

Interview: Rich Table chef-owners Evan Rich + Sarah Rich

By Joshua Lurie | April 1, 2013

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Queens-born and Jersey-raised Evan Rich graduated from the Culinary Institute of America and initially worked for David Bouley before rising to Chef de Cuisine at a series of high profile restaurants, including Quince and Coi. Sarah Rich lived in Louisiana until age 15, moved to east Texas and attended the French Culinary Institute in Manhattan before clocking time at Bouley. She switched to Mas and moved with husband Evan to San Francisco, where she continued her upward trajectory as sous chef of Michael Mina's signature restaurant, and at Coi. In 2012, the Riches opened **Rich Table** in San Francisco's Hayes Valley with Wine Director Maz Naba. In under a year, they've earned accolades from San Franciscans and became finalists for a 2013 James Beard Award for Best New Restaurant. On February 7, we met at Rich Table, and the couple shared insights about topics like ownership, collaboration and evolution.

Was it a given that you would both become chefs, or did you consider other careers?

Sarah Rich: When I was in college, I had things that I wanted to do, for sure. I was originally a theatre major, I wanted to be an actress, which at this point is pretty laughable, but hey, whatever. When I graduated college, I wasn't really sure where I was going to go and what I was going to do, and that was right about the time that the Food Network started to become something that people watched, I watched it a lot. "Iron Chef," the original one, was on all the time. I used to love that. I would see ads for the French Culinary Institute, and I just started looking into it. It was never something I'd realized you could make a career. I know that sounds really odd now, because it's so... everywhere, but at that time, it never dawned on me that that was a career path, and I started looking into culinary schools, and ended up going to the French Culinary Institute. Food was always a part of my life; it was always something I really enjoyed, I just didn't know that I could be a chef. That was my story, what about yours?

Evan Rich: I crashed my parent's car when I was 15, and needed to get a job to pay for it. I got a job washing dishes, and that's the only thing I've ever done, worked in restaurants, so I never thought of anything else. It's the only thing I know, so I wouldn't know where to start if I wasn't working in a kitchen.

What was your very first night like when you moved from washing dishes to working the line?

Evan Rich: I mean, it was fun; I fell in love right away. I like the adrenaline rush, it obviously was hard, but you know it's the atmosphere, the adrenaline rush, the creativity, the instant gratification of making something where people enjoy it, everything about it just kind of got me excited, so I was hooked right away.

Do you still feel that adrenaline rush when you're on the line?

Both Riches: Oh, yeah.

Evan Rich: I love it. One thing that's great about this restaurant is that we get pretty busy, so there's a huge buzz and a lot of energy in it, so me at least, I feed off that energy, so as the restaurant gets busier, I'm running around on the line, cooking, tasting, running to the back,

serving food. So I like that energy rush, I like the buzz in the restaurant. It helps the creativity in the kitchen and the push to make things better, and you have a lot of fun doing it.

Was an open kitchen always part of the plan?

Evan Rich: Yeah. We wanted to open a restaurant that was already a restaurant and just kind of change it, and we searched a long time for a kitchen like this, just because it's our restaurant, and we felt like our friends and family would be coming to see us, and if we were stuck in the back, in kind of brought a disconnect. I mean, it says it on the front, Rich Table, you're coming to our table.

Sarah Rich: It just breaks down that barrier, between the two areas of the restaurant. When we moved here from New York – I don't know about now, we haven't been there in 5 years – but there weren't a lot of open kitchens like this. The kitchen was in the back, you didn't ever see who was back there or what they were doing, your food just appeared and you were in your own space in the dining room. We moved out here, and that was one of the things we saw right away, that there were more, not necessarily this open, but you could see into the kitchen a little bit. Which was exciting for us because we enjoy seeing that. Just like Evan said, it opens the space up, to give it more of that feel of we've invited you into our space, come and sit, we're cooking for you, you're our guests. It's more of a fun atmosphere, it's not quite so stuffy.

Tell me a little about how you collaborate. Maybe use a recent dish as an example.

