranate base like the bazaars, but hit with candied ginger, hazelnuts, and cinnamon. It's sweet, chewy, and a little spicy – like getting kissed by somebody who's got other plans for you after dessert.

Overclock: Every runner's got their poison, but caffeine and synth-stims'll burn you out fast. Overclock's the Cathode Glow's way of giving you the charge without the crash. Pineapple and tart cherry for punch, passionfruit for that tropical edge, and a little nutritional yeast to sneak in your B-vitamins. Protein powder to keep your hands steady on the trigger. You drink this, you don't just feel awake – you feel like you're three steps ahead of the room.

This menu? It's not some polished corporate spread you'd see at a Saeder-Krupp boardroom dinner. This is food that's alive – food you eat while you're watching your back, or leaning in close to whisper a deal over the bassline. It's quick, it's dirty, and it's fraggin' unforgettable.

Thing about Berlin is, everyone's running – from a corp, from the cops, from a past they can't delete. And if you're gonna run, you might as well fuel up on something worth remembering.

So pull up a flickering neon stool, chummer. Order fast, eat faster, and don't ask too many questions.

Dante's Inferno

Dante's Inferno isn't just another nightclub – it's a legend in neon and firelight. In a city where the line between night and day is blurred, Dante's took what clubs were doing and raised the stakes until no one else could keep up. Here, food doesn't just fuel the party; it drives the experience, pushes it forward, and keeps it burning long after the music fades.

When Dante's first opened, clubs were about drinks and bass, maybe a plate of fries on the side. But Inferno's kitchen built a reputation as daring as its DJs, proving that quick eats for partiers could grow into something that shapes an entire food culture. Today, Dante's is one of the most influential kitchens in the sprawl. Vendors on the street, mid-tier restaurants, even corp lounges steal from its playbook.

Part of the magic is how Dante's uses space. Each level has its own mood, its own flavor, its own menu. On the top floors, food is fast and easy – handheld bites you can grab without breaking stride on the dance floor. Dumplings, skewers, wraps: everything you can balance in one hand while your other hand clutches a drink. Drop one level and the food shifts. The beats hit heavier, and the plates do too. Fusion-driven small plates meant for sharing, built to surprise, designed to match the chaos of the floor. Go deeper still and you hit the VIP tiers. The music softens, the lights lower, and the dishes rival what you'd find in the city's high-end dining halls: plated with care, indulgent, refined, yet still carrying the Inferno spark. Everywhere you go inside Dante's, the menu changes with the music, but the heart stays the same – bold and unforgettable.

What sets Dante's apart is the way it fuses grit with glamour. Food here is never one thing. It's the late-night skewers you devour on the curb and the fusion desserts served with smoke and flair. It draws from the whole sprawl – Asian, Latin, African, European flavors colliding in ways that shouldn't work but do, because the chefs refuse to respect boundaries. Sweet smashed against spicy, savory twisted with umami, acid cutting through richness. Every plate a burst of neon in the dark: vivid, unexpected, impossible to ignore.

In the early days, the food was pure convenience: grilled meats, fried dumplings, wraps stuffed with herbs and hot sauce – dishes built to be inhaled between dance tracks. But the kitchen crew started experimenting, taking risks, asking: what else could club food be? They weren't content to feed; they wanted to perform. Now, the menu is a series of acts, each one daring the eater to pay attention. The chefs build dishes that hit as hard as the speakers, that grab hold of you and refuse to fade into the background.

The influence spread fast. At first it was just the crowd leaving with new cravings. Food trucks clustered outside Inferno's doors, selling riffs on the plates people had just tasted inside. Then street vendors in other neighborhoods copied the flavors, and suddenly whole corners of the city tasted like Dante's on a Saturday night. Before long, even top-tier restaurants were bending to its gravity, adding Inferno-inspired plates to their menus – usually stripped of the mess, the noise, the wildness that made them great in the first place.

Yet for all that influence, Dante's never forgot its roots. The food remains fast, bold, and built for people in motion. You don't sit down at Dante's – you dive in, you balance a skewer in one hand and a drink in the other, you lick sauce from your wrist before it stains your jacket. The chefs embrace that chaos and use it. Where other kitchens chase precision, Dante's chases energy. Mess is part of the brand. The flavors are sharp, the heat aggressive, the plating encourages you to break the rules. If your fingers aren't sticky and your lips aren't tingling, you haven't really eaten at Inferno.

That's what makes this meal compelling. It isn't a tidy tasting menu – it's a performance, a reflection of the club itself. Each dish is built to surprise you, to grab your attention, to force you to stop and taste before you throw yourself back into the night. They're fast, but never sloppy. They're bold, but never careless. They carry the same wild heartbeat as the dance floor: unpredictable, high-energy, alive.

Cook this meal and step into Dante's world. You'll work with flavors that don't apologize, that hit hard and demand a reaction. You'll build food that mirrors the multicultural sprawl – diverse, chaotic, unforgettable. Some dishes are designed to be eaten on the move, while others invite a moment of stillness, a pause before the next song. Together, they capture the rhythm of a night at Inferno: pulse, break, rise, release.

Welcome to Dante's Inferno. Turn up the music, bring out the fire, and prepare for dishes that don't just fill – they seduce, provoke, and ignite.

Club Penumbra

You ever walk into a place and feel like you just stepped into somebody else's heartbeat? That's Club Penumbra. It doesn't matter if you're a wageslave loosening your tie or a runner just in off a job – you push through those heavy black doors, and the whole world tilts. The light's low, the air's heavy with bass, and the hum of quiet deals is almost louder than the music. Almost.

The joint's older than most of the faces inside, been sitting on the edge of Downtown since before the Crash. No flash signage out front, just a faint glow of a crescent moon over a single word: Penumbra. You only see it if you're looking for it, and only if you're the kind of person who belongs here.

Inside, it's a study in controlled shadows. The main floor's ringed with raised seating – shadowrunner booths, they call 'em – each with a perfect sightline to the center stage where the music shifts between live jazz fusion, synthwave DJs, and the occasional "someone you'd better pay attention to" making an announcement. The crowd's a mixed bag: corporate muscle trying to look casual, street-level fixers greasing palms, and the kind of people who know where to get a dozen fake SINS before breakfast. You watch your back in here, but you also watch your plate.

Now, about the food – Penumbra doesn't serve meals so much as it serves moments. The chef here knows their clientele. Nobody's looking for a white tablecloth three-course spread. You want something that fits in your hand, something you can put down when a conversation turns serious, something you can eat between scanning the crowd. And in Seattle, where the water's always been rich with life, that means salmon – every way you can imagine it, and a few ways you can't.

Hot-smoked salmon on a pile of fries – the kind of thing you tell yourself you'll just have a few bites of, but then your fixer's halfway through their briefing and suddenly you're staring at an empty basket. Blackened salmon folded into tacos with just enough Baja sauce to make you keep licking your fingers, even though you're trying to look cool. And my favorite? A fritter – crisp, golden, still steaming inside – with a ribbon of cold-smoked salmon draped over it like it's posing for a photo nobody's allowed to take. Cream cheese melting just slightly from the heat. It's the kind of bite that stops a conversation dead for two seconds before someone says, "Frag me, that's good."

And the drinks... oh, chummer, the drinks are as much a tell as the food. You see a glass of The Spawning Ground in somebody's hand, and you know they're in it for the long game. Clear spheres in the bottom, like salmon roe, but when you bite 'em? Boom – tart-sweet berry juice bursts across your tongue. Sparkling water sharpens the edge, lemon syrup smooths it back out. It's the club's way of reminding you – nothing here is quite what it looks like.

Thing is, eating here isn't just about taste. It's about playing the part. You take your bites between sentences, you keep your eyes on the room, and you never – ever – let your guard down. But you enjoy it, because Penumbra's the kind of place where enjoyment's a luxury you're allowed... for as long as you can afford it.

Me? I've walked out of Penumbra with a new job, a new contact, and one time, a new scar. But I've never walked out hungry. Not in my stomach, anyway.

The Snake Pit

You don't just walk into the Snake Pit – you get pulled in. Doesn't matter if you were headed somewhere else, minding your own biz in the Auburn night, or just drifting on the breeze of your own thoughts. Somewhere between the smell of mesquite smoke curling down the block and the low thump of a bass drum that feels like it's synced to your pulse, you find yourself at the door.

It's not flashy. Just a sun-bleached sign with a rattler coiled around the name, paint worn thin by wind and grit. But when you push past the thick canvas curtain – no fragile glass door here, omae – it's like stepping into another world.

Inside, the Snake Pit hums with that alive energy you only get when the crowd's half in the moment and half riding the edge of something bigger. The walls are plastered with old concert flyers, tribal art, and sepia-toned portraits of people who could be ancestors or legends – maybe both. There's a haze in the air from the mesquite grill in the back and a hint of sage smoke from the bar. The lighting's low, golden, and flickers just enough to make you second-guess if you saw what you thought you saw in the corner.

And the music? It shifts like the wind it's named for – one minute a driving hand drum rhythm, the next a flute melody that slips right under your skin, sometimes both at once in a way that makes you feel like your heartbeat's been hacked.

The Pit's not just a bar, it's a meeting place. Not the safe, neutral ground of a fixer's office, but the kind of place where deals are sealed with a handshake and a drink, and where breaking your word will get you remembered – and not in a way you want. But frag it, the reason I keep coming back is the food. They call it Taste of the Changing Winds, and it's as much a story as it is a menu. The kind of story that starts bright and fresh, then gets smoky and deep, then ends with a slow burn that stays with you.

First thing they slide in front of you is the Cactus Slaw with Fire-Charred Corn – crisp nopales, sweet corn just blistered enough to pop with flavor, a whisper of lime and honey dressing. It's got that balance of bright and earthy that wakes you up, and it's like the first breath of cool air before a desert storm hits.

Then the anchor of the meal lands – Border Smoke Stew. This ain't your standard chili, chummer. Big chunks of beef or bison so tender they're just holding together, roasted poblano and serrano peppers bringing a smoke and heat that's more depth than burn. No beans, no tomatoes – just meat, peppers, onions, and spice simmered low and slow until it's something you'd follow a coyote through the dark to find.

After that richness, the closer's unexpected – Blue Corn & Sage Shortbread with Chili-Spiced Agave Syrup. It's crumbly, buttery, and nutty from the cornmeal, with sage weaving this grounding, almost meditative note through it. Then you hit it with that warm agave syrup, kissed with chili and cinnamon, and it's like the wind's shifted again – sweet, a little heat on the back end, making sure you're not walking away too fast.

And, of course, there's the Spirit Walk Sangre – the Snake Pit's signature drink. Deep red like it's been poured straight from some old ritual bowl, pomegranate and cranberry tang balanced with lime, smoothed with honey, and just a ghost of chili heat that makes you take your time. It's the kind of drink you sip when you want to think about where you've been and where you're going... or if don't want to think at all.

Thing is, the Snake Pit isn't just a place to eat. It's a place to listen – to the music, to the air shifting when a new crew walks in, to the low murmur at the table in the corner where no one ever seems to get up. It's the kind of joint where food, drink, and deal all taste the same: like something you'll be remembering later, maybe when the wind changes and you can't sleep.

I've sat in that back booth, bowl of stew in front of me, watching the night turn. Watched a fixer make a quiet promise to a street shaman over cactus slaw. Watched a young runner grin into their first bite of shortbread like they'd just been given the keys to the city. Watched a whole room go still when someone important walked in, and the Spirit Walk Sangres hit the table all at once, like a toast without words.

Every time I leave, the wind outside feels different.

Muay Neon

Muay Neon isn't on the tourist guides. Hell, even most locals couldn't tell you exactly where it is unless they've already been pulled into its orbit. You don't "find" Muay Neon – it finds you.

It starts with the smell. Not the heavy grease-and-sugar reek you get from most of the food stalls that crowd the sprawl's alleys, but something sharper, brighter. Lemongrass and kaffir oil cutting through diesel fumes. Chili heat hiding under sweet coconut like a blade under silk. Your stomach answers before your brain even catches up, and before you know it, you're ducking down a side alley lined with flickering neon kanji, Thai script, and English warnings you're not sure are jokes.

The entrance is just a steel door painted the color of dragonfruit skin, lit from above by a pulsing purple tube. A pair of doormen in tailored street leathers and Muay Boran armbands size you up – not for creds, but for nerve. Step inside, and it's another world. The place is a split-level fight ring turned club, all open metalwork and glowing ropes like the squared circle's been possessed by a rave spirit. The air's thick with the scent of sizzling pork and citrus, but underneath it you catch the ghost of sweat and liniment from the fighters warming up in the practice ring at the far end.

Muay Neon runs on rhythm – not just the music, though the DJ booth tucked into a scaffold corner drops a relentless beat stitched from old-school Thai rock, synth bass, and street percussion. It's the rhythm of bodies moving – dancers, servers, shadowrunners weaving between tables with plates balanced like weapons.

And the food? It's built like a fight card. They call it The Five Points of Contact – every dish hits you from a different angle.

They open with the Green Papaya & Pomelo Clash with Chili Jam Crumble – fresh, sharp, sweet, and tangy. Pomelo bursts between your teeth while the green papaya crunches like a training mat under bare feet. Then you get that chili jam crumble – street grit with a sugar edge – and you know they're not here to play nice.

Next up is the crowd-pleaser, Crispy Pork Belly Over Herb-Stuffed Sticky Rice Balls. Each rice ball's a perfect bite, hiding basil, lemongrass, and peanut like a fighter hides a knockout elbow until the last second. Then they drop a slice of crisp-skinned pork belly on top – rich enough to slow you down, salty enough to make you want more.

