

An Interview with Andy Broder  
by: Virginia Kravitz

*The following excerpts are from my conversation with chef Andy Broder on March 25, 2010.*

### Early Clues

GINNY: Did you ever consider the food industry as a possible career when you were in college?

ANDY: No, in fact, almost absolutely not, but not because there wasn't an interest. I don't think when I was growing up that the average person knew that oh, you can be a chef. There wasn't a Food Network. We didn't have celebrity chefs. I grew up when Julia Child was doing her shows for the first time.

GINNY: Did you watch them?

ANDY: I did. **I was the weird kid who, on Saturday afternoon, wanted to watch Julia Child.** And she was a home cook. She was talking about entertaining in your house. I don't think that cooking was anything in my mind but either a hobby for people or kind of what your mom did.

### Practicing Law & Vague Inklings

GINNY: All right, so twelve years pass as an attorney. Take me through that process that precipitated the change.

ANDY: When I first started practicing law I would say that I mostly liked it. And I don't think I made a mistake. I think that it would be more appropriate to say that, **after five years, six years, I had this sense that I wasn't going to do this for the rest of my life.** At first it was more vague. And as time went by I did become more dissatisfied, in an ironic way probably. As I got more experienced and was better at what I did, I was actually less happy about doing it. And I think I was a decent lawyer.

GINNY: Yes.

ANDY: I just at some point felt this isn't going to be my life. And I had in my mind a vague sense of oh, **when I'm such-and-such age I'm going to quit and I'll do something else.** And at the time I left I had not actually reached that point.

GINNY: What was the age in your mind that you imagined?

ANDY: I sort of thought around 40. Or somehow that between 40 and 45, I would transition to a new career, whatever that was. And it was vague.

### Decision to Leave with No Particular Destination

GINNY: So you bowed out, so to speak?

ANDY: I did, because it was an opportunity. **And I've come to think of that as one of those times where, if I hadn't done it, I probably would be looking back saying that I regretted it and I wish I had taken up that opportunity to make the transition.** But 20/20 hindsight in this case was I did the right thing. And I think this would be one of those hindsight... I'd be very sad that I hadn't done it if I hadn't.

GINNY: Yes. It's good to be able to say that, isn't it?

ANDY: Yes, it is.

GINNY: That's so interesting how things just happened. You had what I would call some things tickling your brain in years before that or that sort of restlessness stirring, and then events happened. At that point did you know you were going to pursue cooking?

ANDY: No.

GINNY: All you knew is that you were leaving?

ANDY: Correct. **I quit my practice to leave without a specific destination.** I actually told myself that the first thing I was going to do was just take some time off and not do anything. **Because sometimes not doing anything is really doing something.**

GINNY: Right.

ANDY: I needed some time to not be practicing law. At the time I lived very close to the Phoenix Public Library. I would go there a lot and I would find things to read for pleasure but I would also look at different potential career options. **I would look through books on all sorts of different subjects.**

GINNY: Interesting.

ANDY: For example, in the world of food I would look at cookbooks or books about food, not specifically books about becoming a chef. And in other professions, the same thing. I wouldn't necessarily look at it as I'm transitioning to this profession. I would just be looking through their literature. **But I always kept going back to the food section.**

GINNY: Were you cooking all these years in your personal life?

ANDY: Yes, I always cooked.

GINNY: How did you get from the books to enrolling in Scottsdale Culinary Institute?

ANDY: I didn't have a big impetus to go and work in a restaurant for a couple of years while I was making the decision. That didn't have an appeal to me. I came to the ultimate conclusion that, if I went to culinary school and **when it was all said and done I chose not to have a food career, I would actually be happy to have all the knowledge in my head that I would get.** In that case I would just call it a sabbatical because I could always go back to practicing law.

I asked myself: *If I don't like it, would that be a failure?* And I thought, no, I want the information. I **actually did have a passion for it. And that made me comfortable with the situation.**

## Evolution of a Cooking Career

GINNY: Once you were in school when did you say: *I'm going to make a career out of this?*

ANDY: Early on, I remember a time when we were told: *You've got an hour and it's Friday afternoon. Just clean out the refrigerators, but you have to make a dish.* I made something and the chef in the class said, **"You should be cooking professionally."** That made me feel so good.



GINNY: It was an endorsement.

ANDY: **That and the day that I learned how to make pasta from scratch.** Those two things made me very happy. And I was happy to be there.

GINNY: I understand you didn't want the typical internship assignment. Tell me about your conversation with the placement director.

ANDY: Yes, she said I should get a job at a hotel or restaurant to get experience in the industry. My response was that I didn't think it would be a good choice for me, which is not what you would usually say to a placement director, even if you don't agree with her. She sat back and looked at me and asked why. And I said, well, so far I have not missed any class and I haven't been late to any class and I have all As, not just in each class but I got an A on every test and I'd like to get out of here with that. **I think that for me, defining success here is that I really learn a lot.**

GINNY: When did you absolutely know that you were going to start a business or make this your career?

