MICHELIN STARS TO CANNABIS

BY JIMI DEVINE
We hit the farm to see Aaron Keefer’s jump from elite fine dining to cannabis for ourselves.

BY JIMI DEVINE

We started our chat while surveying some flowers they were looking at from a recent Compound Genetics pheno hunt. After partaking in some GMO x Starfighter, the conversation moved on to the most obvious concern of the moment for the farm—the thick smoky haze in the sky. While the smoke was thinner in the neck of the woods, they were still losing a lot of the sun’s energy to the haze it produced as the plants enter their home stretch before the harvest.

"I’m just looking at this as the fire season," Keefer told L.A. Weekly of how extreme the wildfires have gotten in recent years. "Every year we’re gonna have fires. It’s not been too bad. And we huddle around grills, and we huddle around fires all the time, so a little bit of smoke in the air is not gonna kill anybody."

Does he have concerns about the plants?

"The plants have been doing fine. There’s been a little bit of ashfall, we haven’t been close enough to anything serious, and truthfully, it’s not like the Paradise Fire where all you smelled was plastic," Keefer said. "This is all wood and grasses and we aren’t really worried.

As noted in our recent fire coverage, farmers have a lot more concern about the ashes coming from structure fires than vegetation ones. Vegetation fires are believed to be survivable because you’ll still have a shot to pass testing, but the ashes from structure fires are a different story and are said to contaminate crops.

Keefer explained that the lack of lumens is the biggest problem. "We want all the power from the light to go into the leaves right now, so we’ve been hurt a little bit with that," he shared. "We’re hoping there isn’t too much impact on the yield, but the plant itself is looking so good that I think we’re gonna be fine."

Watching agriculture in the region be impacted by ever-worsening wildfires, Keefer, who’s been a farmer in Sonoma for the last decade, seems prepared for anything. "Truthfully, it’s just something you have to plan for," he said. "You have to keep your crew safe. You have to keep everybody you know protected. But other than that, it’s really like a high heat day, everybody goes home. A day that is very, very cold and rainy, everybody does go home. So, anybody who’s working in that environment would obviously go home if it gets dangerous."

Before we got to the weed, we went to pick up lunch. We passed rows of fresh parsley, chives, and a variety of Keefer’s other veggies that chefs would kill to get their hands on as he explained the property was some of the first farmland settled in Sonoma County just following the beginning of the Gold Rush in the 1850s. Harden, who drove us on a garden tour, pointed out a house off in the distance as one of the oldest in the county.

At one point, Daigle flipped over a log and pointed to the fungal growth on the bottom. He called the white residue an example of indigenous microorganisms the farm has been able to gather in their quest to work with the land.

“We’ve collected and we’ve inoculated a bucket of water and cultured it and fermented it for 12 days,” Daigle said. “It’s a Korean natural farming method that you know you’re working with nature; you’re using what’s on the land. You’re anaerobically growing these bacteria out, and so it’s a way to unlock nutrients. You can also put in green leaves and pull nitrogen out of those.”

“It’s really just inoculating the soil with some life and then they’ll multiply in that soil once you put it in the ground. It’s not really like a nutrition program," Keefer added.

The farm is currently growing three species of corn they had to plant at different times, so they didn’t cross-pollinate, and as he gathered it, Keefer explained they’d just received approval to start grading the ground for their new greenhouse.

"It’s only going to be 15,000 square feet," he told us, which sounded small and adorable in the age of super greenhouses. "Yeah, it’s cute but it’s gonna be a Venlo. Like super, super high end."

Regardless of the greenhouse, the land has a lot going on and this has led to Keefer’s belief that dry farming the property is also possible. They’re yet to pull the trigger, though. "Obviously, as we satellite out, we’re looking to do a lot of dry farming," he said. "This is great soil for dry farming. We’re sandy loam out here."

After we dropped off the veggies, we headed towards the section of the garden we’d made the trip for. Upon entering past the gate, Keefer pointed out a towering Orange Acai. It is one of the 27 strains they’ll be running in total this year. The main offerings include names like Wedding Crusher, GG #4, Animal Mints, Banana Kush, Pink Jesus, Cherry Cheesecake, Spyrock OG, and a Sherbert that’s proving to love the environment. "I know they’re starting to push," Keefer said of the plant. “We’re probably every bit of three, four weeks away on this at least. So, they should end up pretty nice.”

Though the endeavor is a few years old, the physical plot the cannabis garden is on has only recently been built up to the task; they started growing there this February. “Nothing was here, not the fence, none of the prep was done. It looked like fields over there,” Keefer showed us. “So, it’s been a lot this year, but we’re good next year. We’re gonna have fences of sunflower.”