Between rounds, they throw in the Coconut-Ginger Soup Shot with White Pepper & Kaffir Oil. Small, hot, and deceptively simple – but that white pepper sneaks in like a counterpunch you didn't see coming, and the kaffir oil lingers in your nose long after the shot glass is empty.

The closer? The Red Dragon Elbow – Muay Neon's signature drink. It's as dangerous as it sounds. Watermelon and lychee lure you in, lime brightens the hit, grenadine drops the color, and then the chili tincture lands – not enough to hurt, just enough to let you know you've been touched. If you ask for it "full contact," they'll spike it with white rum and give you a look like they're betting on how long you'll last.

Thing about Muay Neon is, it's not just a place to eat and drink – it's a proving ground. Shadowrunners hash out job details over rice balls, fighters come here to celebrate wins or swallow the burn of losses, and more than one Johnson's scouting new muscle from the fighters in the ring. You feel it in the air: if you can stand the heat, you might just earn your place here.

Me? I've been coming to Muay Neon since before the neon ropes, back when it was just a cramped gym with a wok in the corner. I've seen street kids grow into champions, crews come in green and leave with creds – or not leave at all. But the food's always been the same: five hits, every one of them landing clean.

And when you walk back out into the night, ears ringing from the music, lips tingling from the chili, stomach full but still wanting just one more bite... that's when you know Muay Neon got you.

Hell's Kitchen

Thing about Hell's Kitchen in 2070? It's not a place – it's a pressure cooker.

Old New York grit never really left, it just got dressed up in corp-branded neon and brushed steel. But walk a few blocks west of the tourist strip and you'll hear it – the clash of a hundred languages bouncing off brick walls, steam vents coughing up ghost heat, the smells of five continents fighting for space in the same crowded air.

They call this part of town “The Immigrant's Knife Fight,” and it ain't just about the brawls that still happen in the back alleys. It's about food fighting for your attention – Portuguese spice next to Korean funk next to Sicilian smoke, all of it layered on a Puerto Rican drumbeat. You don't eat here so much as you survive it.

When I was a young tusker fresh in from the Barrens, I didn't have creds for the high-rise sushi bars or the Midtown white-linen spots. But Hell's Kitchen? This place fed me. Pulled me into its swirl. The stalls, the corner joints, the backroom kitchens – didn't matter where you were from, you brought what you had, and you put it on the plate with both hands.

Now, the Knife Fight menu isn't about clean lines and polite forks. This is street fusion at its loudest. You'll be eating with your hands at least once. The flavors aren't here to shake hands – they're here to throw elbows.

We start with The Crosswalk Collision – a plate that looks like a food truck pileup at rush hour. You've got Korean kimchi rubbing shoulders with Italian meatballs, roasted Brussels sprouts caught in the crossfire, Portuguese piri-piri sauce drizzled over everything like graffiti, and dill pickles crashing the party just to make sure your tongue never gets too comfortable. It's messy, it's loud, it's got no business working together – and it works perfectly.

Then we get to the heavyweight – Pulled Pork & Swiss Chard Lasagna, built on rice noodles so the whole table can dig in without worrying about gluten. This isn't your nonna's neat little square. It's slow-cooked pork shoulder, smoky and tender, layered with the kind of marinara that clings to your fingers, bitter greens that cut through the fat, and enough cheese to make your cardiologist wince. We bake it in single-serving ramekins so it comes out bubbling, molten, dangerous.

And then comes the closer, the sweet punch – Smoked Orange & Chili Cannoli. Gluten-free shells fried to shatter between your teeth, stuffed with ricotta kissed with smoked orange zest and just enough chili to remind you you're still in the fight. It's dessert with a smirk, served with a dusting of powdered sugar like the snow that used to fall on this city before climate shift made that a rarity.

Of course, no knife fight's complete without a drink in your hand. The Five Borough Brawl is my caffeine-free answer to the Long Island Iced Tea – barley tea syrup gives you that “tea bite,” five different juices bring the color and the chaos, and zero-proof spirits keep it strong without sending you into the red. One sip and it's like the city itself in a glass – layered, unpredictable, and guaranteed to get in your face.

This meal doesn't tell a quiet story. It's not a gentle romance or a whispered secret. It's a street corner argument that turns into a dance, a shouted greeting across traffic, a dozen cultures colliding in one cramped kitchen and realizing they're stronger together.

And that's what Hell's Kitchen's always been – not a melting pot, but a street fight where everyone walks away with a little bit of the other guy's flavor stuck to 'em. It's about resilience, hustle, and taking your shot whether you're a two-star chef or a kid selling empanadas off a stolen hot plate.

You don't come here to play it safe. You come here to taste something you didn't know you needed.

Club Asphyxia

You ever been to Lagos in the wet season?

Air so thick you could drink it, streets so alive you can't tell if the crowd's moving you forward or holding you under. Smells hit you in waves – diesel smoke, fried plantain, ozone from a lightning strike a block away. And under it all, the constant pulse of drums, voices, and wheels-on-pavement hustle.

Club Asphyxia sits right in the middle of that storm. You don't find it – it finds you. Maybe you follow the neon sign with the flickering palm tree. Maybe you hear the bassline thumping like a heartbeat through the alley walls. Maybe you just catch a whiff of suya smoke drifting in from somewhere you can't quite see. But if you're in the Lagos shadows long enough, sooner or later you end up at its door.

The name's no joke. Step inside and the heat hits you like a freight truck – bodies pressed shoulder-to-shoulder, the air rich with spice and sweat. The lighting's low, all flickers and color shifts, so everyone's skin glows in shades of crimson and gold. The music? A mash of live percussion and synth beats that doesn't just hit your ears – it gets in your bones and starts moving them for you.

Thing is, in Lagos, food's not just about eating. It's about survival – literal and otherwise. You share food here, you're part of the crew. You refuse it, you're just another stranger in a city that chews strangers up and spits them out. That's why the menu here isn't some dainty string of small bites for a slow night. It's a ritual – fast, hot, meant to pull you in before the city can push you back out.

First hit? Neon Suya Bites. Beef cut thin, coated in roasted peanut and spice so bright it feels like sunlight in your mouth. They grill it over open flame, the smoke curling through the air and clinging to your clothes. You eat it with your fingers, a squeeze of lime cutting through the heat, and for a second you forget you've been sweating since you got off the plane.

Then you grab a couple of Black-Eyed Bean Akara Fritters. Crisp outside, soft inside, still steaming from the oil. Street vendors make these in battered pans over open fires, but here, they come out stacked in a pyramid on a tin plate, the cayenne heat building slow in the back of your throat. You pop one after another until you realize your drink's gone and you're already leaning toward the bar for the next round.

They bring the Jollof Rice Balls out quick – because in Lagos, you never know when the party's gonna shift into something rough. Rice cooked down in tomato and spice until it's almost sweet, rolled up with cheese, fried until the outside snaps. Dip them in the extra jollof sauce they slide onto the table and you're grinning before you realize it.

The Plantain Chips with Palm Aioli are what you reach for between everything else. Sweet, salty, thin enough to shatter in your teeth, dipped into that deep-orange palm oil aioli that tastes like smoke and sunlight had a baby. They vanish faster than you expect, and no one at the table's admitting to finishing them.

And holding it all together is The Breathless – Club Asphyxia's signature drink. Hibiscus tea, pomegranate juice, date syrup, cardamom and cinnamon – the kind of thing that feels cool going down but leaves a slow burn in your chest. No caffeine, but the spice and sugar keep you locked in the moment. It's got that sharp-sweet edge that makes you take another sip before you've even put the glass down.

That's the Survival Ritual. You don't linger, you don't pace yourself. You eat, you drink, you keep moving – because in a city like Lagos, the second you stop, you're already behind.

I've seen runners cut deals in here over skewers, corp kids slumming it for the thrill, and locals who don't even blink when the power cuts mid-song. The heat never leaves, the bass never stops, and the food... the food reminds you you're still alive.

And maybe that's why I love it here. In the shadows, it's easy to forget you're more than just the job, more than just the creds. But sit down in Club Asphyxia, breathe in the smoke and spice, and you remember – survival's not just about living. It's about tasting it.



My Place

I grew up in Redmond Barrens. It wasn't called the Barrens back in 2010 – it was a decent place to live. Rows of suburban homes, neatly trimmed hedges, and a sense of community that didn't yet know how fragile it was. My parents, well, they were a mismatch from the start. My dad, Kaito, was a mid-level corp drone from Japan – relocated to Seattle in a transfer that felt more like exile than promotion. He never talked about it much, but the tension in his jaw every time he left for work told me plenty. My mom, Siobhan, was a fiery first-gen Irishwoman, steeped in old traditions and with a temper to match. Oil and vinegar doesn't quite cover it. Dad's precise, methodical ways clashed with Mom's intuitive chaos, and the sparks flew often enough that it's a wonder I wasn't scorched growing up.

Most of my early memories are tied to my mom. She was the constant, the anchor in our household. My dad's long hours at the corp left us to our own devices. Mom had this thing for cooking – part duty, part passion. She made regular pilgrimages to the Japanese grocer in Bellevue and downtown to Pike Place Market. She'd bring back these mismatched hauls: fresh salmon, tamari, daikon, along with the Irish staples she clung to – potatoes, cream, and stout. She cooked for Dad, but she also cooked for me, filling our little kitchen with aromas that seemed to weave both sides of my heritage into something uniquely ours.

The world outside, though, was a different story. In 2011, when I was a year old, the Awakening hit. Magic returned to the world, and everything changed overnight. Elves, dwarves, trolls, and orks – people started changing, transforming, becoming something new and strange. Redmond began its slow decay not long after, as the Great Ghost Dance shook the foundations of the globe. By the time I was eight, the Treaty of Denver had split the map, carving up the United States into pieces. Seattle found itself a treaty city, isolated and yet vital, a hub for those caught between worlds. Redmond? It started sliding into the Barrens, and my nice little neighborhood turned into something grittier, darker, a shadow of what it had been.

Life in Redmond shaped our meals, too. The fusion dishes of my early childhood gave way to a more desperate creativity. The Treaty of Denver meant supply chains broke down, and ingredients Mom once took for granted became scarce. No more bonito flakes or miso paste. Instead, she made do with what she could scrounge – canned goods, dried spices, whatever was left on shelves. Dad hated it, retreating more and more into the sterile, predictable world of corporate cafeterias. Mom, though? She leaned into it. She called it survival cooking, but I think she secretly loved the challenge. I learned to adapt with her, to experiment and taste and tweak until something edible emerged.

The recipes in the following pages come from this tumultuous time, spanning the chaos of my childhood and the upheavals of the world outside. They're Japanese at their core, but filtered through an Irish lens and forged in the fires of Seattle's sprawl. I could have chosen more “traditional” Japanese recipes, but I went with these because they speak to the diversity of Seattle and reflect the types of ingredients you can find in the sprawl today. These recipes are about resilience, about making something beautiful and nourishing in a world that keeps shifting beneath your feet.

By the time I hit my teens, the Barrens were fully entrenched, and I was well-acquainted with the art of making do. Mom stayed true and as stubborn as ever. Together, we learned not just to survive but to thrive in the shadows of a city transformed. Cooking became more than a necessity; it became a way to hold on to something, to tell a story, to connect. And it's that connection I hope to share with you now through these recipes and the memories that cling to them like the scent of dashi lingering in the air long after the pot's been emptied.

For me, these are comfort food and touchstones. As you try these recipes from my childhood, I hope they become the same for you. Sprinkled among the recipes are anecdotes and stories that connect the dishes to moments in my life – some poignant, some chaotic, but all part of the tapestry that made me who I am. So, dive in, experiment, and make these dishes your own. After all, cooking is as much about the journey as it is the destination.

Welcome Home

Listen up, chummer. “My Place” isn’t about the cart, the fold-out tables, or even the mismatched chairs I’ve scrounged from around the sprawl. It’s about something deeper than geography – it’s about creating a space where the armor comes off, where you can sit for a minute and remember what it feels like to be human instead of just another cog in the corporate machine or another shadow in the night.

This meal is what happens when I stop being just another food slinger and start being what I really am: someone who understands that the best conversations happen over shared food, that the most important deals are made when people’s hands are busy with chopsticks instead of weapons, and that sometimes the difference between surviving and living is having somewhere you can go where someone gives a damn.

The flow here isn’t rushed. This isn’t grab-and-go fuel for your next run. This is deliberate, methodical, the kind of meal that forces you to slow down because that’s exactly what you need to do. We start simple – onigiri and ginger beer, little tastes that say “you’re welcome here” without making a big production of it. Something to occupy your hands while you figure out what you want to talk about.

Then comes the ochazuke – warm, liquid comfort that soaks into every corner of your system. It’s the kind of dish that reminds you that healing doesn’t always come from a medkit or a stim patch. Sometimes it comes from warm broth and the understanding that someone took the time to prepare something specifically for you. The roasted potatoes alongside aren’t just sustenance; they’re proof that care can be measured in caramelized edges and the perfect balance of sweet and savory.

The yakitori course is where things get interactive, where the real magic happens. There’s something about grilling together, about the ritual of turning skewers and sharing the work, that breaks down walls faster than any street drug or social enhancer. It’s ancient human behavior – gathering around fire, cooking together, building trust one bite at a time. Whether you’re threading vegetables onto bamboo or arguing about whether the chicken is ready, you’re participating in something that connects us to every generation that came before us, back when community meant survival.

And we finish light – rice crackers that crack between your teeth like small celebrations, sweet enough to remind you that life still holds pleasures worth pursuing, simple enough that you don’t walk away feeling heavy or sluggish. It’s the kind of ending that leaves you satisfied but not sedated, ready to face whatever comes next but carrying the memory of this moment with you.

The drinks matter here too. That ginger beer isn’t just refreshment – it’s alive, fermented, complex. It changes as you drink it, revealing different notes and depths, just like good conversation. The herbal tea at the end is about transition, about moving from the shared space back into your own head, but gently, without the jarring shock of suddenly being alone again.

