

As a chef, I take stock of a meal's success when the evening ends. I watch guests linger at the table, passionately engaged in conversation with someone only a stranger earlier. Meanwhile, a cheery mood erupts amongst my team. We celebrate with pesto on focaccia scraps. These are the moments of community – the marriage of guests and the camaraderie of a kitchen – I sought to create when I started my on-campus restaurant, Mince.

At the busiest points of semester, meals are a friendship lifeline. Grabbing dinner together under the guise of nutrition, in a time where coffee substitutes lunch, is a reliably high-quality way to develop relationships because (nearly) every worry drops once dumplings arrive. Campus lacked a common space to form these meaningful relationships. I saw food as a dynamic medium to do so, imparting care onto guests and teammates alike. This vision resulted in Mince.

Today, Mince has served 3,500 guests and has amassed a waiting list of over 10,000. I lead our 21-member team. Though an operation our size cannot overhaul the hustle culture of campus at large, I notice local changes in attitude. A calm settles during every service. Our guests know they are taken care of; for two hours, time suspends. After dining, professors have generously covered tickets, helping us reach more guests. Recently, my team was invited to exchange perspectives on food's ambassadorial role with Michelin and James Beard Chefs.

I encourage my team to be creative in unorthodox, sometimes eccentric ways because I believe that the most meaningful messages come in slightly outrageous packages. My purpose is to establish connection between guests. To soften the oftentimes tall ask of vulnerability, my team makes the first, delightful move. An art-gallery themed menu saw a metallic balloon animal, inspired by sculptor Jeff Koons, seated before each guest. Before an autumnal event, I learned that bizarrely, a stray pumpkin shattered one guest's window. When dessert arrived, her fellow diners enjoyed goat cheese ice cream with poached pear. Hers was replaced with a brown-butter roasted pumpkin. The room filled with laughter and applause. She excitedly shared her story, all thanks to our "unreasonable" hospitality.

Out of sight from diners, the kitchen's orchestrated intensity also nurtures community. In one corner, chefs grill, unflinching at the flame. "Hands!" We rush to the pass to plate; servers are on standby. Other members occupy a soapy regime, scrubbing dishes before the next course drops. Time's unrelenting tyranny establishes a profound appreciation for all tasks, big and small, executed with care and precision. This is the egoless line excellence marches on, defining my leadership style.

I'm most proud of my philosophy's impact on my teammates outside of Mince. April is a lead baker at a café. Zitong was admitted into a culinary arts program. Jacky completed his sommelier certification. My vision is not a moment of community, but one with a regenerative future. I see this already taking form in the members I've mentored and the spaces they will create.