Evan Rich: (laughing) I mean there's really no rhyme or reason. Maybe one day, I'll come in and say oh, "I have this idea." On the menu there's a dry aged steak tagliatelle with sun-dried tomatoes and crispy potatoes. I came in and I was like I want to do a pasta that's steak frites, you know, and then she was kind of like well, that sounds great, but... and you know, it just was a conversation. When we were talking about the mint dessert, it was like, "Oh, I want to do something with mint and chocolate," then, you know...

Sarah Rich: We just sort of throw ideas back and forth between each other. Like this past Tuesday we were walking through the market and seeing different things, and I had the idea, why don't we try using these wheatberries somewhere? And Evan had wanted to change the beet dish, so we started thinking about the beet dish and how to evolve that, and just throwing ideas back and forth so that you know, we're both bringing something to the table, so that rather than one person just saying, "This is the dish," we can see from different perspectives, and then hopefully put them all together to make an even better dish... Sometimes he helps with desserts, sometimes I help with savory, we just go back and forth all over the menu.

Evan Rich: It's just kind of a gamut process that just happens.

Sarah Rich: And I would say, originally, evolving the design of the menu and the setup, how we wanted it to look, what kinds of dishes we wanted to offer, we just did a lot of brainstorming and thinking.

How has the restaurant evolved since you opened?

Sarah Rich: I think it's evolved a lot.

Evan Rich: Yeah, I mean, simply just the kitchen, when we first opened there were five of us, including us two. Now, due to business and things going on, there are twelve of us. The pasta, when we started there were two pasta dishes, and the middle section of the menu was kind of more like grains and bread and starch kind of stuff, and now it's all pastas. Just the system and the complexity of what we do have evolved, we're starting to find what works with us. When we first opened, it was really like changing everything every day, figure out what works, what people like, what we're capable of in the kitchen, and now we're starting to find a more workable format that we can kind of work on and feel confident with. I know when we first started, we just changed the menu every day, almost completely. Week by week we'd have totally new menus. I think that was more due to, "Let's just figure out how it works." And now, we have format systems, and things that work, and are really good, and people come back for, and changing everything every week doesn't work so much. Now the process sort of works itself out where today, I went to the market and found a couple things, and we're going to start talking about new dishes, and tomorrow we'll try some, probably by Saturday they'll be on. Instead of just alright, we're just going to try this. So we're just trying to figure out, a more consistent way to do things, and I think that's a major part of the evolution of the restaurant.

What are your favorite aspects of finally having your own restaurant?

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What are your favorite aspects of finally having your own restaurant?

Sarah Rich: All of them. (laughing)

Evan Rich: (Laughing) The little things, to me. Just like, a friend comes in and you go sit down and it's just like, this is my restaurant. People come in to see you, and I don't know, it's stupid little things, like even if it's just like you send your checks out to your purveyor, and it's your signature on the check, it's like, "Alright."

Sarah Rich: Well it's all part of the fact that this has taken years to achieve. It's been my goal since I started culinary school. I'm sure it's been Evan's goal for just as long. We've had many many years of extraordinarily hard work and sacrifice, working tremendously long hours, not seeing our families on holidays, not having weekends off, missing out on all the things that people with regular schedules do, not making any money, all of those things that you do to reach a goal. And then, years of working on projects and seeing them fall through at the last minute. Or getting excited about a space, or this or that, and seeing it fall through. To finally have it actually happen, is a tremendous achievement. For me, I'm still not really realizing it's real. It's taken a long time. It's not like we just suddenly one day said hey, "Let's open a restaurant." We've been working for this for fifteen years each, so to finally do it is really exciting.

I imagine everyone had a piece of advice for you when you were trying to get your restaurant open.

Evan Rich: Oh, everyone's got something to say.

Who gave the best advice for you, and what was it?