See, most people in this business think food is just fuel. Calories in, energy out, keep the machine running. But I learned something growing up between two worlds, watching two people who spoke different languages find ways to communicate through what they cooked for each other. Food is language. It’s memory. It’s the difference between existing and belonging.

When you sit down at My Place, you’re not just a customer. You’re not just another runner looking for cheap calories before heading back into the night. You’re someone whose story matters, whose need for connection is just as real as your need for protein and carbohydrates. This meal is my way of saying that you deserve more than just survival rations, that your humanity is worth the extra effort it takes to make something beautiful instead of just functional.

So when you make this meal you’re saying, stay a while. Bring your appetite, sure, but also bring your willingness to be present, to be part of something larger than yourself, to remember that the best meals aren’t just about the food – they’re about the stories we share while we eat it.

Childhood Memories

Look, I'm not gonna lie to you, chummer. Growing up in my house wasn't exactly a storybook. When you've got an Irish mother who thinks garlic is "foreign nonsense" and a Japanese father who believes every meal should honor the sea, dinnertime can become a battlefield. But here's the thing about conflict in the kitchen – it's loud, it's messy, and sometimes it burns the bread. But underneath all that noise, there's love. And eventually, if you're patient enough, that love finds a way to speak a language both sides can understand.

This meal? It's my childhood on a plate. Every dish tells the story of two people who couldn't agree on seasoning but somehow agreed on me (until changed). The oxtail stew is what happened when Ma's love for hearty, stick-to-your-ribs cooking met Da's understanding of umami and depth. She'd brown the meat with the fierce determination of someone feeding a family on dock worker's wages. He'd quietly add miso to the pot when she wasn't looking, and somehow neither of them ever mentioned it, but the stew always tasted better when he did.

The miso-butter colcannon was born from necessity. Ma made colcannon because it was cheap, filling, and reminded her of home. Da ate it because he loved her, but I could see him mentally seasoning it with every bite. One day I caught him stirring miso into butter while she was out, and when she tasted it that night, she just nodded and said, "That's not terrible." For Da, that was basically a marriage proposal all over again.

That soda bread with furikake butter? Pure accident. Ma was making her weekly loaf, Da was preparing his evening snack of buttered bread with nori flakes, and somehow they ended up sharing the same plate. Watching them discover that their separate traditions could not only coexist but actually improve each other – that's when I learned that fusion isn't about compromise. It's about finding the places where different loves can amplify each other.

The hojicha was Da's nightly ritual, but Ma started joining him after particularly difficult days. She'd sit with her own cup, adding honey despite his gentle protests, and they'd share the kind of comfortable silence that only comes after years of learning how to fight and make up. Those were the moments when our house felt less like a cultural battleground and more like home.

And those pickled vegetables? They were the peace treaty. Something sharp and bright that cut through heavy flavors, satisfying both Ma's need for "something with bite" and Da's belief that every meal needed balance. They'd argue about the preparation, but they'd always eat from the same jar.

Here's what I learned watching them navigate two completely different approaches to food and family: comfort isn't about perfection. It's not about having parents who never disagree or meals that go exactly as planned. Comfort is about showing up, even when it's difficult. It's about finding ways to honor where you came from while building something new. It's about the willingness to taste something unfamiliar because someone you love made it with their own hands.

Every time I serve this meal at my cart, I'm serving more than food. I'm serving the memory of a kitchen where Gaelic, Japanese and English mixed with the sounds of chopping vegetables and simmering pots. I'm serving the lesson that love doesn't always speak the same language, but it always finds a way to feed you.

This meal is comfort food, but it's the complicated kind of comfort that comes from real life. It's warm and filling and satisfying, but it also carries the bittersweet taste of growing up between worlds, of parents who loved each other and me enough to keep trying, even when they couldn't agree on whether dinner was supposed to be served with chopsticks or forks.

So when you sit down to eat this, remember: the best comfort food isn't just about the flavors on your plate. It's about the stories those flavors carry, the hands that prepared them, and the love that finds a way to bridge any gap, one meal at a time.

Celebration

There's a special kind of magic in a cheap celebration done right. The kind where the nuyen's light in your pocket but your heart's riding heavy – still pumping from a win, a close call, or just another day survived. Not every victory calls for champagne and corp-catered sushi. Sometimes all you need is heat from the grill, music bouncing off brick walls, and a plate in your hand that says, "Yeah, you earned this."

That's what this meal's about. Not highbrow. Not curated. Just real food with flavor that swings way above its weight class.

See, some folks think celebration has to look a certain way. White tablecloths. Soft jazz. Frag that. That kind of party has its place – just not on this corner of the Sprawl. The truth is, when you've got a little extra cred and something to toast, the best move might be a food cart run. The wings are hot. The drinks are cold. And you don't need to pretend you're anyone but who you are.

That's the philosophy. You don't need big creds to feel big. You just need someone to cook like they mean it, serve it with swagger, and make every bite feel like a little victory. Street food isn't lesser – it's louder. It's joy you can afford, eaten shoulder-to-shoulder with the crew that got you there. And unlike those penthouse parties, out here you can laugh as loud as you want.

And maybe that's the key: celebration isn't about where you do it, it's about how it makes you feel. A good celebration puts fuel in your fire. It reminds you why you hustle in the first place. It marks the moment so it sticks, so that a week or a year later you can still taste the smoke, still hear the beat, still feel the grin on your face. And if you're doing it right, it's not just about food – it's about presence. You, your chummers, the sounds of the street, and a plate that hits like a second wind.

Look around the Barrens on a Friday night and you'll see it plain as day: joy doesn't need a megacorp sponsor. It's a cluster of runners passing a bottle down an alley after a clean job. It's a family stretched three deep around a noodle stand, everyone talking over each other between slurps. It's a busker on the corner keeping rhythm while strangers clap along with greasy fingers. That's the celebration I'm chasing with this meal.

And don't think celebration always has to be loud. Sometimes it's quiet – just two people splitting skewers on the tailgate of a beat-up van, the kind of moment that glows brighter because it doesn't need to impress anyone else. Sometimes it's about tradition – making a dish the way your abuela did, even if the only audience is your crew. Sometimes it's about defiance – raising a cup not just because you won, but because you're still here when half the Sprawl bet you wouldn't be.

That's why this menu was built the way it was. Each dish has the rhythm of a party but the weight of a ritual. It starts with wings that coat your fingers in butter and fire, chased by a ginger fizz with the kick of a street brawl. Then shrimp skewers glazed in hop-citrus sauce, paired with a spiked radar that keeps the mood lifted. And to bring it home? Charred pineapple dripping brown sugar and chili, chased by a Neon Street Shandy that tastes like shouting your own name.

It's messy. It's bright. It's loud. And it's exactly how a street celebration should be. You don't toast with crystal here – you raise whatever glass, bottle, or pouch you've got and clink it hard enough to spill. You don't wait for the perfect song – you make the street itself your soundtrack. You don't dress up – you show up. That's it.

So if you've got a little cred to burn and something worth raising a cup for, don't waste it on a place that'll make you feel small. Come find me. The grill's hot, the cart's bumping, and for tonight? You're not just alive. You're winning.

Recovery

Some meals are for business. Some are for show. Some are for flexing creds and making a point. But this? This meal is for when the show's over. For when the body's bruised, the nerves are shot, and the soul's running on fumes. This is for those moments when everything hurts – and you just need to feel human again.

My cart isn't marked with a cross or a dragon or anything fancy. But there's something wordless that passes from one runner to another, and eventually the busted ones find their way here. They know what I serve. They know what it means. They show up limping, stitched, sleepless, and they don't need a menu. They just need someone to feed them like they're still part of this world.

Recovery food isn't flashy. But it's sacred in its own quiet way. It isn't about carbs or macros or some fragging “performance fuel” paste from a vending machine. It's about giving your body what it actually needs to rebuild. And just as important – what your mind needs to feel grounded again. When you're strung out and stretched thin, real food is a tether. The smell of something warm. The feel of a drink held in two hands. A moment of stillness where your gut says, “Hey. Maybe we made it.”

Because making it through a run is only half the job. The other half is learning how to come back from it.

This meal is built from the ground up to help with that. Every dish here has a role to play – not just nutritionally, but emotionally. Each one says, “You're safe now. You can stop fighting for a minute.”

Start with the kefir lassi – cool, creamy, filled with good bugs to get the gut back online. It's got a little sweetness, a little berry, a mint leaf if you're lucky. That's your welcome. That's your “you're still alive” sip. Pair it with something warm and grounded like the grilled miso-cabbage wedge. It's something to sink their teeth into, but it's not heavy.

Once they're done, give them a minute to rest, to let things settle, then serve the arepas with crispy chicken skin. The chicken skins got a bite of salt, a little fat and a crunch. Paired with the the toasted corn meal and you have something that will get those gut juices moving.

When they've licked their fingers, and the plate clean, offer a small cup of the Found Broth. This isn't a bowl of soup – it's a quiet moment in liquid form. Clear, warm, rich with bone and herb and street smoke. You drink it slow. It doesn't fill you – it centers you. It says, “We're gonna be okay.” It's a bridge between the richness of the chicken to what's coming next, and it helps lead them from the lows of what ever just happened to a better place.

Then bring out the Kabocha Alfredo over rice fettuccine. That's the heart of the meal. It's creamy, gentle, earthy – not heavy, but real. It fills without burdening. And when they're halfway through, when they start leaning back in their seat a little, that's when you slide in the cucumber and seaweed salad with dry smoked salmon. It's bright, clean, mineral-rich – like a cool splash of water to bring them fully back.

End with the herbed lemonade – light, citrusy, just a little herbal. It's hydrating, refreshing, and honest. And if you really want to send them off right, finish with canned peaches in basil-lime syrup. Yeah, I said canned. Real street food magic isn't in the rarity of the ingredients – it's in what you do with them. Steep 'em in basil and lime, serve 'em cold, and you've got a dessert that feels like a whispered promise: Tomorrow's going to be better.

The think to remember when serving this meal is that you're not setting the pace. Your job is to connect with you guests and sense their pace. Give them the space and time to connect with the food, they'll thank you later.

Date Night at the Cart

Love's not about price tags. It's about presence, intention, and flavor that lingers.

There's a kind of romance that doesn't come with roses or rooftop views. It comes from the flicker of a streetlamp and the hiss of a grill. From steam curling off a bowl of noodles on a chilly night and from leaning in close to hear someone laugh over the noise of the city. Love doesn't always look like the trid says it should. Sometimes it looks like two pairs of chopsticks digging into the same dish. Or one last rice cake split in half because it was just too good not to share.

Out here, love shows up in quiet ways. In the effort someone makes when they don't have to – not because they're trying to impress you, but because they want to. Because when someone brings you a dish that's balanced, thoughtful, and cooked just right, it's not about the food anymore. It's about how well they see you. How they've paid attention to the little things: what you like, what makes you close your eyes when you chew, what warms you from the inside out.

This meal is built for that kind of night. Not flashy. Not fancy. But unmistakably intentional. A bowl of chilled soba with citrus zest and just the right bite of umami. Tender bok choy, gently charred and kissed with sesame. Crispy tofu katsu that holds its crunch under warm, golden curry. Every dish is humble, but full of care. It's food that says, "I wanted to do something for you." And that's a kind of love that lasts longer than any bouquet.

Because here's the thing: love lives in the details. In the garlic just barely browned, in the timing between dishes, in the second drink that surprises and delights. You don't need nuyen for that – you just need presence. That's why I built this cart. To be a place where people can show up for each other, even when the world's burning down around them. A place where someone can say, "This is what I can offer. I hope it's enough." And where the answer, most nights, is, "It's more than enough."

So take your time with this meal. Start slow. Sip something bubbly and floral while you slurp noodles in unison. Let the curry linger while you share stories and soft laughter. And when dessert comes – sticky, sweet, and warm from the grill – let it be the last word in a conversation you'll want to have again.

After all, you don't need moonlight when you've got neon. And if the rice cake's grilled just right? That's love.

Rose Ginger Spritz

The Goods: (one serving)

1/2 oz ginger syrup (see note)

1 tsp rosewater (or to taste)

- > Elves know – roses aren't just pretty petals. They're tied to memory, to longing, to the echo of places lost. This drink carries that, if you let it.

- > Whisperwind

1/2 oz lemon juice

8 oz sparkling water or club soda

Ice

Garnish: Lemon twist or edible flower

- > If you're making it for after-hours? A shot of gin folds right in with the ginger. Botanicals on botanicals – smooth, sharp, and dangerous.
- > Elena

The Groove:

Fill a high ball glasses with ice.

In a shaker or jar, combine ginger syrup, rosewater, and lemon juice.

Stir or shake gently.

Divide between glasses and top with sparkling water.

Garnish with a twist of lemon or an edible flower if you're feeling poetic.

Ginger Syrup:

To make ginger syrup: combine 1/2 cup sugar, 1/2 cup water, and 3 inches of peeled, sliced fresh ginger in a saucepan. Simmer 10 minutes, cool, and strain.

- > Don't buy that bottled ginger syrup dreck. Simmer fresh ginger with sugar and water until it burns your nose. Strain it fine and you'll never go back.
- > Flame



Mr. Johnson

Mr. Johnson. Every runner's heard the name, sat across the table from one. He's the ghost in the suit, the handshake in the shadows, the guy who shows up with a smile just warm enough to hide the knife. Doesn't matter if you're working the Barrens or waltzing into a corporate tower, when you hear the words "Mr. Johnson will see you now," the game changes. He's the one holding the credstick, the contract, the strings.

