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## Cirque du Sorbet For riveting theater, forget Broadway. Try ringside seats with the top toque | By Dirk Smillie

**A**N EPICUREAN DRAMA IS UNFOLDING in the kitchen of Studio, a rustic-chic restaurant at the Montage Resort in Laguna Beach, Calif.: Barbra Streisand's manager has called down from his suite, asking for a batch of chicken soup to soothe his cold. Dinner orders fly in from Studio's packed dining room, piquing a verbal volley from the line cooks. "Fire duck breast 26!" hollers one; another sets a filet of Miyazaki beef on fire with a blast of grape seed oil. Chef James Boyce waves a menu aloft, having discovered an error. "What's the wild turbot doing on here?!" he demands, brow furrowed in disbelief.

The 43-year-old Boyce, whose spiky blond hair is moussed into a rock-star coif, is the leading man in this nightly performance. His audience: 14 elegantly dressed guests seated at a "chef's table" in a private dining room with a fireplace. They have paid \$250 apiece for seats just a few paces from the kitchen, allowing them to kibitz with Boyce as they devour octopus carpaccio and other goodies.

A slinky brunette wants to know how Boyce rendered a filet of snapper crisp-as-a-cracker on the outside without overcooking the inside. He explains that his \$100,000 Molteni oven, of which there are only two dozen in the U.S., has a hot spot on its grill that sears fish at 675 degrees. Move the fish off it and you ratchet down the heat without stopping the cooking.

Chef's tables have been around for a

century—they used to be where lowly staff chowed down. Now they are prized and pricey, found on mezzanines overlooking the kitchen or in glass-walled rooms adjoining the "hot line," where cooks dish up their vittles. Typically they demand extra work from an already overtaxed kitchen. So why are more restaurants offering them?

"Incredible margins," says Westport, Conn. restaurateur Michel Nischan. In New York City, where dinner at Alain Ducasse costs \$230 per person with tax and tip (but not wine), the tab for the chef's table is \$500 (including wine). Since these meals don't have much higher ingredient or labor costs than those dished out to the hoi polloi in the main room, the premium collected on them is almost all profit. Studio sells an average four chef's table seatings a week, seasoning the top line of Studio's owner, Montage, by \$700,000 a year.

For the chef, there's another incentive. Explains restaurant consultant Lisa Donoughe, "Chefs love to be watched." At Sensi, a restaurant inside Las Vegas' Bellagio hotel, Japanese design firm Super

Potato has conceived two chef's tables—one wood, one stone, each hand-chiseled by monks—that look down into an almost gladiatorial arena: At four sunken kitchens in the middle of the dining room, Iron Chefs engage in hyperbolic oyster-shucking; risottos are whipped cruelly and fistfuls of pasta fly into boiling water.

"Chef's table" has its own meaning in Buenos Aires, where Manhattan orthodontist Peter Theodorou dined with his girlfriend last December at restaurant Verace. Chef Rodrigo Balfagon arrived at the \$150-a-couple table in a dirty apron, reeking of fried food and cheap cologne. He sat down, quaffed wine and told rambling stories—not about food but about his childhood. Three hours later the entrées arrived—all six dishes simultaneously. Shrugs Theodorou: "I'm not even sure who cooked them." Why tolerate such guff? "It was the best meal I ever had."

To see our pick of the top ten chef's tables, visit [www.forbes.com/extra](http://www.forbes.com/extra). **F**