Since the plants at Sonoma Hills Farm are directly in the ground and not pots, we asked how much time the team had to build up the soil on the new site to give their weed the best shot possible.

“We’re really lucky because we had 30 years of a regenerative kind of grazing going on. All the cows are going through grazing and pooping,” Keefer replied. “So, we were lucky to have almost 18 inches of beautiful topsoil with great microbial action to start with.”

As we walked through the rows of plants, Keefer noted the Wedding Crasher had come from tissue culture at Node Labs in San Francisco. Tissue culture cuttings are made from the freshest piece of materials on the plant’s meristem, the region of the plant it physically grows from. The plant issue is so new in most cases, pests and diseases impacting the parent plant won’t carry on to the fresh cutting. The tissue culture cuttings proved to grow the most uniform of the crop.

Keefer next showed off the Pink Jesus. One of the crop’s gems, it’s a pairing of Starfighter and Cherry Cheesecake. When the plants are in this part of the growth cycle, you can rub the buds with your fingertips and then smell them to get an idea of what the final product’s scent will be. When we tested this one, it exploded up our nostrils like a smoothie filled with exotic fruit.

A lot of prep will go into keeping the soil pumping out heat in the future and in the offseason, they’ll run a cover crop that will go right back into the soil for next year. But the full biodiversity profile intended for the soil will take about four years to hit its stride, “and it is a truly healthy soil that creates a great immune system for the plants,” Keefer added. “So, you can resist more pests, mold or bacterial issues.”

We asked the renowned chef and cannabis farmer about his vision, and the knowledge he hopes to impart:

“I want people to understand that what they’re smoking isn’t the process or how it is cured. What they’re smoking is the life of the plant,” he replied. “Would you rather have your plant grown beside a freeway under lights inside, or would you like it outdoors in one of the most beautiful temperate parts of the country with not a single pesticide around, just farmland and ocean air?" Expect to see Sonoma Hills Farm’s flowers on L.A. dispensary shelves later this fall. We’ll be sure to tell you where you can get your hands on them once the Croptober harvest hits.
PAINTER
ED CLARK PUSHES
BOUNDARIES,
LITERALLY

A new exhibition at Hauser & Wirth highlights key points in the late artist’s legacy.

BY SHANA NYS DAMBROT

Photos by the estate of Ed Clark courtesy the estate and Hauser & Wirth

To gestural and evocatively prismatic for Minimalism, too refined and elusive for Abstract Expressionism, too textured and materially layered for Hard Edge, and being Action Painting only if the “action” is transcendental meditation, nevertheless, it’s high time for the inventive work of American painter Ed Clark (1926-2019) to take its rightful place in contemporary art history.

Remembered as a highlight of the Broad’s 2019 exhibition Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power 1963-83, the new exhibition Ed Clark: Expanding the Image at Hauser & Wirth Los Angeles goes a long way in clarifying his influential legacy.

Setting the tone with chromatically stormy and combustibly contoured works of the late 1960’s, the exhibition soon focuses on Clark’s breakthrough(s) of circa 1970 that saw both the mastering of the ovoid compositional (and sometimes physical) shaping motif, as well as the fullest expression of his proprietary push-broom painting technique that allowed for immediate facture at an industrial scale. Works like “Locomotion” from 1963 disrupt the picture plane and interfere with optical restfulness in transecting, hefty layering of competing, mottled color fields. By the time of 1970’s “Silver Stripes” Clark’s appetite for toothy color was subsumed beneath veils of translucent, silvery pigment, like fog refracting sunlight.

This, and other works from the early 1970’s, each deploy traces of those colors in ways that both describe and evade a landscape reading. Here the ellipses function like picture windows, the striations unfurl like multiple horizon lines, colors create the suggestion of an illusion of expanding space, and the atmospherics are visible at a distance, before evaporating and giving way to the wavering lines of close-up brush (well, broom) strokes, letting a great deal more specificity operate in the abstract equation.

In fact, it had been in 1968, living at the rural home of the artist Joan Mitchell in Vétheuil, France, when Clark began to create elliptically shaped paintings that mimicked the form of the human eye. Integrated Oval #1 (1972), which was also in the 1973 Whitney Biennial was both the height and the virtual end of that profound phase of his career. In 1971, Clark had visited another artist friend, Jack Whitten, in Crete, where he became, “enraptured by the Mediterranean light and atmosphere. Influenced by this new terrain, his palette began to veer into pastel hues that rendered greater nuance in his art.”