Now, here's the part most people leave out of the stories: sometimes Mr. Johnson buys you dinner. Not soy-noodles from a cart, not reheated stuffer shack bites, but a meal. Food as theater. Food as power. A Johnson doesn't just hire with nuyen – he hires with tone. And what's on the table when you sit down says almost as much as what's in the briefing.

I've seen spreads that felt like a family dinner, where you walked away thinking maybe – just maybe – this suit wasn't half bad. I've had other meals where every bite was a test, where the plate felt heavier than the pistol under the table. Sometimes it's comfort food to patch you up after a run. Sometimes it's guilt food when he already knows half your team won't be coming back. And sometimes it's spectacle so over the top you can't tell if you're being fed or measured like a specimen in a lab.

See, Johnsons understand something the rest of us forget: food sets the stage. A meal lowers defenses, buys trust, or makes you sweat before the job even starts. That bowl of stew isn't just calories – it's a message. Relax. Tension. Belonging. Distance. He decides, and you play your part whether you want to or not.

But here's the kicker: you don't need to be some corp-backed executive to pull the same trick. That's what this chapter's about. I've taken those "high-class" moments – the power dinners, the velvet invitations, the last suppers – and I've rebuilt them for the kind of kitchen you actually live in. You don't need a chef's brigade or a black-card account. You don't even need matching plates. What you need are flavors, a little prep, and the guts to serve like you mean it.

You want to impress a date? Host a crew meeting that doesn't feel like another night hunched over take-out boxes? Throw something together for friends that makes them sit up straighter and say "whoa"? These menus are how you do it. They're built to feel big, to feel intentional, but they're written so you can cook them without selling a kidney or installing a sous-vide rig in your squat.

And don't get me wrong – these aren't about pretending you're a Johnson. They're about flipping the script. Johnsons use meals to control. You get to use them to connect. When you serve one of these spreads, you're not dangling jobs or contracts – you're saying "I wanted you here, I wanted this moment, and I made it for you." That's real power, and it's the kind that lasts longer than any payday.

Each menu in this chapter is built around a different vibe. Some are warm and forgiving, like comfort food with a story. Some are sharp and theatrical, the kind of bites that hit fast and make people talk. Others are heavy, rich, slow – the kind of food that carries weight even after the plates are cleared. You'll notice they're not random piles of recipes. They're structured, start to finish, to play out like a run: an opener, a main push, a twist, a closing move. You don't need the whole crew of dishes every time, but if you run one end to the other, you'll feel the arc.

Think of it like learning a new trick in the kitchen. You don't need to be perfect. The fun's in trying. Mess up a garnish? Nobody cares. Nail a sauce that makes someone close their eyes on the first bite? That's a win worth more than any nuyen bonus. Cooking at this level isn't about intimidation – it's about joy. And yeah, it might look fancy, but I promise, every one of these recipes is something you can pull off at home.

So go ahead. Set the table. Pour the drinks. Play Johnson for a night – not to manipulate, but to impress, to connect, to celebrate. In the shadows, meals can be messages, weapons, apologies. In your hands, they're something better. They're proof that high-class doesn't have to mean out-of-reach.

Suit up your kitchen, omae. Time to serve like a pro.

A Taste of Portugal

If you're lucky, you'll get to work for a Mr. Johnson who's not from Seattle and proud of it. The proud of it I'm talking about is their food. Some Mr. Johnsons cut to the chase, but occasionally you'll run across one who wants to get to know you, and for you to know them before talking about the details of a job, and what better way than to share a meal.

I know some runners are in too much of a hurry, but I say it's their loss 'cause most of the time Mr. Johnson has some serious cred to spend. The meals that have impressed me the most were not just an exotic dish, but when exotic tastes are merged with our local food. These are the ones I remember, not just for the taste, but for the fact that the cook has made an effort to make their food approachable.

The following meal wasn't the work of a Mr. Johnson, but rather a grouping I put together to capture the feel of walking into a restaurant you've never been in, asking for Mr. Johnson, being shown the "backroom", and being caught off guard by the smells and sights of a spread on the table instead of a glass of synth-beer.

This one is from the kingdom of Portugal. They have a long tradition of doing things their own way. While you might think their food would be the same as Spanish food, you'd be wrong.

Sure, Portugal shares a border with Spain, but their food walks a whole different path – one that's older, saltier, and, frankly, gutsier. Portuguese cooks don't flinch at bold flavors. They'll hit you with garlic and vinegar one second, and cradle you with custard and cinnamon the next. It's food made by people who've spent centuries looking both out to sea and back at the land. You've got Moorish spices, Roman preservation tricks, and colonial trade routes all wrapped up in a cuisine that doesn't ask for your approval – it assumes it.

And if you think old-world means outdated, you've never had to fight for a table in a back-alley Lisbon pop-up where they're flash-grilling octopus on ceramic tech recycled from drone plating. Portugal is a kingdom, yeah, but in the Sixth World it's also a crossroads – tradition meets adaptation with a shot of piri-piri. So sit down, slot your comm, and take the offer. Because when the pork hits the table and the custard still jiggles, you'll realize: this isn't a history lesson. It's a power move served warm.

Sprawl Sauce

Ingredients:

- 1/4 cup dark soy sauce
- 1/4 cup rice vinegar
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar or molasses
- 2 tablespoons chili paste or oil
- 1 teaspoon grated ginger
- 1/2 teaspoon ground Szechuan peppercorns
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch dissolved in 2 tablespoons water
- > Finally, a sauce that knows how to bite back. Don't skimp the chili paste, omae. Half the fun is watching your crew sweat while they pretend it's fine.
- > Flame
- > Balance, please. Sweet, sour, heat – none of them should shout louder than the others. A sauce like this should glide, not punch.
- > Elena

Preparation:

Combine soy sauce, vinegar, sugar/molasses, ketchup, ginger, and Szechuan peppercorns in a small saucepan. Heat gently, stirring to dissolve sugar.

- > You want that Szechuan tingle, not a full face-numb – don't overdo it. Or do, if you're cooking for someone who owes you nuyen and pain.
- > Flame

Add the cornstarch slurry and stir constantly until thickened and glossy. Adjust seasoning to balance sweet, sour, and spicy notes.

- > This'll coat meat nice. Double the batch, pour half over pork before roasting, keep the rest for dipping. Trust me – it sticks to your ribs.
- > The Beast

You're Lucky to Be Here

Some Mr. Johnsons buy your loyalty with trust. Some with nuyen. But the rarest of them – the real operators – buy it with spectacle. They don't just hire you; they curate you. You're not talent, you're a talking point. A statement piece. The right shadow in the right room. And when you get the call – not a commlink chirp, but a velvet-lined invitation, encrypted just enough to make you nervous – you know the job's already half done. You've been selected. Not because you're the best. Because you're useful. And because Mr. Johnson wants you to know who's really running the table.

This isn't a meal. It's a performance.

You walk in and everything's been arranged down to the millimeter. No menus. No introductions. Just you and a few hand-picked faces in a room with too much glass, too much space, and soundproofing that makes every footstep feel like a sin. The food doesn't come on plates. It arrives on sculptural slate slabs, floating platters, and once – I swear – a slowly rotating hexagon of obsidian underlit by soft bioluminescent algae. Don't laugh. That fraggin' bite was the best mushroom tart I've ever tasted. Also nearly cost me a contact lens.

The point. You're not being welcomed. You're being calibrated. Measured against a standard you don't set.

Mr. Johnson is playing a long game. He's not here to impress you – he's here to display ownership of the moment. To show his client, his fixer, or whoever's watching that his team – his assets – aren't back-alley amateurs. That when he plays, he plays with style. The food is proof of that. Every amuse-bouche and edible vapor cloud is just another way of saying, "I operate at a level you can't fake."

But don't get too comfortable. Because under all that opulence, there's a current of tension. You're being observed. Scanned. Not just for tells or intent, but for composure. You want to make a good impression? Don't act impressed. Don't gawk. Don't ask what the protein is unless you're ready for it to be vat-grown neotiger or synth-printed Atlantic spider crab from a colony that technically doesn't exist. Just take the bite, hold the eye contact, and say, "Excellent sourcing."

Because this isn't a dinner. It's a power display. Every sip of wine is a ledger entry. Every compliment you give is a minor test of your etiquette, your deference, your understanding of hierarchy. That's what makes it dangerous. Not the food. Not the job. But the performance expectation. You're being asked to play a part you weren't cast for, and if you blow your line – even once – you might find yourself quietly escorted out and scrubbed from future opportunities.

And here's the kicker – the moment you think you're doing well, that you're holding your own? That's when Mr. Johnson turns the table. Maybe he drops a reference to a fixer you've never heard of. Maybe he uses a term you can't place. Maybe he watches how you react when the next course is late by exactly thirteen seconds. He doesn't want to see if you can fight. He wants to see if you know when not to.

Because this kind of Johnson doesn't hire for muscle. He hires for presentation. You don't just do the job – you look like the kind of crew that gets chosen for the job. You're a brand extension. A visual signature. A subtle nod to clients and competitors alike that he plays at a level they can't touch.

Now, don't get me wrong – if you pass this test, the rewards can be long-term. This Johnson will remember you. He'll feed you again. He might even call you for repeat work – high-pay, low-visibility gigs that never show up on the usual channels. But it also means you're marked. You'll be expected to show up polished, in control, and above it all. And if you can't maintain the illusion? You're out. Or worse, you're left in the room while the temperature drops, and you start to realize the meal was the warning – not the reward.

So yeah, enjoy the foie gras foam or the smoke-cured oyster mousse. Sip the highland shochu infused with AI-paired botanicals. But don't let your guard down. Not for a second. This isn't about food. It's about message. And that message is: "You're lucky to be here. Don't forget it."

And if you do? Well... you won't be invited back.

Hunter's Table

Hunting's in our blood, omae. Doesn't matter if you've never held a bow or tracked a hoofprint through the mud – the instinct's still there, buried under concrete and neon. Long before we built cities, we chased what we needed across fields and forests. Sometimes we came back with meat and stories. Sometimes we came back empty, tired, and cold. And sometimes, we didn't come back at all. That was the gamble of the hunt: risk for reward, danger for survival.

Civilization tried to file the teeth off that truth. We built farms, markets, corp towers stacked with vats of protein and soy, shelves that never go empty. At least, that's the story they want you to believe. But every runner knows the old game never really died. It just changed shape. These days the hunt might be for credits on a credstick, or data in a server, or leverage over someone too high up to see your face. Same rules, different prey. You stalk, you wait, you strike, you carry your prize home.

That's the spirit this table carries. On the surface, it's a feast – roasted meats, earthy roots, slow-cooked shallots, flavors that taste like soil and smoke and sweat. The kind of spread that feels primal, even when it's plated neat. But dig under the flavors, and you see the second story: this is what Mr. Johnson sets out when he's hiring hunters of his own. A Johnson doesn't put venison on the table because he's nostalgic. He does it because he's saying, "You're the wolves tonight. The quarry's out there, and I'll pay you to bring it down."

Hunting's always had two faces. It's survival. You go out because your people need food, your family needs warmth, your belly's empty. That's the earthy side – the shallot tart, the root mash, food that tastes like the land and the labor it took to live there. On the other side, hunting's always been wrapped up in myth. Think of the Wild Hunt stories – riders in the dark, hooves pounding, hounds baying, chasing souls through storm and night. The hunters weren't just men and women, they were forces: death, fate, inevitability. Step into their path and you didn't get away. That's the runner's side of the story. Not survival, but contract. You're called into the hunt because someone's quarry must fall, and you're the one who'll make sure it does.

This menu leans into both faces. The Caramelized Shallot Tart is patience made visible – waiting out the slow burn, knowing the prize is richer for the time you invest. The lamb on plantains tells the story of the chase three ways: spicy for the thrill, sweet for the victory, sour for the cost. The tri-tip roast with root mash is the hunt's prize made heavy, a reminder that real bounty doesn't come cheap. And the Velvet Bloom at the end? That's the release, the calm after the storm, proof that even the fiercest hunters crave peace once the chase is done.

But here's the thing about the hunt, chummer: it's never just about food. In the Sixth World, a Johnson lays a table like this not just to feed you, but to shape you. He's binding strangers together with meat and ritual. He's saying, "This is your role now. You're not scavengers, you're predators. Work together, strike together, and you'll eat together." Food becomes theater, and the table becomes a stage where the hunt is set in motion before the job's even briefed.

We don't have to use it that way. We can reclaim the hunt, strip it of the leash. Hunting doesn't have to mean running at someone else's quarry. It can mean chasing down joy, chasing down connection, chasing down that sense of belonging we're all starved for in a city that keeps trying to scatter us apart. Lay this table for your friends, your neighbors, even strangers, and you're not just serving food – you're serving a reminder that we can still be a pack, still share the prize, still sit together as more than competitors.

The hunter mythos is powerful because it's older than memory. It whispers that life isn't safe, that survival requires courage, patience, and risk. But it also whispers that no one hunts alone. Even the Wild Hunt rides in numbers. Even wolves run in packs. When you set this spread, you're calling back that truth: whether it's for meat, for credits, or for meaning, the hunt is always stronger when the table's full.

So welcome to the Hunter's Table. Here, the meat is seared, the roots are mashed, the drink is poured, and the stories are waiting. Some will eat and think only of bounty. Others will taste the call of the job. Either way, the hunt goes on – and for tonight, you've got a seat at the fire, a place in the pack, and a share of the prize. That's worth raising a glass to.

The Last Supper

Sometimes it is in their tone. Sometimes in their unwillingness to answer a simple question. Or maybe their insistence on how easy the job is. However, when you see it in the food they serve you, there's no question about it – things are going to get frag'n bad before the run is done. And don't bother asking for more nuyen, the meal is the bonus. If Mr. Johnson is willing to give you more, run away, because it means he's not planning on giving you anything.