ANDY: **My process was a little more Zen. I continued to do what I liked or test the waters of what I thought I was going to like.** I do think that I'm lucky with what I do for a living because **I didn't find a place where my peg fit into that shape hole. I sort of created my own space to do what I want to do.**

GINNY: Yes.

ANDY: **And that takes a process of elimination combined with certain kinds of experience.** Right after I did my internship somebody asked me if I wanted to teach some cooking classes (at a place that's not in business anymore). And I said: *I think that'd be fun.* And so, she said: ***Bring a couple of menus and we'll see.*** And I brought six menus. And she said: ***These all look good. Let's do them all.*** The next thing I knew, I had a cooking class scheduled every other week for a month and a half.

GINNY: So that happened organically.

ANDY: And I liked it. And she was like: *Let's do more classes.* So, now I was teaching cooking classes. Ultimately I taught around town at the pots and pans stores that have cooking classes. I was teaching a lot... two, three times a week, which, when you're doing it freelance is a lot.

## Birth of a Studio

ANDY: After five years of teaching classes, I wanted my own place. I also realized I had no desire to be a retailer. My father had a store. I just didn't want it to be a store. **I wanted to be in a kitchen.**

GINNY: You were clear on that.

ANDY: I called up some department at the county or state and if you were starting a business they would send you a packet. They asked you questions on the phone. They sent me a booklet about how to do a business plan. I hadn't done that kind of stuff before so, I went through the process. **I made a 20-page business plan.** You have to make a list of what your goals are now and in five years and two years and how you see the business growing. And you had to do projection of profits and where the income was... all that stuff.

GINNY: **So, you got there in a Zen way but then you did this practical exercise.**

ANDY: Right, I did. I was very practical about that. Because then I said I was going to move forward. I had to find a space and I had to see if the space was able to be built out. I had to find out if I could do it on a certain budget.

GINNY: At this point or at any point when you're deciding to pursue this, did you have any doubts or fears arise? And if so, how did you deal with them?

ANDY: Well, I think there are always doubts. I don't think I had doubts about specifically wanting to do it. I **knew that it was for me going to be a big undertaking**. I think that when you're in the mode of saying, "I like this prospect and I think it's going to be good," and you're being creative about it and you're practical at the same time, and you're applying tools to take ideas and turn them into something that's a real thing, **that if you are excited about it, you have concerns or those fears but you deal with them and you keep moving towards your goal.**

GINNY: Yes. When did you have that feeling or the knowing that "this is my thing"?

ANDY: Well, there are a couple of points that stand out in my mind: **when I taught my first class here and when I actually saw the kitchen completed**



## Hindsight Wisdom

GINNY: **If you could imagine yourself today talking to your younger self who is sorting all this through, what would you tell that person?**

ANDY: I think in an odd way, the hardest part about that question is, would I tell that person not to go to law school? And interestingly, I'm not sure that I could've gotten this place done the way I've done it if I hadn't gone to law school because, while I'm not really a very litigious person by nature (which is probably why I didn't like practicing law), I'm also not a very pushy person. But to get this place done I **had to be willing to stand my ground and not get pushed.**

GINNY: Is there anything you might have whispered in your younger self's ear as a word of encouragement or wisdom?

ANDY: I might've told my younger self that my whole career path and education path could've been different than what it was. Because I took a "wasn't-sure-what-I-was-going-to-do path" and I wasn't very dynamic in my getting to be a lawyer. It was more like I was there by default. And that's probably why I wasn't as happy.

GINNY: What do you see as some of the inner qualities or characteristics that got you here and helped you?

ANDY: I think I'm reasonably self-reliant. **When it comes to the things that are important to me, I take time to educate myself** and know what I'm talking about. Like when I went to culinary school, there was a final there. I think it was 200 questions. And I told myself that I wanted to get 100%. **I studied as hard for the culinary exam as the bar exam.**

GINNY: Wow.

ANDY: Because I thought well, what's the point of my having switched careers and done this if I can't say that I learned everything?

GINNY: Learning was very important to you.

ANDY: That's why I call it a studio. Because I think this place actually is *culinary art*... I mean, there's an art to it. I don't think I am an artist; I think I'm artistic. There's a big difference.

The thing I'm good with –and maybe that's the artist part of me– is that I can write recipes in my head. I mean, as in I sit and I think about it and then I type it up. Then, as I'm looking at it I go no, it needs more this or that. **And I can taste it as I'm typing it.** And then I change it; no, it needs this. And 95% of the time what I type, when I go to cook it by the recipe, tastes like what I wanted it to and comes out the way I want, which is a pretty good ratio.

GINNY: Yes, it is.