Drawn as well to the international diaspora of Black American bohemians, who like him traveled extensively out of both curiosity and a desire for relief from the rampant racism at home, when in New York Clark’s activities included not only his own studio pursuits, but also the establishment of the Lower East Side artist-run cooperative space, Brata Gallery. Each of these areas, as well as earlier influences from within the expat Paris community he joined in the mid-1950’s like Mitchell and Sam Francis, is
**Bill & Ted Face Aging in an Uncertain World / VOD**

Keanu Reeves and his on-screen bestie Alex Winter’s return in the new threequel *Bill & Ted Face the Music* that makes for a simple, rather silly little movie, but the first two were too, so what did we expect? This one brings about nostalgic feels, even while milking modern reality as its core premise. Twenty-five years since the first adventure, these two wide-eyed, whimsical buds are now dads (with dad bods to match); they know that one, google it now)! However flimsy Face *The Music* may be story-wise, one thing is for sure -- watching an iconic star pay homage to his bodacious beginnings with the kind of heart the actor brings here makes for a most excellent flashback.

Meanwhile, the guys’ teen daughters (Brigette Lundy-Paine) and (Samara Weaving), go on their own adventure, gathering the greatest musicians in history to jam and hopefully play their dads’ epic tune once it’s written. Writers Chris Matheson and Ed Solomon do a nice job of capturing the previous films’ charm and stoner/surfer speak while director Dean Parisot -known for a slate of strong TV work- brings a light, slightly satiric vibe to the story set-up. But despite the offspring angle, this film is clearly not made for teens. It’s a movie meant to give older audiences and maybe the retro nerd contingent, a fun and fluffy, warm and fuzzy escape. It’s also a movie for younger Reeves fans who only know him as the enigmatic Neo from *The Matrix* or the dynamic badass from the *John Wick movies*, not the long-haired sweet simpleton here. Alex Winter’s return in the new threequel *Bill & Ted Face the Music* that makes for a simple, rather silly little movie, but the first two were too, so what did we expect? This one brings about nostalgic feels, even while milking modern reality as its core premise. Twenty-five years since the first adventure, these two wide-eyed, whimsical buds are now dads (with dad bods to match); they know that one, google it now)! However flimsy Face *The Music* may be story-wise, one thing is for sure -- watching an iconic star pay homage to his bodacious beginnings with the kind of heart the actor brings here makes for a most excellent flashback.

**The new Mulan is Missing a lot, but it Still Conjures Disney Magic / (Disney+)**

Though fans and critics who read anything about the new live-action version of *Mulan* already knew not to expect musical numbers or the comedic pizzazz of dragon sidekick Mushu, the comparatively serious tone and battle-scene packed take here is surprising; it’s clearly not the licensing cash grab we usually see from Disney in terms of potential for doll sales and princess dress-up kits. The filmmakers are really trying to do something more sophisticated here, and for the most part they pull it off. Many will be disappointed by its lack of whimsy or humor, but for adults who grew up with the original it’s actually a pretty cool and refreshing re-imagining.

Directed by Whale Rider’s Niki Caro, *Mulan* is stunning to look at from the very first frame. From the colorful village moments to the gilded backdrops of the emperor’s palace to the battle scenes -- which bring to mind the dramatically choreographed fights seen in the Wonder Woman movie -- every shot has a mood and a purpose. That purpose is to convey Mulan’s coming of age as in the original film, but here things get more metaphysical with a narrative concerning “qi” and how this energy can provide superhuman “man-like” balance and strength to our young heroine. To hammer in the feminist subtext, there’s also another strong female character whose abundance of qi is not celebrated but condemned as witchery. With her tribal makeup and dark nail swag, Li Gong’s Xianniang makes for an intriguing adversary who might sells to the Disney villain fanbase even if Mulan herself doesn’t prove marketable.

The basic story is the same: when China comes under attack by Rouran forces from the North, Mulan disguises herself as a male and joins the Chinese army in order to spare her injured father from doing so. Li Shang (Mulan’s love interest in the cartoon) has been melded into two characters: Commander Tung (Donnie Yen), who serves as her father figure/mentor and Chen Honghui (Yoson An) a cute squadmate who connects with Mulan as a boy and becomes enamored with her as a girl. She seems only mildly interested, even once the jig is up, making for a nice and notable negation of the prince savior trope.

And yet, it’s the love story that made Mulan so meaningful to so many, even beyond seeing an Asian character as the hero. Representing pansexual love before many understood what it meant, fans saw Shang’s development of feelings for Mulan’s male alter ego Ping as not only reassuring but groundbreaking, even if a gay theme was not Disney’s intention. The character’s removal has been called out as straight-washing, but it really isn’t. Honghui actually seems beguiled by Mulan in boy drag from the start, suggesting sexual fluidity in a more natural way than the cartoon did.