Now, I've had all kinds of pre-job meals. Boxed soy-noodles wolfed down in the back of a speeding van. Protein cubes passed around like communion wafers. One time we were handed vitamin packs and a canteen of "electrolyte-balanced hydration fluid" like we were heading into a firefight with malnutrition. But every so often... you get the kind of meal that's not tactical. It's not practical. It's not business.

It's guilt.

And guilt doesn't come in rations. It comes in slow-roasted meat, in hot bread with real butter, in drinks that come warm and second-poured. It's layered like a dish built by someone who knew what they were doing – and knew they'd never see you again. A last supper, plain and simple. That's the psychology of it: not to arm the body, but to disarm the mind. To say I see you as human. The thing is, it works. No one wants to believe they're being served their last meal. And if the food is good enough, part of you hopes you're wrong.

See, the trick to serving a last meal without saying it out loud is you have to mean it. Not pretend. Not posture. You have to dig into that primal instinct every cook has – the one that knows when someone's got a storm on the horizon and nothing will stop it. That's when you give them something warm, something real, something slow. It's the universal apology. It's not about forgiveness. It's about acknowledgment. The best last meals aren't about closing a deal. They're about saying I know this isn't fair. And I can't stop it. But I can make this one thing better.

This meal – this one right here – was served to me by a Mr. Johnson who couldn't look us in the eyes. Said his client wanted to "build goodwill." Said he was authorized to "host a morale event." Said a lot of things. What he didn't say was the corp already signed off on casualties. That we were cover, not the actual play. That the real team was going in behind us, once the alarms were tripped and the hostiles softened up. We were, as the briefing called it, "a compelling distraction."

He served it in a rented mid-rise with exposed brick and real flatware. Small table, no guards in the room, lights just a touch too warm. First came the mac – not one, but three bowls of it, served on a reclaimed slate slab. One sharp and smoky, like a memory. One gooey enough to make you pause mid-conversation. And one with goat cheese and paneer, which didn't make sense until it hit your tongue and suddenly did. Then the roast – tri-tip over a mash of turnip and beet, earthy and rich, bleeding its own kind of truth across the plate. Dessert was Irish bread pudding with butterscotch and cream, served like a story he wasn't ready to tell. The drink was warm, oat and cider – the kind you sip while you figure out if you're going to run or stay. We stayed.

Three of us came back.

So, if you're ever the one hosting – if you find yourself in the position of being the Mr. Johnson who already knows how it's going to end – here's my advice.

First, don't lie more than you have to. The best liars in the room are always the ones who lie the least. Serve the food like it's what you always do. No flourish. No announcement. Let the smells do the talking. Let the silence carry some weight.

Second, make the food feel earned. This isn't a bribe. This isn't hush money. This is an unspoken acknowledgment of what's being asked. If it tastes like a payoff, it'll breed suspicion. But if it tastes like care, it might buy you a shred of mercy later.

And finally, never sit down with them. Not if you know the odds. Because once you break bread, really

Well Done, Pop the Bubbly

You don't get a lot of wins in this line of work. Not clean ones. Not the kind where everyone walks away with full clips, no burn marks, and a little more cred than they started with. Most runs end in triage or tequila, and sometimes both. So when a run goes right – really right – it feels... off. Like the universe forgot to balance the ledger. You half expect a second explosion, or a sniper on the next rooftop. You twitch when things are too quiet.

So when a Mr. Johnson actually calls you back – not for cleanup, not for the obligatory second half of your pay, but to invite you in – you check your instincts. And your weapons. You stall. You look for the hook. Because we've all heard the stories: team gets invited to a follow-up meeting and disappears between courses. So yeah, caution's part of the meal.

But then you arrive, and the vibe is different. It's a private room – music just low enough to talk over, light just warm enough to feel flattering. The kind of room where drinks are waiting before you sit, and the staff already knows your handle. It starts to click: this isn't a trap. This is a thank-you. And not the kind you get in nuyen. This is Mr. Johnson saying, "You surprised me. You exceeded expectations. And that? That deserves more than a bank transfer."

See, here's the thing most runners forget: Mr. Johnson isn't just a fixer's suit or a walking paycheck. He's a node in a network, just like you. He might be climbing, might already be high up, but no matter where he stands, he's watching for talent. And when you deliver something above spec – more intel than expected, cleaner execution, fewer bodies, bonus leverage – you stop being a tool and start being an asset. That's a promotion you don't see on paper. You see it here, in the food. In the presentation. In the company you're keeping.

The psychology of it is simple, really. Money disappears. It pays rent, debt, ammo. But a moment? A moment lingers. Johnsons don't always give you more money – half the time, they can't. But they can give you a memory that feels like more. A fancy drink, a bite-sized masterpiece, a second glass raised in your honor. That stuff sticks. It earns goodwill. It builds trust. And in this biz, trust is currency that spends better than nuyen.

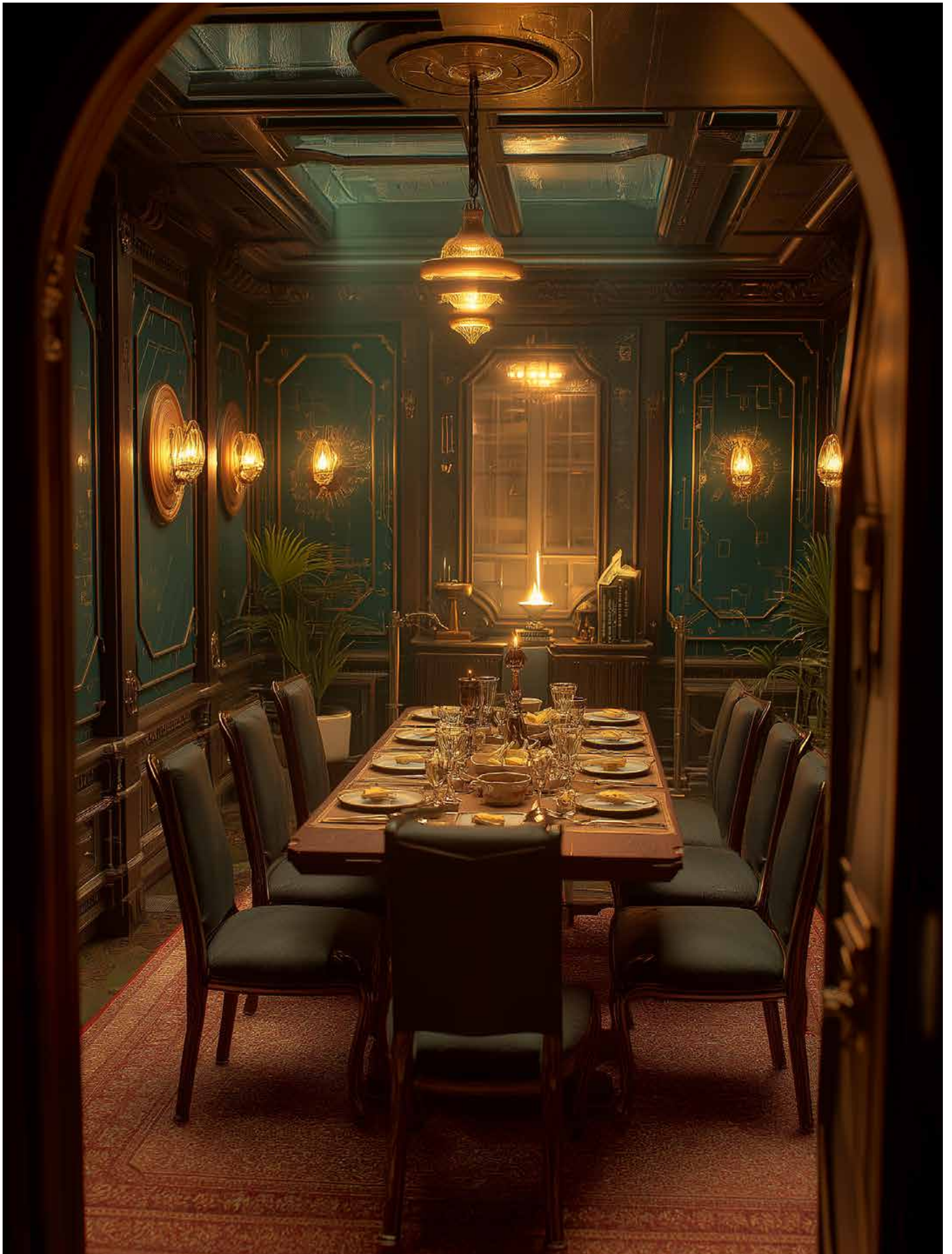
And don't forget – this isn't just a celebration. It's a test. This is the soft handshake, the vibe-check, the moment where a Mr. Johnson decides whether to keep your number on speed dial or drop it in the archive. How you carry yourself in this room – how you drink, how you toast, how you treat the server who brings that fourth perfectly timed bite – says just as much as your hit percentage or matrix dive record. He's not just rewarding you. He's assessing you. Is this team a fluke? Or is this the beginning of a beautiful, billable relationship?

So yeah, enjoy it. Take the mimosa – real fruit, glowing shimmer, probably laced with the good stuff. Take the bite of duck on crispy rice and let it make you forget the last safehouse meal you choked down cold. Laugh. Let yourself be seen. But never forget: every celebration is also an audition. Every bite is a message. The job's done. You won. But the game? The game is still on.

And if you play it right? That Johnson might not just be tonight's host. He might be next month's lifeline. Or next year's escape plan. So eat up. Smile wide. Leave an impression. And toast like someone who knows they're getting invited back.

And spin this for your crew. Did they get your back. Was the plan good. Is no one leaking. Pull up this spread as a way to say both, "We did it," and "Thank you." This is especially true if this is not your crew, but a one time run. Show them that you'd like to be a crew. Get them to laugh and talk about how well the team worked.

Played right, you can do the same thing as Mr. Johnson, encourage the bonds that have started to form and turn this group of strangers into your next crew. Who knows, maybe this will be the start of a string of wins – it could happen. Not likely, but it could.



Corporate Pinnacle

Here we are, chummer. The top floor. The big show. The last chapter of this book.

Corporate Pinnacle. Sounds fancy, right? Like some marketing slogan for a luxury tower you and I will never set foot in. And that's kind of the point. This is the food of the 0.01% – the kind of spreads you read about in glossy corp magazines or catch a glimpse of on trideo when an exec's gala makes the newsfeed. For most of us, these meals might as well be staged on the moon. Prices so high they don't bother printing them. Ingredients airlifted from halfway around the world. Plating so precise the chef must have used a ruler.

So why end the book here, with meals you'll probably never eat in their natural habitat? Simple. Because food isn't just about access – it's about imagination. It's about taking something you thought was out of reach and saying, "Nah, omae, I can make this my own."

See, the message behind this food is power. Corporate dining isn't about filling bellies – it's about filling boardrooms with theater. Every plate is a statement. Every garnish is a flex. It tells you who has the resources, who has the control, who can drop more cred on a single appetizer than most families spend in a month. The suits sitting at those tables don't just eat – they perform. They negotiate billion-nuyen contracts while sipping drinks that look like liquid shadows. They toast mergers with cocktails designed to catch fire at just the right moment. They chew loyalty, swallow tradition, and wash it down with control.

And yeah, it's easy to roll your eyes. Easy to say this has nothing to do with you. But here's the secret: strip away the showmanship, and what's left is just food. Ingredients. Heat. Timing. The same things you and I have been working with this whole book. Sure, the board might be dining eighty-seven floors above the sprawl, but the asparagus wrapped in bacon? The figs baked with honey? The clams steaming open in broth? Those are things you can make, right in your own kitchen.

That's why you should care. Because when you cook these meals, you're not pretending to be a corp exec – you're flipping the script. You're taking their power move and making it yours. You don't need a black card or a dragon's invitation. All you need is the guts to try.

This chapter is about more than recipes. It's about seeing what precision looks like when money is no object, and then figuring out how to hack it for real life. Maybe you can't source saffron that costs more than rent – but you can grab a decent pinch from the market and let it shine in a dish. Maybe you don't have a dome ceiling that projects constellations – but you can dim the lights, put on some music, and let the food set the mood. The point isn't to recreate the setting. The point is to bring the experience down to earth.

And here's the kicker: when you do, you'll realize these meals aren't untouchable. They're just another way to connect. Just like the street food at the start of this book, or the cart meals that keep a crew running, or the club plates that double as cover for a job – these high-class spreads are still about sharing. About saying, "I made this for you." The difference is, now you're showing your people a side of the world they'd never get to see otherwise.

So don't be intimidated. Don't think this chapter's about showing off or cooking like some tower-trained chef. It's about inspiration. It's about taking the pinnacle and planting it on your own table, even if that table's scarred wood and chipped bowls. It's about learning that precision isn't reserved for the elite, and that luxury is something you can build with your own hands.

This is the end of the book, but not the end of the story. The other chapters gave you grit, hustle, comfort, connection. This one? This is your chance to prove to yourself that you can take even the highest walls and find a way over. Not for the sake of imitation, but for the sake of joy.

So step up, omae. The menus in this chapter are waiting. Put on some music, clear a little counter space, and dive in. Because once you've cooked at the pinnacle – even just once – you'll know the truth: food is never out of reach. Not if you've got the will, the fire, and a sharp enough knife.

風花 (Kazahana)

Platinum Harvest

There are some gigs you take because the nuyen's good, and some you take because they change how you see the world. Working three weeks in Kazahana, Renraku's executive dining room on the eighty-seventh floor of the Arcology, was both.

I didn't land it the way you think. No silver-spoon chef network, no polished résumé. Just a fixer who knew someone who knew someone. Renraku's top chef was down with food poisoning, half his staff was wrecked by some flu making the rounds, and they had a board dinner set in stone. When megacorps get desperate, they make strange calls. That time, the call was: "hire the troll who can actually cook."