Evan Rich: To be honest, everyone had really good advice, but it was totally opposites. You'd talk to one chef who opened his own restaurant, and he'd say oh, "Starting capital? That's a luxury, I started with nothing, don't worry about it, you're not going to need it." Then you'd talk to another chef who opened his own restaurant and he'd say, "I had this much money in the bank and you need to have this much, or else you're going to have such trouble." And they're both super respectable chefs who have a great business, and you talk to someone else, and they're like, "Don't sign that, that's not what you need to do, you need to put that in something else," and then you talk to another person and they're like oh, "I signed that, that's fine, whatever, you just got to do it." At least for me, I talked to so many people, and got so much advice that to be honest, everyone's advice was really good because you just see this really roundabout view of how to do things and it's like there's no right way there's no wrong way, you just kind of do what's right for you. And that's kind of what we did, we just made it happen. When things would come up, you'd remember oh, so and so said have this money aside for your tax down payment, you know, and stuff like that. And when it came up you would have confidence in your decision because you had like three people tell you about their experience doing it.

Sarah Rich: I would say also, not necessarily advice, but just in terms of the support we got, our families were incredibly supportive. Not just because they want us to succeed, or you

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know, they're proud of us, but because it takes a lot of risk to do this, and they supported that risk. I could tell that both our parents were nervous, and our siblings were nervous, because you're borrowing lots of money, you're writing big checks, who knows if it's going to work or not going to work. It's not like we come from family of people who take risks like that. They're not people who go out and start businesses. So they couldn't necessarily relate to it, they were just as curious as how it would work out as well, but they never told us not to follow our dream, never once said don't do it. As scared as they may be for us, they backed us 100%.

Evan Rich: Daniel Patterson actually gave us some pretty good advice. Right before we opened, we had some friends just hanging out and drinking some beers here. He came by and he was just like, "Don't listen to what anyone has to say, for the first six months, just do what you do. Stick to your guns, feel good about what you do, have fun with it, and just don't listen to anybody. Overall, just do what you do and stick to your guns and you'll be fine." Being such a high profile opening, and stuff like that, like you said, a lot of people have opinions, and a lot of people have advice, but it also goes the other way. A lot of people have criticisms. It can get to you, because all we want to do is make people happy. All we want to do is when you come in and sit down and eat, when you leave, you have a big smile and you feel good about it. That's the ultimate goal, and a lot of people come in, trying to pass judgment and have criticisms, and think they can do it better, and it's just like, you got to just, "Well we're just doing what we do and you can't win them all."

Sarah Rich: It's hard to not let it get to you. And you want to address legitimate problems but you know, some of them are not legitimate.

Evan Rich: Overall, you know, Dan was just saying just stick to your guns, feel confident about what you do, you guys know how to cook. We were like yeah, alright. Sometimes you just got to go back to that conversation and think yeah, alright, we do. We're good.

What do you look for when you're hiring someone to work, either in the kitchen or front of the house, and is that different?

Evan Rich: For the kitchen, I look for certain experience. We come across as a casual, kind of fun atmosphere, but in the kitchen everyone who works there has worked in Michelin starred restaurants, everyone has very serious experience, and everyone really loves what they do. That's not to say someone who hasn't worked in that environment can't come in here, but it's more of an attitude. I'm not so concerned with experience, more with the attitude and the willingness to work. One thing we say to everyone who applies here, one thing that I'm looking for, I'm looking for someone that's down for the calls. I don't want someone coming in here and saying, "I'm a sous chef, and I want a sous chef job." You got to earn that, or we don't need that right now. I want people to come in here and say yeah, "I'll work that station. I'll work that day." That kind of attitude, that I'm just here because I love this place, and the people I work with.

Sarah Rich: We have a really good team of people that are all, obviously very hard workers, but also excited to be here, excited to learn, excited to be challenged, they don't want to just go through the motions every day for a job. They want to be here and be a part of it, and something we've said right from the beginning is that we want everyone here to take ownership of the restaurant, in the sense that they treat it as if it's their own. I worked at many other restaurants where I tried to have that attitude, because it helps you in the future when you do have your own restaurant, and it helps you create a good support team throughout the staff, and you know that when you're not there, they're going to have the same amount of respect for what they're doing. Everybody on our team does do that.

Evan Rich: And everybody in our kitchen wants to be a chef. They're not just here because oh, this is cool, they'll do this for a couple years. If it happens or not, whatever, but their goal right now is to become a chef. And that right there, is crucial because if you want that, learning and sacrifice is what you want to do. You don't just turn it on one day, you know, I was lazy for my last job but then this job I'm going to take serious. It's something that's kind of built into you and you just learn.