If anything, what makes this storyline -- and the movie in general -- a stretch is Liu herself, not the male leads. The waifish actress is not buyable as a boy even for one minute, so her big reveal falls super flat. The vivacity the movie tries to conjure from there almost doesn’t make up for it, but with a well-spent 200 million budget, at least the Disney magic-driven beauty of the film does.
FOOD

LAST CALL AT PREUX & PROPER — FAREWELL FROM OWNER JOSH KOPEL

BY MICHELE TUEVEN

As the Los Angeles restaurant community continues to struggle and adapt with no hope of immediate indoor dining in sight, another heartbreakingly closure was announced today. Josh Kopel, proprietor of the Michelin Guide-recognized Preux & Proper in downtown L.A. is closing the gates. He shared this moving page from his diary with L.A. Weekly:

“Temper us in fire, and we grow stronger. When we suffer, we survive.” — Cassandra Clare, City of Heavenly Fire

What if you had the opportunity to start all over again, but this time, knowing everything you do now. No, you don’t get back the time or money you lost on your last project; you only get the luxury of hindsight that experience affords.

Welcome to my world.

Preux & Proper was an investment, not in a restaurant but in a community. I saw a resilience and an optimism in the residents of downtown Los Angeles, and I wanted to serve them. Almost a decade after making that choice, I find myself coming to terms with the death of that dream. Preux and Proper will not be reopening at 840 South Spring street. The past is prologue. The only thing that matters is the present and, in this moment, my restaurant is homeless.

I know I’m not alone. There are many restaurateurs without restaurants at the moment. As we look toward the future, we are each given the opportunity to evaluate the choices and compromises made over the years, as well as the costs incurred. I’ve come to many realizations over the last several quarantined months, but these are the biggest.

I was never a restaurateur. I was a restaurant manager with an equity stake. I spent my life dreaming of being a restaurateur, popping between locations, offering advice and inspiration to my teams, launching community-building events, etc. How did I really spend my days? Washing dishes because the dishwasher didn’t show up. Helping the staff clean the restaurant to save a few minutes of labor. Trying to fix a fryer in an effort to avoid the repair fees. Sound familiar? I hope not.

I’m not knocking the idea of playing an active role in your business, but I now clearly see the difference between working on your business and working in your business. I never escaped the day to day grind for long enough to take that ownership role.

If I’m honest, I enjoyed the busywork. It made me feel needed and productive, but that was never my dream. It was merely a natural evolution that occurred by choosing to tackle the “easiest” tasks instead of focusing on the big picture.

Achieving excellence in my career is not the same as achieving excellence in life. As I write this, the 2019 Michelin Guide sits on my desk with a little tab bookmarking where my restaurant is listed. That short paragraph in that little book can tell you everything you need to know about me as a restaurateur.

What it doesn’t tell you is who I am as a son, a spouse, a friend or as a father. It doesn’t mention the struggles endured by everyone around me who sacrificed, compromised, and picked up the slack so that I could focus on my career. I never took my success for granted but never fully appreciated the people in my life that made that success possible.

Hospitality transcends our industry. It is a state of mind and needs to be evangelized. The biggest lesson to come out of FULL COMP is the importance of hospitality. The benefits that come from adopting a service-oriented perspective are boundless.

In the restaurant industry, we succeed by injecting a personal connection into a financial transaction. Our guests aren’t paying for food; they’re paying for an experience. They want to be served, cared for, and feel valued.

These are universal desires, and they transcend the foodservice industry. Now, when I begin to chart the path forward, I see that every business is in the hospitality industry. I wonder if it’s possible to inject our values into other business models. I wonder if I’m locked within the four walls of a restaurant or if our values have a transcendent quality.

Could it be our industry that leads the world on a new, more considerate path?

If our entire industry can be torn apart and stitch itself back together in a matter of months, I can do the same with my life and my career. Aristotle said, “Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening when you’d rather have been talking.” I’ll start by listening to the greatest minds of our time and sharing their wisdom with our community so that we never, ever find ourselves in this vulnerable position again.

Despite my fears, I’m wading out into these uncertain waters with only one destination in mind: to be of service.
BARFBAG REVIVES PROTEST PUNK

BY BRETT CALLWOOD

David Bason has spent decades working behind the scenes in the music industry for the likes of RCA, Decca, Roadrunner and Red Bull Records. As an A&R guru, he has carefully cultivated the careers of the Dresden Dolls, the Strokes, Andrew WK, Jesse Malin and the Cult, and worked closely with the New York Dolls during their comeback years. The guy has seen it all, from the sidelines.