The background check took longer than the interview. They scanned my SIN six ways from Sunday, had me cook test dishes under armed guard, and shoved more NDAs in my face than I've seen runners use for a triple-A datasteal. But here's the thing—they didn't care if I was a runner, or a Barrens cart-chef, or a troll who stood out like a tank in a teahouse. They cared if I could hold a knife steady under pressure and not frag up a plate in front of the most powerful suits in the tower. My street rep worked in my favor: if I could keep my cool with bullets flying, maybe I could keep my cool with shareholders watching.

Kazahana didn't look like any kitchen I'd ever set foot in. Everything gleamed—not the patched-together chrome of street stalls, but the kind of shine that comes from budgets without ceilings. Floors scrubbed so clean you'd swear no one ever cooked there. Steel knives sharper than gossip, stoves humming with precision instead of rattling on their last legs. Even the air was different: chilled, filtered, perfumed faintly with cedar smoke and citrus. It wasn't just a kitchen; it was a statement. This is what unlimited resources taste like.

The head chef, Tanaka-san, was old-school Japanese. Eyes like a hawk, movements so precise you'd think he was slicing air instead of salmon. He looked at me like I was a puzzle he wasn't sure he wanted to solve.

"You cook?" he asked in clipped English.

"Yeah," I said. "I cook."

He handed me a knife. Real steel. Perfectly balanced. Worth more than my cart and half the block it sat on. "Show me."

Three hours later I'd broken down a salmon, brewed miso from scratch, and plated dishes like my life depended on it. Maybe it did. He gave me a single nod. That was all the approval I was going to get. But in that nod was an entire contract: I was in.

That's how I got introduced to Platinum Harvest.

This wasn't just a menu. It was Tanaka's masterpiece—a progression he'd spent two years honing for Renraku's most important occasions. Every dish balanced against the next. Every garnish tested, rejected, perfected. Every sauce whisked until it gleamed like lacquer. It was corporate fine dining as performance art.

The first course set the tone: Black Ice. A cocktail black as shadow, activated charcoal turning it into something that looked more like malware than a drink. Executives love theater, and this was their opening act. Watching them swirl the glass, ink swirling like smoke inside, while they negotiated deals worth billions—it made me realize something. The drink wasn't there to refresh them. It was there to remind them they were drinking something no one else could. Exclusivity in liquid form.

Then came the Fennel and Citrus Salad. On paper? Just a salad. On the plate? A reminder of their supposed "healthy lifestyle." Fennel shaved so thin it curled, citrus gleaming like jewels, pansies scattered like tiny edible signatures. You don't eat flowers because you're hungry. You eat flowers to prove you can.

Next, the Sprawl-Wrapped Asparagus Wellington. This one was Tanaka's little rebellion. Bacon-wrapped asparagus—comfort food at its core—but dressed up until even the board had to pretend it was high art. I watched execs bite down and realize that underneath all the polish, they were eating the same stuff that kept a hundred street crews fed after a long night. It was a joke in plain sight, and only Tanaka and I were in on it.

Then came the dish that made me sweat: Sake Butter Scallops. Perfect sear, razor-thin timing, sauce reduction balanced like a blade's edge. The kind of dish where one second too long meant ruin. I learned more about sauce work that night than in years of running my own grill. Tanaka's rule was simple: don't waste, don't rush, don't settle. Executives could buy and sell entire city blocks, but they couldn't buy back a broken sauce.

The sides—Rosemary Garlic Potatoes and Maple Glazed Carrots—looked like afterthoughts. But that's the thing: in this world, nothing's an afterthought. Potatoes flown in from some farm where each tuber got more attention than most of us do in a lifetime. Maple syrup aged in barrels that cost more than a runner's deck. Carrots cut, glazed, and plated so each one pointed the same way like they were in formation. Even the simplest plate became a statement of control.

And the close? That was the real flex. Blueberry and Lavender Chia Pudding. Light, floral, healthy-looking, dressed up with edible blossoms. It wasn't dessert. It was indulgence disguised as discipline. A dish that let execs tell themselves they were virtuous, even while the blueberry syrup dripped down their lips. And of course, it didn't end there—they got a choice. Coffee laced with sake and brown butter syrup, or a violet-mist cocktail, each one designed to flatter their sense of importance.

Watching them eat was its own education. They didn't just taste the food. They tasted their own power. The forks didn't clink by accident. The silence between courses was engineered. Even the waitstaff were part of the performance, stepping forward in unison like an orchestra hitting its cue. The entire night was scripted to remind them of who they were: people who controlled lives, companies, entire city blocks.

What struck me most wasn't just the food or the theater—it was how fragile it all felt. I could see the tension in their jaws, the way a few forked at their plates without ever tasting, already calculating the next deal. They sat above the city, dining on perfection, but none of it made them happy. For all the precision, all the extravagance, it still felt like armor they wore to hide their hunger for more. That realization stuck with me: perfection alone isn't enough to satisfy.

And yet, in the middle of all that, I learned something I carried back to my cart. Precision matters. Care matters. Plating matters. Even a simple potato can become art if you treat it like it deserves to be more. Tanaka called it Platinum Harvest not because the ingredients cost more than rent (though they did), but because it was about pulling the best from the earth and turning it into power.

The day I left, he handed me a small bottle of sake. "For your cart," he said, and nodded once. Same nod as the first day. That bottle's still on my shelf, unopened. Because some things you don't waste unless the moment demands it.

So here's my advice: don't look at this menu and think it's out of your reach. Strip it down. Rebuild it for your kitchen. You don't need the eighty-seventh floor, or knives worth more than your bike, or staff marching in step. What you need is patience, attention, and the guts to plate it like you mean it. That's the real harvest—the platinum's just the shine.

The Standing Stone

There are gigs you take for the nuyen, gigs you take for the connections, and gigs you take because you need to see how the other half lives. Working at The Standing Stone was all three, and it left me more conflicted than a decker caught between two ice programs.

The fixer who got me the job warned me it would be “challenging.” What he didn’t mention was that I’d be participating in the most elaborate piece of elven supremacist theater this side of Tír Tairngire. But the pay was three times my usual rate, and I’d never seen inside a place like this. Sometimes you swallow your pride for education.

The Standing Stone sits in the heart of Bellevue, disguised as just another corpo dining establishment until you get inside. The moment you pass through the eastern entrance – and there’s only one way in, because elves love their symbolism – you’re in a different world. The space is a perfect circle, maybe sixty meters across, with a massive dome overhead that starts the evening showing Seattle’s actual sunset and gradually transitions to a star field so realistic you’ll forget you’re indoors.

But the centerpiece is the Stone itself. Eight meters of genuine Irish limestone, carved with spirals that seem to shift in the light, sitting dead center like some ancient god’s dinner table. The elves had it shipped from County Cork, stone by stone, and reassembled by “authentic” druids they flew in from the Celtic League. The thing probably cost more than most runners make in a lifetime, and it serves no practical purpose except to make everyone feel like they’re dining in the presence of something sacred.

Eight pentagonal tables radiate out from the Stone at the compass points – North, Northeast, East, and so on. Each table seats ten in chairs that curve around the five-sided surface, ensuring no one sits directly across from anyone else. “Promotes harmony,” the head server explained during orientation. What it really promotes is pretension, but the ergonomics are surprisingly comfortable. Each table has a brazier sunk into its center, real wood fires that the elves claim represent “the eternal flame of wisdom” but mostly serve to keep the food warm and create dramatic lighting.

The acoustics are something else. Eight fountains along the outer walls create this constant backdrop of falling water – not loud enough to interfere with conversation, but present enough that you never quite forget it’s there. Combined with the soft crackling of the fires, it’s like dining inside a very expensive nature documentary.

The whole operation runs on precise choreography. Guests enter through the East at sunset – exactly sunset, no earlier, no later – and are seated as the dome shows the last light touching the horizon. Throughout the evening, servers emerge from two of the four doors at the cardinal points: drinks from the North, food from the South, with the East and West reserved for entrance and exit respectfully. It’s all very mystical and orderly, which is peak elf.

But here’s where it gets twisted: the serving ritual. See, the elves don’t just want to eat their fancy food – they want to turn the whole experience into a performance where the “lesser races” demonstrate their “elemental natures” for elven entertainment. Each course is served by a different metatype, dressed in ceremonial robes that make you look like you’re auditioning for a very expensive Renaissance fair.

Marcus handled Water – the opening tea and soup course. He’s human, mid-thirties, probably supporting kids somewhere but swallowing his dignity for the pay. They dressed him in flowing blue-grey robes that looked like stylized waves, with a circlet of silver that caught the light. His lines were pure elven mysticism: “The waters of wisdom flow through conscious thought, washing clean the vessel of understanding.” He’d bring the chamomile tea and chilled soup to each table, moving in this practiced glide that took weeks to perfect. The elves would nod approvingly, like he was confirming their theories about human emotional nature.

Thorek was Earth – the Kabocha Squash Alfredo course. Dwarf, built like a brick shithouse but surprisingly graceful when he wanted to be. His robes were deep brown and green, weighted with actual stones sewn

into the fabric so they didn't flow – they hung. Copper bracers on his arms, boots that looked hand-forged. His bit: "From stone and soil springs abundance, the foundation that nourishes all who build wisely." He'd present the alfredo with these formal gestures, setting each plate down like he was laying the cornerstone of a building. The elves ate it up – literally and figuratively.

Korak handled Air – the sautéed spinach course. Ork, lean for his kind, with tusks filed down to points that caught the firelight. They put him in pale green robes that actually did flow, lighter than air, with a crown made of woven grass and small bells that chimed softly when he moved. "The breath of life stirs growth in humble places, teaching strength through flexibility." Watching a two-meter ork glide between tables while tiny bells announced his presence was surreal, but he carried it off with more dignity than I expected. The spinach was perfectly prepared – bright, simple, exactly what the palate needed between the rich alfredo and the sweet finish.

And then there was me – Fire. They saved Fire for the troll, because of course they did. Nothing says "primal elemental force" like having the biggest, supposedly most primitive metatype handle the culminating moment of their precious ceremony.

My costume was something else. Deep red robes that somehow managed to look both ancient and futuristic, with bronze bracers that had been heated and cooled to create flame patterns in the metal. A torque around my neck made of twisted copper and gold, heavy enough that I felt it with every movement. But the crown – fraggin' hell, the crown. They called it a "diadem of flame," made from some kind of memory metal that shifted color with the heat from my body, cycling through reds and oranges and golds like I had actual fire dancing around my head.

The ceremony for my course was the most elaborate. I'd emerge from the Southern door carrying a silver tray with the baked figs and the nightcaps, moving to the center of the room near the Standing Stone. The dome overhead would be showing the full moon by then, and all the table fires would dim except for a ring of larger braziers around the Stone that would flare to life as I approached.

My lines were pure theater: "In fire's heart lies transformation, the sacred flame that lifts matter to spirit." I'd stand there in the moonlight, this massive troll in elaborate robes, speaking words about transcendence while elves sat around watching the show. Then I'd visit each table, serving the figs with practiced precision and pouring the nightcaps with ceremony that would make a Japanese tea master proud.

The worst part? I was good at it. Weeks of training had turned me into something between a waiter and a performance artist, and I found myself taking pride in the precision, the timing, the way the whole elaborate dance came together. The elves weren't just paying for the food – they were paying for this fantasy where they got to sit in judgment while the other races performed their "essential natures" for entertainment.

But here's what really got to me: the food was exceptional. Not just good – exceptional. The chamomile gin cocktail Marcus served was perfectly balanced, botanical and floral without being cloying. The soup was like drinking liquid silk with subtle flavors that built as you ate. Thorek's alfredo was rich and complex, the kabocha squash adding sweetness that played against the cheese without being obvious about it. Korak's spinach course was deceptively simple – just greens, garlic, and pine nuts, but prepared with precision that turned basic ingredients into something elegant. And my figs... fraggin' hell, those figs were perfect. Sweet, warm, the honey and walnuts adding texture and depth that made each bite better than the last.

Every night, I'd watch the guests – corporate elites, government officials, the kind of people who shaped the world from their pentagonal tables. They'd start the evening looking superior and smug, but by the time I was serving the figs, even the most arrogant ones were caught up in the experience. The combination of the setting, the ceremony, and the absolutely perfect food created something that was hard to dismiss, even when you knew it was theater.

The elves running the place understood something fundamental about power: it's not enough to have

money or influence. Real power is making others participate in your vision of how things should be. Every night at The Standing Stone, eighty of the most powerful people in the UCAS sat around a stolen Irish monument, eating food served by other races dressed as elemental spirits, convinced they were participating in something profound and ancient.

And the most messed-up part? They kind of were. Strip away the supremacist bullshit and the racial roleplay, and what you had was a genuinely transformative dining experience. The progression of flavors, the choreographed timing, the way each element built on the last – it worked. It really worked. The elves had taken their arrogance and pretension and used it to create something that was, I have to admit, pretty close to art.

I lasted six months before I couldn't stomach the roleplay anymore. The money was incredible, the food was the best I'd ever tasted, and I learned things about fine dining that I still use today. But every night, I had to put on those robes and speak those lines and participate in a fantasy where my race existed to serve elven entertainment.

The breaking point came the night one of the Princes of Tír Tairngire decided to grace Bellevue with his presence. You could feel the tension the moment he arrived – the dome seemed to shine brighter, the servers stood taller, and every elf in the room sat a little straighter, like schoolkids waiting for inspection. The rest of us backstage knew it too: no mistakes, no missed cues, no nerves. We were told, very clearly, that we were not serving food that night. We were serving a legend - we weren't sure if it was our story or the prince he was talking about, but it didn't mater.