ANDY: **I knew I wanted to write about food and develop recipes. I didn't know I was going to teach people then.** But I had sort of an academic bend. I had to be proficient in all of those things. Just like if you want to be a doctor, it doesn't make a difference what your specialty is. You sort of have to have a basic underlying understanding of how the human body works and basic pharmacology and all those things so that you don't kill a person when you're doing a procedure on a little part of the body that you focus on.

GINNY: **What you're describing, sounds to me that you took yourself and your pursuit seriously.**

ANDY: I did.

GINNY: Yes.

ANDY: And I probably was in culinary school for the right reasons.

### The Art of a Good Meal

GINNY: I love that you call this a studio and “culinary studio” is registered as a trade name. You say it's where your talents and interests meet. What else is significant about calling it a studio to you?

ANDY: I think it's a place where other people, when they come here and cook, can feel like they can be a little creative or that they can learn. Studios can be places where there's art or crafts. And I definitely think cooking is always a craft.

GINNY: Yes. The artistic part is a big theme for you. **It's the AndyFood mantra: *The Art of a Good Meal.***



ANDY: That's right. I think there are a lot of people who come here who are impressed with what they completed because in their whole life they never took the time to take the food they made and put it on a nice plate. They just served it out of the pot. And suddenly they see: *Look what I did. It looks really nice.* And maybe they never made their food look nice. Or maybe everything they did came out of a can or a box and they mixed it together. And they never took what they considered to be basic, raw ingredients and turned it into something. Now they can say: *This wasn't so hard. I can do it again. That's sort of a studio-ish thing.*

GINNY: Yes. Actually, that's what I experienced when I took the pasta class here. I always thought well, that's got to be a very involved thing. And then, that was the transformation here that I went home and said: *I could do that.* And we went out and got the pasta machine.

ANDY: That's great.

GINNY: **When does a meal become art?**

ANDY: **When the person who made it did it with a lot of thought and care.** If you think about it, when a five-year-old does something with a crayon, it might not make it to the Museum of Modern Art. Yet, it is a kind of art and that's why it ends up on the refrigerator. That's because that five-year-old cared about it and to them it's art. And to their parents and to everybody else it's squiggles. That's why you can go to a restaurant that's kind of divey but the kitchen really cares about what they're turning out. They're making good ethnic food, good soul food, good something. They care about it and the fact that they have mismatched silverware and plates and not very pretty furniture is beside the point. If the place is clean and if they care about what they're doing, that can be art.

And you can go to a really, really expensive place where it feels like all they're doing is taking things out of a mold, there's no art at all. It's a formula.

GINNY: Love that. What's the part of all of this that delights you the most, the part that spills over and you can't help but share with people?

ANDY: I think most people who talk to me on the phone when they're planning an event, think I'm pretty enthusiastic about what I do and that I like it. Part of the enthusiasm is that I'm qualified to do what I do, and when I say, well, this is what I think you ought to do or why we might want to consider this, that it sounds to them like a reasonable thing to do because I've given them all the groundwork as opposed to just throwing it out there. **Because I don't like the cookie-cutter approach.**

GINNY: No, that's clear! So, when you get to be creative and share that spirit with people, that's what you enjoy?

ANDY: **Yes, I think people like being part of a creative process.** When you're at parties in people's houses, everybody ends up in the kitchen. **And pretty much on a day-to-day basis I'm in the kitchen where people are having a party,** which granted, I'm the one that had to plan it and do everything, but that's still where I am. And most of the people are happy to be there and they're there because they want to be. And there's a nice set of values and emotions that go with that, that I get to be around all the time versus when I was a lawyer I was around people who were miserable all the time because they had to hire me.

### Advice for Career Changers

GINNY: What you would say to someone who's just at that part where they're in the library, thumbing through the books or contemplating a change?

ANDY: **I think that people should do something that they really care about.** I also think that there are lots of stories of people taking their hobby and turning it into their profession and finding that they have ruined their hobby. I did think about that because cooking was my hobby.

GINNY: Yes, that's an interesting point.

ANDY: And I think that I didn't do that. Because I actually still cook at home. But that's an important thing...

GINNY: Yes, to keep checking in with yourself and ask: *Am I still enjoying this?*

ANDY: Right. And I did try hard to think through that for myself.

GINNY: So, you haven't ruined it for yourself? You still love to cook?

ANDY: I do.

GINNY: Wonderful, Andy. I don't know if you've thought about that journey in a while but I'm sure that it will help people who are going through the process. It's always helpful to look at others and say okay, what can I expect and someone else did it, maybe I can do it. So, thanks for sharing your insights.

ANDY: You're welcome. Thank you.



Ginny and Andy at Andy's Culinary Studio, AndyFood, Scottsdale, AZ

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The interview is part of the series: *Models of Living In the Current*.

Update (2015): *After 12 years and nearly 60,000 students, chef Andy Broder closed his Scottsdale cooking school to pursue other endeavors including blogging about food. Andy, enjoy the next change you are cooking up!*

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