Now though, he’s stepping out to the front with incendiary punk rock troupe Barfbag. Mind you, it’s not his first time in a band; he’s low-key dabbled before.

“I played in a band from Vancouver called Hard Drugs,” he says. “I’ve always made my own music, putting out solo records. I came up very firmly in the punk rock and hardcore world, and I just noticed a lack of protest records. It’s really encouraging and heartwarming to see the wave of protest records that are starting to come now. But we made this record last year and it just felt like we’re all so angry and consumed with the news day in and day out -- why are people not shouting?”

That’s the seed of an idea that led to Barfbag being spawned into the world -- the simple thought that the world is going to shit and there aren’t enough musicians, particularly punks, protesting the awfulness.

“Genre aside -- I don’t care if it’s punk rock, hip-hop, folk music, reggae, whatever -- every genre has delivered amazing protest records but there seemed to be a lack of protest music coming,” Bason says. “So I got Brian [Viglione] from the Dresden Dolls and my buddy Kenny [Carkeet] from AWOLNATION and said, ‘We have to make this record.’ It’s been really fun because they’re my friends, but it’s also been really cathartic. Just getting it out there and saying things.”

That desire to say things led to the release of The Plastic Age EP in July, and a string of singles building up to the debut Let’s Stop a War album on election day -- November 3. The most recent song to drop is “Street Crime,” which contains the no-nonsense lyrics:

“I cross borders at will; I’ll show up at your marches; I’ll put out your torches; I’ll pull off your masks; You take our kids at the border; We’ll take your kids at the tower; You attack the press again; We’ll release the fucking piss tapes!”

“It felt to me like there’s an entire generation of kids who felt empowered by going the other way and dropping out,” Bason says. “Not standing up and shouting but popping pills and dropping out. Not voting, and saying ‘Both sides are corrupt -- I’m not getting involved.’ That’s how we end up where we are.”

The song “Some of it Was True” has a title taken from the Clash’s "London Calling" -- “And you know what they said, well some of it was true.” It’s also inspired by the Tom Waits song “What’s He Building,” albeit with a Twilight Zone’s Rod Serling vibe.

“I wake up sometimes and think ‘We’re in the fucking Twilight Zone. How did we get here? What is that guy building in there?’”

Bason says, “That got me thinking. There’s a grain of truth in what Trump says, but he uses misquoted information to suit his purposes. He’s got no references, everything is easily debunked by minor fact-checking except no one does it, and then he peppers a grain of truth in there, mixes it with a bunch of lies, he sits back and watches the chaos. He sees what sticks, and that’s the Trump brand. That’s not saying anything new -- we all know that. In our song, the new part is we have our own call to action now.”

Based on the many protests we’ve seen in the streets this year, it’s clear that calls to action work when the cause is just. Barfbag are offering a soundtrack while amplifying the rallying cry.

“That’s us saying, ‘Oh yeah, well you know what? We’ll be there in the street and it’ll get gnarly but that’s ok too. We’ll be outside the White House and we’ll be the ones calling you on your bullshit enough to make you run scared to the bunker,’” says Bason. “We don’t want to be whiny punk rockers -- we’ll go out and protest and call you out every step of the way. Trump knows that, as soon as he loses this election, he is instantaneously irrelevant. ‘That, I feel, is his biggest fear, so he will fight with everything he has to hang on to the spotlight which is feeding his narcissistic ego.’

One does have to wonder though -- when the messages are so serious, why opt for such a goofy band name?

“I have an aversion to preachy punk rock, which might not make sense given what you’ve heard from this band but it’s meant to really show we’re all down here in the muck together and no one’s on a high horse talking down at you,” Bason says. “Is the name regrettable now that we’ve got a little traction? Probably. But it won’t be the first time. You know how sometimes you have a band name that you just repeat so much that it just becomes part of your vernacular? I’m hoping for that. It started with three knuckleheads in the studio trying to make a punk rock record. I guess it stuck. It’s not rocket science -- that’s for sure.”

The lockdown has resulted in a burst of creativity from Bason; as well as a ton of Barfbag recordings, he’s also in a hardcore band with Rich Cipriano (formerly of Sick of it All) called War Orphan, and he has a doom metal project too. That’s how he’s staying sane.

“We’re all sitting around making records in COVID times because it makes us happy,” he says.

With the Barfbag album dropping in November, there’s plenty to keep Bason busy. He’s putting the right messages out there -- we just need to make sure we’re listening. Barfbag’s Let’s Stop a War album is out on November 3.
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