And frag me if we didn't nail it. Every course went out flawless – Marcus with his water-smooth tea and soup, Thorek solid as stone, Korak moving like a breeze through tall grass, and me with the fire finale. The figs landed perfect, the nightcaps poured without a tremor. When the braziers flared, the dome overhead glowing with silver moonlight, I almost believed it myself. For a moment, it felt like we were part of something transcendent, not just theater.

After the plates were cleared, the four of us were summoned to the Stone. We stood there in our ridiculous robes while the Prince looked us over, smiling that cool, practiced smile you only see in people who've never once been contradicted. He lifted his glass and said, "It fills my heart with joy to see my subjects willing to embrace their true natures, even when those natures are so... humble."

And the worst part? He believed it. He thought our dignity stripped away was proof of his wisdom. He looked at us – human, dwarf, ork, troll – and saw confirmation of his prejudices wrapped up in pretty speeches and candlelight. Around the circle, the other elves nodded like it was some profound truth instead of a line sharp enough to cut.

That was it for me. I bowed, finished the night like a professional, and walked out. I didn't even go back for my knives. Some lies you can only repeat so many times before they burn a hole straight through you.

The head server – an elf so refined he made moonbeams look crude – he found me a couple days later. He handed me my knives and a small bottle of the sake they used in a special coffee service for private parties. "For your cart," he said with that same condescending smile. "Remember – good food is good food, no matter the... circumstances."

I still have that bottle. Still haven't opened it. Some things are too complicated to taste on just any occasion.

But if you ever get the chance to eat at The Standing Stone – if you can stomach the politics and afford the insane prices – do it. Just remember that you're not just having dinner. You're participating in the most elaborate piece of performance art in the UCAS, a nightly demonstration of how the powerful stay powerful by making everyone else play their games.

The food really is that good. That's what makes it so dangerous.

Aztechnology Executive Feast

I struggled with whether I should include this meal in the book or not. Most of what I've written here is about food as connection, food as story, food as survival. But this one... this one is different. The experience I had working an Aztechnology Executive Feast left me shaken in a way no other job ever has. The food was brilliant—flawless in execution, layered in flavor, the kind of cooking that could make you close your eyes and forget the world outside the plate. But the symbolism underneath it all? That was darker than anything I've ever put my hands to in a kitchen.

I kept telling myself maybe it wasn't worth sharing, that some shadows are better left in the dark. Then again, the Sixth World doesn't give us that luxury. This is the world we live in. And if food is part of the story of our lives, then this meal is part of that story too. The flavors deserve to be remembered—but so does the truth that sat beneath them, sharp as an obsidian knife.

The Call

The job came through the same fixer who got me the Standing Stone gig. He called me late, voice tight like he already knew I'd curse him for it. "One week, one meal, same pay the elves gave you for six months," he said. "You'd hate me if I don't tell you about it. You'll probably hate me for telling you."

I should've hung up. I knew Aztechnology's reputation, knew enough stories about what their "hospitality" really meant. But six months' pay for one night? That kind of offer can break even the strongest willpower. I told myself it was just cooking, just one service. Do the work, take the nuyen, walk away. Pride said no. Hunger said yes. Hunger won.

The Kitchen

The kitchen they led me into was unlike anything I'd ever seen. Walls of polished obsidian reflected the glow of braziers set at every corner, the air thick with the sharp bite of burning copal. Even empty, it felt crowded—like the stone itself was pressing in, watching, listening. Five stations stood ready, knives gleaming, ingredients stacked with military precision. Whoever had designed the space knew exactly what they wanted: discipline, silence, control.

The staff had already rehearsed. They didn't smile, didn't speak much beyond clipped affirmatives. Everything was too smooth, too practiced, as if the performance had already been running long before I stepped into it.

There were whispers, though. The head chef—the one who had developed the menu, secured approval from the executives, planned every detail—was gone. "Accident," they said, but no one met my eye when the word was spoken. Too neat, too convenient. A meal like this didn't get handed off lightly. I knew better than to ask. In Aztechnology kitchens, questions weren't seasoning. They were poison.

The Warning

It was during the first rehearsal that I saw him. Steam rose from the stockpot at my station, curling in the lamplight, and there—clear as day—stood the outline of a man in a chef's coat. His face was half-shadow, half-ember glow, but his voice was sharp enough to cut through the smoke.

"I was sacrificed to sanctify this meal," he whispered. "You might be too."

The steam broke apart, leaving nothing but broth bubbling on the stove. My hands were steady, but my heart wasn't.

I told myself it was a trick of the light, my mind playing games under pressure. But when I glanced at the line, a few of the staff looked away too quickly. They'd seen something. Or maybe they'd seen enough times before that they knew better than to look.

Either way, the message was clear: this wasn't just cooking. This was something else. Something dangerous. And I was already in too deep to walk away.

Preparation

The rest of the week went by smoothly, at least on the surface. We ran the meal four times, every plate timed down to the second, every garnish placed like a soldier at inspection. I could feel the ghost of the head chef hovering at my shoulder each rehearsal, but no more words came. Maybe that one warning was all I was going to get. By the fifth run, the line moved like clockwork. Whatever happened out there in the dining room, I knew the kitchen would deliver.

The Night

When the night came, the air was heavier than usual, thick with incense and smoke. Nine guests filed in, their footsteps echoing against the obsidian floor. Five men and three women in suits worth more than my car, every movement dripping with the certainty of people used to owning whole blocks of the sprawl. And then there was the ninth: a young woman, barely out of her teens, dressed to match the others but carrying none of their steel. Her eyes darted around the room, wide, afraid. She didn't belong.

First Course: Descent with Xolotl

The first course wasn't food, but a drink—*Descent with Xolotl*. A cocktail designed in three stages, each meant to pull the drinker deeper.

Stage one: blanco tequila, sharp and clean, laced with lime and bitter tamarind. It hit the tongue like a spark, bright and cruel, the kind of jolt that told you the road ahead wasn't going to be easy.

The glasses were set down in unison. As the guests lifted them, priests stationed at the walls began to chant in Nahuatl. Low, rhythmic, more heartbeat than melody. The words blended with the smoke of copal, filling the chamber with the smell of earth and resin. No one spoke at the tables. Nine of the most powerful people in Seattle sat in silence, sipping their way into myth.

I watched from the pass, uneasy. It wasn't just a cocktail. It was a ritual disguised as refreshment, a way of reminding everyone that they weren't at a business dinner—they were stepping into a story written in fire and blood.

Second Course: The Smoked Trout

The second course slid into place with the same precision as the first. The servers carried out slabs of obsidian, each one bearing a piece of smoked trout. The skin was burnished and crackling, kissed by alder smoke until it gleamed bronze. The flesh beneath was pale and delicate, tender enough to fall apart at the touch. I'd checked each filet myself before it left the pass; they were flawless.

This was the moment for the second stage of the descent. The servers approached with small carafes, pouring reposado tequila, golden and mellow, across the back of a bar spoon so it floated above the bitter tamarind base from the first pour. Honey softened the edges, chili gave it heat. Layer on layer, the drink grew darker, deeper, like a map guiding them further underground.

Then came the ritual that made my skin crawl.

A server set the trout before one of the executives—a man with slicked-back hair and a smile too white to be trusted. Instead of eating, he pinched a piece between his fingers and held it out. The young woman leaned forward, lips parting. He placed the morsel in her mouth, then waited as she plucked a sliver of fish to offer him in return. He didn't just take it—he lingered, lips brushing her fingers, tongue flicking against them before pulling back with a satisfied hum.

The table chuckled, approving. The ritual rippled outward. Another exec fed his neighbor, two women leaned close to exchange bites, fingers brushing mouths and tongues as if this were foreplay instead of fine dining. Every pairing became a display of control disguised as intimacy.

From the kitchen window, I watched, stomach tightening. The fish was perfect, but it wasn't about flavor. Trout meant souls in their mythology, smoke meant transformation, and the hand-feeding... the hand was submission. Watching those exchanges, it was impossible to pretend otherwise.

Third Course: Feathers of the Sky

The third course was served with ceremony that edged on reverence. They called it *Feathers of the Sky*—Quetzal Cold Starter. For the first time all evening, cutlery appeared at the tables: a fork, laid carefully on obsidian chargers polished until they gleamed like pools of black water. The message was clear—this was refinement, civilization, the moment when hands gave way to tools.

The dish itself was striking. Shrimp, butterflied and splayed open, lay nestled in citrus that was arranged in curves resembling wings. Brilliantly red against a bed of pale fruit and herbs, they looked less like food than like offerings laid at the feet of some ancient god. The name wasn't just poetic. In Mesoamerican lore, the serpent earned wings, and with them ascended as Quetzalcoatl. Here, on the plate, that same story was being retold in shell and flesh. Transformation, sacrifice, and ascension—served chilled.

With it came the final stage of the drink. Añejo tequila, deep and dark, poured carefully over the layered cocktail, floating just long enough before bleeding downward, turning the glass into a gradient of gold sinking into black. Smoked hibiscus and currant gave it weight, the flavor heavy with wood and fruit. Guests lifted their glasses, forks poised like ritual implements, and the priests began another chant.

In the kitchen, the tension was thick enough to taste. The sous chefs moved stiffly, eyes darting toward me more often than the plates in their hands. I caught whispers, short and sharp, words I couldn't make out but tones I could. If I slipped—if anything less than perfect left my station—they wouldn't hesitate to fix it. And by "fix," I didn't mean garnish. I meant blood.

I kept my knife steady, my face blank. One mistake, and the ghost's warning might prove true.

Fourth Course: Three Tongues of the Coatl

The fourth course was called *Three Tongues of the Coatl*—the serpent course. It came on a platter shaped like overlapping scales, black ceramic painted with a faint green sheen that caught the light like reptile skin. For all the myth and pomp, the food itself looked simple enough: mushrooms, roasted until their caps blistered and filled with smoke, each one stuffed with a coil of crisped bacon that peeked out like a tongue.

But simplicity was a mask. The real bite came from the sauces—three of them, set in small obsidian bowls arranged in a triangle around the mushrooms. The servers named them as they poured: *The Whisperer*, pale and cool with herbs and lime, almost innocent; *The Temptress*, red as blood, sharp with chilies and honey; *The Devourer*, black and glossy, a reduction of mole and charred peppers thick enough to cling to anything it touched. Guests were instructed to dip each mushroom in order, one after another, tasting the serpent's tongues in sequence.

To wash it down, tall glasses of lime-aid were served, bright and green, rims dusted with chili salt. Sweetness at first sip, sour chasing after, and a burn that lingered. It was a joke and a taunt at once—refreshment with teeth.

From the kitchen window, I watched the execs play their part. They dipped, they tasted, they laughed softly at the names. The young woman followed suit, hesitating at the third sauce before pressing on, the fear in her eyes flickering brighter.

Coatl meant knowledge and danger, creation and destruction. On those plates, it meant control—three flavors that pulled the diners through temptation, surrender, and consumption.

And behind me, the line stayed silent, knives whispering against boards. Tension coiled tighter. The serpent was here, and its tongues were sharp.

Main Course: Spit-Roasted Rabbit with Masa Ash

The main course was the centerpiece of the night—*Spit-Roasted Rabbit with Masa Ash*. The meat had been marinated for days in chilies, garlic, and herbs until it absorbed fire itself. On the spit, it turned slowly, skin blistering, fat dripping into the flames, smoke rising like incense. By the time it came off the fire, the rabbit was crisp, dark gold, carrying the smell of heat and hunger.

Each diner was first presented with a circle of blackened masa, flat and brittle, like a tortilla scorched until it resembled a fragment of the sun. The servers explained nothing, but the symbolism was obvious: the blackened disk was the sun at eclipse, burned, dying. At a signal, the guests broke the masa with their hands, the sharp crack echoing around the room.

Only then did the servers bring the rabbit. Carefully carved, still steaming, the meat was placed atop the broken sun, as if laid across the ruin of creation. One sacrifice to feed another.

The flavors were extraordinary. The rabbit was smoky and earthy, crisp at the edges, tender within. The chilies gave it bite, the herbs a grounding depth. It was food that satisfied on every level—yet I couldn't taste it without also tasting the ritual. Every bite was heavy, like swallowing fire and blood, as though the meal itself demanded a toll.

The lime-aid returned, poured to finish the glass. Sharper this time, the citrus cutting the richness, the salted rim stinging like a reminder. The guests drank, and the ritual moved forward.

In the kitchen, tension was at its peak. The line was quiet, movements stiff. I felt their eyes on me, whispers at my back. One slip, one flaw, and I wasn't sure if the knife would land on the cutting board—or on me.

Final Course: Ashes and Ice

The last course arrived like a benediction—*Ashes and Ice, with Sun's Last Light*. Each plate carried two small pumpkin cakes, their edges charred black, their centers still golden and warm. Beside them, a scoop of tamarind sorbet gleamed like frozen amber, melting slowly against the heat of the cakes. A drizzle of bright green herb syrup tied it together, thin threads of color across dark and light.

It was a dish of opposites: hot and cold, sweet and bitter, burn and balm. Every bite carried tension—char giving way to sweetness, ice shattering against warmth, tart fruit rising through smoke. If the rabbit had been sacrifice, this was resurrection. The promise that something might grow again from the ashes.

The drink came last, a small glass of golden liqueur they called *Sun's Last Light*. Sweet, sharp, glowing in the firelight. Guests raised their glasses without a word, and for a moment the room fell into reverent silence.

No one laughed, no one traded clever remarks. They ate quietly, heads bowed slightly, as though this were a temple and not a dining hall. Watching them, I felt it too—that strange weight, where food becomes more than food, and ritual more than theater.

The Breaking Point

Service ended without a hitch. Every plate perfect, every drink timed, every ritual performed down to the breath. When it was done, they summoned me out. The heat of the kitchen still clung to me as I stepped into the obsidian chamber and faced the diners.