As far as the front of the house is concerned, we look for experience. We look for pros that are really good at their job and enjoy it, and don't need someone who stands over them and make them do what we need. We let people be who they are, and let their experience speak for itself. Our servers mostly come in dressed off the street and put an apron on, and it's like they know about wine, they know about food, they enjoy talking to guests, and they enjoy what they do, and they have the right experience, so that it's natural for them...and they enjoy it, which means a lot.

Sarah Rich: The idea is that, it's sort of like our approach to the food, same approach to the service, is that you can tell that there's experience and technique behind it, but it doesn't feel stuffy, it doesn't feel contrived, it doesn't feel overthought. You're getting this quality experience, where it's the food or the service, but it doesn't feel — for lack of a better word — stuffy. You're getting that same level of service, but it's more comfortable. It takes a skilled, experienced server to pull that off. It's not just about giving casual service, that's not what we want. We want sophisticated service that feels casual.

When people think of a Rich Table dish, what does a dish have to be if it's going to end up on your menu?

Sarah Rich: Tasty. (laughing)

Evan Rich: Yeah, I think the first question we ask ourselves when we're coming up with a dish, "Is it tasty?" I like to think our food is simply complex. Like on the top layer, if you're just sitting, having a conversation, eating your food, it's delicious and you don't have to think about it because you understand it tastes good. But if you come in for a food experience and you kind of want to think about deeper about it and think about concept and complex flavors, you kind of look in a little bit deeper and have a discussion about the food. But, a happy medium with that. We want people to just come in, eat, relax, have good conversation, have good wine, good food, not really have to think about it. But at the same time, the backgrounds we're in, we want also people to come in who are interested in food and having interesting food experiences to be stimulated here. So, you know, I think we conceptualize dishes to an extent, but simplicity is mainly what we strive for.

Is there anything that either of you don't enjoy eating?

Evan Rich: (Laughing) Celery root.

Sarah Rich: I don't really like papaya.

Evan Rich: To be honest, there are things I haven't enjoyed eating, but just me, who I am, if someone prepares it, I'll eat it. I wouldn't want to say I'm never going to eat that, because if I go to a restaurant and a chef makes a dish that's "that thing," I'm going to try it because it could be different. It could be better.

Sarah Rich: I would agree with that. I pretty much like everything. I don't really like papaya.

Evan Rich: You'll never see celery root on the menu. I don't know what it is. I would gladly try it at another restaurant, but we'll never cook it here.

Sarah Rich: I like green papaya salad, but like bright, fresh papaya, I don't know why, I just don't — it's been a long time since I've had it — maybe if I had it I would like it.

What was the last meal that you cooked at home?

Evan Rich: New Year's Day, we took a steak home, and a truffle, and some pasta, and just did grilled steaks with truffle pasta. Cooking at home, right now, is not a luxury we have. We're closed on Tuesday, Tuesday's a big market day so there's a lot of work to do. We try, on Tuesday, to get a babysitter for two hours and just go to a restaurant, even if it's just the Chinese place around the corner, and kind of have a moment for ourselves, and just enjoy it.

Sarah Rich: I cook dinner every night, but it's like toddler-friendly food. I can only get so crazy with a two-year-old running around beneath me. There's a lot of cheesy pasta.

Do you have a top selling dish at Rich Table?

Evan Rich: Our sardine chips are taking off. We do our porcini doughnuts, and they're starting to rival the sardine chips, but everything else, we change so often —

Sarah Rich: We sell a lot of steak.

Evan Rich: We do. We always have a New York strip, the garnishes change, but those sell quite a bit. Our pastas sell, no matter what they are, they'll sell. Top-selling dish? I don't know.

Since we're in San Francisco, let's consider the possibility that Rice-A-Roni is not, in fact, the San Francisco treat. What would it be instead?

Sarah Rich: Dungeness crab. That would be my San Francisco treat. To be honest, I can eat crab for the rest of my life. I love crab.

Evan Rich: I think vegetables. Being in this area right here, so vegetable-friendly. I've never looked at vegetables the way I do since I moved here and just going to the markets. I would say vegetables, plural.

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