Eight of them were exactly what I expected: Aztechnology suits, smug and cold, their eyes sharp with the satisfaction of control. They smiled the way predators smile when their prey runs exactly where they want it to. But the ninth... she didn't fit. Young, beautiful, her dress chosen for her, not by her. Fear clung to her like perfume. She didn't belong at that table, and my gut told me why.

They gave their compliments, sharp as knives. "Surprising for a troll," one said. Another added, "Of course, the menu was designed by Chef Cortes. *He* only followed instructions." The table chuckled, comfortable in their superiority.

I kept my face even, but the heat burned in my chest. Then I looked at the girl, at her trembling hands, and I knew. The ritual wasn't complete. It needed one more sacrifice. One more broken soul to sanctify their feast.

Not tonight.

I bent low, grinning crude and wide. "Hey there, beautiful. I've been looking for you all night. No one's rocked my world like you did backstage earlier." I kissed her hard, loud, vulgar. "You want to make some real noise later? I know this place—"

Gasps. Nervous laughter. The girl pulled back, tears starting, playing her part. "How **dare** you! That was a secret," she cried, fleeing the room in apparent shame.

Perfect. A troll's vulgarity—dismissed as crude behavior. The girl was "dishonored" publicly, but alive. The sacrifice undone.

I finished the night like nothing had happened, collected my pay while the execs sneered and made their jokes about troll appetites. They couldn't touch me—not when every plate had been perfect, every ritual followed to the letter. Well, almost every ritual.

The Real Meal

Later, outside in the alleys of Bellevue, I found her wandering, mascara streaked, shoulders shaking. She was from Aztlán, lured here with promises that turned to chains. She thanked me through tears. I didn't ask for details; I didn't need to know the specifics to understand the shape of it.

I brought her back to my cart, sat her down, fed her something real. Scrambled eggs with peppers, simple bread, clean water. Food without symbolism, without ritual. Just sustenance. Just kindness.

With help from Gruk's people, she had a safe place for the night, and permanent sanctuary within the week. A small act of defiance, but enough to fracture their ritual. Enough to matter.

That's the truth that sits beneath the flavors. Sometimes the most important part of a meal isn't what's on the plate—it's what you choose to do when the cooking is done. In the Sixth World, that choice can mean everything.

Reflections

The executive feast was perfect. But the real meal happened after, in a food truck, between two people who chose humanity over hunger.

That's the one worth remembering.

The food itself was extraordinary. Every dish came off the line flawless, every flavor layered with care. The trout smoked to perfection, the rabbit carrying fire and earth in every bite, the dessert weaving hot and cold into something close to transcendence. These were plates I'll never forget—not because of their beauty alone, but because of the weight behind them.

But that's the thing: every bite was tied to blood and sacrifice. You couldn't separate the flavors from the ritual, the excellence from the shadow it cast. It wasn't just dinner. It was a reminder that in Aztechnology's world, even pleasure is sharpened to a blade.

The elves made theater. Their meals were staged, elaborate performances meant to remind you of your place. Dangerous, sure—but you could still walk away feeling like you'd seen a show. Aztechnology made ritual. Their food demanded submission, demanded you taste the sacrifice with your own tongue. And only one of those left me checking my back every time I picked up a knife.

So cook the food. Savor the flavors. Learn from the techniques. But don't forget the truth: these dishes come from shadows. And the shadows always ask for payment.

Saeder-Krupp Formal Dinner

There's a meal so rare, so tight-lipped, so fraggin' sacred, even most execs at Saeder-Krupp never taste it. It's not on the corp expense report, not in any secure calendar, not whispered over whisky in the Redmond clubs. It's the kind of dinner that only happens when billions move, when nations bend, when a dragon gets what it wants.

I know, 'cause I cooked it. Well – part of it.

I got pulled into this job through a fixer I didn't even like. Said they needed someone who knew their way around Old World flavor and New World discipline. Someone who could poach salmon like a Seattle elf and braise beef like their oma in Stuttgart. And someone who wouldn't ask questions.

The client? Unnamed. But the badge on the security decker's collar had the S-K spiral, and there was a gold-trimmed crate of saffron so pure I caught the aroma from the service elevator. I saw only shadows, contracts signed in UV ink, and one set of instructions burned into my retinas: "Dignity. Discipline. Precision. No extravagance without symbolism."

They weren't celebrating a birthday, or even a fiscal quarter. No – this meal was for when something truly pivotal happens. When a project completes and the world changes, and the few who made it happen need to be rewarded... and reminded.

What I saw of the menu stuck with me – not because it was fancy, but because it was a story. Each course said something. Each bite had a warning behind it.

It started hot – literally. A bowl over flame, clams opening in real time, foam hissing like dragon's breath. It was loud, dramatic, messy – like the moment of victory itself. But even then, they were sipping dashi and watching the steam curl. Everything layered.

Then came the soup – three bowls, one base. Split pea, humble as dirt, but each one with a twist: heat, sweetness, bitterness. Or maybe it was honesty, comfort, and control. You figure it out.

The fish course? Salmon done three ways: cured, smoked, poached. Each paired with fruit or root, each cool and clean. You'd think it was just fancy plating, but nah. It was a statement: Adapt or be eaten.

And the meat? That was where the dragon's breath slowed. Beef, three ways – rolled and braised, sliced in cream, and fried into a golden cube. Tradition wrapped in modern tools. Tasted like loyalty. Tasted like don't forget who signed your paycheck.

Even the dessert kept the theme. A single piece of Bienenstich – honey almond cake, sweet but firm. Around it? Three compotes: cherry with pepper, pear with thyme, apricot with ginger. Choose your memory. Choose how you want to remember this night.

But the real kicker? The drinks at the end. Just four. One of each. Clear. Creamy. Bitter. Burning. No labels. No explanation. You drink what you grab.

I didn't stay to see who took what. I wasn't allowed to watch them eat. But I remember the weight in that room. Like the walls were waiting for someone to disappoint them. Like Lofwyr himself might lean in and whisper, "Choose well."

I'm telling you this not 'cause I want street cred. Hell, half of you can't even taste half these ingredients. I'm telling you because food is power. The right meal at the right time can make people obey, betray, or believe. And when the stakes are high enough, the food itself decides who walks away full.

So yeah, I cooked for a dragon, or dragon adjacent. Just once.

And sometimes, when I slice loquat for a wage-slave's lunch bowl, I still hear the hiss of that first pour. Still feel the heat on my tusks.

And I remember: Even a celebration can be a test.

Evo Transhuman Lounge Meal

I've cooked for jobs that needed speed, swagger, or shock value. I've plated theater for elves and ritual for corps who confuse dinner with dominance. This is none of that. Exhale isn't a meal to conquer; it's a pattern to return to. A small retreat you can build on a kitchen counter, using breath and simple food to hand you back to yourself. You don't blitz through it. You move gently, like walking out of noise into quiet. If the other chapters tested your knife work, this one tests your patience—in the best way.

It begins not with eating but with noticing. Steam rising from orange peel, lavender, eucalyptus—a bowl you lean over just to breathe, slow and steady until the static in your head loosens. Then a towel, warm with lime and mint and sage, pressed against your skin like a reset button you didn't know you needed. Only after that do the cubes arrive: three small prisms of color—gold, green, red—placed on your tongue one by one, dissolving into presence instead of distraction. And finally, intention. A word or phrase you choose—steady, heal, let go—spoken or kept quiet, doesn't matter. It's the moment you tell yourself why you're here.

The next stage is hydration, but not the kind you knock back after a long run. This is a cellular reset elixir, cool and clear, laced with citrus, minerals, and the gentlest thread of bitterness. You sip slowly, letting it linger. Every swallow is a reminder that water can be more than background noise—it can be focus, renewal, the simplest way to remind your body it's still capable of balance. By the time the glass is empty, you feel lighter, less hurried, as though your whole system just took a deep drink of quiet.

From there comes nourishment, the heart of the sequence, built on salmon. Not an indulgence, not decadence, but a plate designed to carry you. The fish is warm, clean, and steady, paired with lentils or grains that ground it and greens that keep it alive in the mouth. Nothing on the plate is loud, yet together it hums with strength, a harmony between land, water, and fire. You eat it slowly, pausing between bites, letting your body understand: this is the kind of fuel it can trust, the kind it can adapt with.

Support follows in the form of a rooted resilience cake, a small circle of earth's sweetness turned to sustenance. Crisped at the edges, soft within, it carries the quiet power of vegetables that know how to store strength. A dollop of something cool on top—cream, yogurt, or puree—softens it just enough, so every bite lands as both grounding and generous. This isn't food that dazzles; it steadies, putting your feet back under you in ways you don't notice until they're there.

And at the very end comes refocus, a Cascadian brainshot no bigger than a swallow. Dark cacao, a spark of ginger, the clarity of matcha, sometimes softened with tahini or herbs. It's sharp, but not cruel—heat and bitter woven together to cut the last of the fog. You take it in one sip and sit still for a breath, feeling your edges sharpen but your core stay calm. It's the closing note, the return of clarity, the reminder that you are still here.

That's why this is the last meal, the one I wanted to close with. After all the spectacle and noise, the tricks and the power plays, there's value in remembering food can also be medicine. Not the kind that comes in vials or bottles, but the kind that waits quietly in herbs, steam, and roots until you remember to use it. You don't need corp-grade gear or a team of sous chefs to make this work. You need a bowl, a towel, a few good ingredients, and the nerve to slow down. That's it.

Build the space. Walk the sequence. Breathe the steam until your chest loosens. Press the warmth of the towel against your skin and let yourself feel held. Taste the cubes one by one, each dissolving with a little more clarity than the last. Name your intention—even if it's just one word. Sip the elixir and remind your body what renewal feels like. Eat what nourishes, steady and unhurried. Lean on roots for strength. Take the shot that sharpens you without breaking you. And then—maybe the hardest part—sit still long enough to notice how it feels when you finally, at long last, exhale.

If you cook nothing else from this chapter, cook this. Not to impress a table, not to show off technique, not to reenact the corps' hollow theater. Cook this because it hands you back to yourself. Cook this to remember who's been behind the knife the whole time.

EVER EAT SOMETHING SO GOOD IT MADE YOU FORGET THE SPRAWL WAS BURNING DOWN AROUND YOU?

WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF NEON KNIFE — TROLL CHEF, STREET LEGEND, AND CULINARY RENEGADE SLINGING FLAVOR BOMBS FROM SEATTLE'S SHADOWS. COME RELIVE THE MOMENTS.

- > LEGEND? HIS PUBLISHER MUST HAVE WRITTEN THIS. NEON'S THE HUMBLEST GUY I KNOW.
- > ESPERANZA

THIS AIN'T YOUR MOMMA'S COOKBOOK (UNLESS YOUR MOMMA RAN WITH A CREW AND COOKED WITH A COMBAT KNIFE). THIS IS A FULL-SENSORY TRIP THROUGH A CITY THAT NEVER SLEEPS, WHERE EVERY MEAL IS A STORY, AND EVERY SPREAD CARRIES MORE WEIGHT THAN THE SUM OF ITS DISHES.

PART MEMOIR, PART SURVIVAL GUIDE, ALL FLAVOR.

- > AND HEAT, AND BITE, AND TWIST, AND POUND YOUR HEAD ON THE WALL WHEN IT DOESN'T RISE.
- > FLAME

IN THE SIXTH WORLD, FOOD IS FUSION — SOY AND SAFFRON, STREET AND SUITE, ANCIENT RITUAL AND TECH. NEON BRINGS IT TO THE TABLE, SERVING STREET-INSPIRED MEALS BUILT FOR EVERY SCENE: FINDING COMFORT ON THE STREET, GRABBING A BIT FOR THE RUN, RELIVING THAT NIGHT AT DANTE'S INFERNO, OR THE MEAL MR. JOHNSON USED TO CONVINCING YOU HE CARED, AND EXPERIENCING HOW THE 0.01% LIVE.

- > AND WHAT HE THROWS UP AT HIS OWN CART - BETTER THAN THE CORP FOOD.
- > THE BEAST

EACH MEAL COMES COMPLETE WITH CHEF'S NOTES, SHOPPING LISTS, QUICK BYTES, AND A SHOPPING LIST. EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO MAKE IT WORK.

- > THE CHEF'S NOTES ARE INDISPENSABLE. THAT GIVES YOU TIMELINES, THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR, AND THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR. THE QUICK BYES FILL IN THE LITTLE GAPS — SO HELPFUL.
- > RAIN DANCER

INSIDE YOU'LL FIND:

- FUSION MENUS THAT READ LIKE STORIES, DRAWN FROM ALLEYS, CLUBS, AND CORPORATE TOWERS
- REAL-WORLD RECIPES YOU CAN ACTUALLY COOK WITHOUT A CORP-SIZED BUDGET
- MEALS THAT REMIND YOU FOOD IS POWER, CONNECTION, AND SOMETIMES SURVIVAL
 - > AND VOICES FROM THE SPRAWL ADDING HEAT, HEART, AND HARD TRUTHS, LIKE MINE.
 - > WHISPERWIND
 - > AND HEALING, AND JOY, AND HOPE, AND REALLY GOOD FLAVORS
 - > ELENA

THIS IS FOOD FOR THE FORGOTTEN, FLAVORS FOR THE FEARLESS, AND A KITCHEN OPEN TO ANYONE WHO'S EVER BEEN TOLD THEY DIDN'T BELONG.

SO STRAP IN, FIRE UP THE GRILL, SET THE TABLE, AND REMEMBER: IN THE SIXTH WORLD, THE MAGIC ISN'T IN THE DISH. IT'S IN THE MEAL.

NEONKNIFE.COM

WHERE THE STREET MEETS THE EATS