

Rebel With a Cause

Dominique Crenn's poetic culinary creations made her a star. But she's also a fighter. As she gears up for an ambitious expansion, she faces the restaurant industry's greatest challenge yet.

BY JAY CHESHES PORTRAIT BY ANTONIO DIAZ



HOLDING STRONG
Dominique Crenn,
photographed at
Atelier Crenn
in San Francisco.



TASTE OF THE PAST
From top: Geoduck, sea urchin and citrus at Atelier Crenn; its signature aperitif, a reimagined kir Breton. Photographed by Jim Sullivan. Opposite, from top: Crenn with her parents and brother on her second birthday; Crenn working at Manhattan Country Club in 1999.

ON A THURSDAY afternoon in mid-March, Atelier Crenn, the three-Michelin-starred restaurant near San Francisco's Marina District, was bustling with chefs preparing their stations for dinner, waiters fussing with flowers and linens, and deliveries arriving through an alleyway entry. Chef-owner Dominique Crenn was pacing among the velvet armchairs and marble-topped tables next door at Bar Crenn, the retro wine bar attached to her fine-dining flagship via a courtyard. Her iPhone lit up with email, text messages and headline notifications about the rippling worldwide effects of the novel coronavirus. "Atelier is going to be OK," she said. "We had 10 cancellations in the last two weeks—that's not bad."

"My main thing is to keep my employees safe and to make sure they're not losing their jobs because of this," she added.

It was just a few days before the coronavirus would shut down the city—along with much of the country—and it was as yet unimaginable how far this crisis would reach. Four days later, on March 16, San Francisco Mayor London Breed would order every nonessential business, including restaurants (except for takeout and delivery services), to close, effective at midnight. By the end of the month Crenn had cut her staff of 75 down to a skeleton crew, the remaining chefs from her three restaurants pivoting from composing exquisitely plated meals—dinner at Atelier Crenn is at least 14 courses and starts at \$345 a head—to packing up Crenn Kits, wholesome takeout sets stocked with simple soups, salads and parmentiers made with produce from Bleu Belle Farm, her four-acre Sonoma farm. Some of these were sent gratis to medical workers with help from corporate backers like Lexus, with the rest available for local pickup starting at \$38 per person.

"Food is medicine, so we're creating kits that make you feel good," says Crenn, 55, reached by phone at the beginning of April, two weeks after Atelier Crenn's eight-table dining room had closed. She was working remotely by then, sheltered in place with her fiancée, actress Maria Bello, in their new home in the Hollywood Hills (for the past few months, Crenn has been commuting between Los Angeles and San Francisco, where she co-parents 6-year-old twins with her ex-partner Katherine Keon).

Crenn's whole life has been a battle against the odds, as she sees it, starting with her adoption as an infant from an orphanage outside Paris, as detailed in her new memoir, *Rebel Chef: In Search of What Matters*, out from Penguin Press this month. "When you are adopted and you realize that someone gave you a gift, you pay attention to things very clearly," she says. "You realize how lucky you are."

With no formal culinary training, Crenn has emerged as one of the most celebrated chefs in the U.S. In 2016, the World's 50 Best Restaurants list named her the world's best female chef, and two years later Crenn became the first, and still only, woman in the country to earn a third Michelin star.

Last year, just shy of her 54th birthday, Crenn discovered a lump in her right breast. The cancer diagnosis came just a few weeks after she started dating Bello, whom she'd met in 2018, when Bello

dined at Atelier Crenn. During Crenn's treatment, Bello moved almost full time into Crenn's waterfront condo in Marin County. "We learned a lot about each other really quickly," says Bello, "and what I learned about her is I love the way she rolls through life, even in the worst circumstances; when most people would have just been taken under, wouldn't want to get out of bed, she kept dancing."

Last fall, after months of treatment and a double mastectomy, Crenn went into remission. She and Bello were engaged in December, while on vacation in Paris. Two months later, they made their public debut as a couple at Elton John's Oscars after-party.

In March, Crenn was forging ahead with plans for a summer opening of Boutique Crenn, a new zero-waste, meat-free, fast-casual concept combined with a commuter bar offering organic spirits and biodynamic wines. The complex, constructed from repurposed materials within the Salesforce Tower in downtown San Francisco, was conceived as her highest-volume business by far, equipped to feed several thousand people a day from breakfast through early dinner. "Boutique Crenn is going to be a monster," she predicted in March.

She hopes to take advantage of the project's high visibility to make a symbolic stand for the environment, eliminating, among other things, disposable cups, and introducing new biodegradable packaging. "I'm trying to do something with a purpose here," she says. "It's not just about food; it's about consciousness and changing the way people think."

Crenn is outspoken about her beliefs and has been critical of the factory farming system in the U.S. Boutique Crenn won't serve any dairy or meat at all, offering only alternative oat and nut milks to accompany coffee from her fair-trade, female-owned supplier, Equator Coffees. The ecological initiatives at Boutique Crenn are a continuation of policies started at her other restaurants. She has been working to eliminate plastic and completed a switch to entirely pescatarian menus last fall. "Eating is an act of activism for me; it's politics," she says.

Bello and Crenn, meanwhile, have been developing their own message-minded lifestyle brand, Free Human, with a focus on sustainability and inclusivity—think Goop with a progressive political focus—as well as its own podcast and an app selling clothing, housewares and beauty products. Crenn's big plans have been on hold since the world began mobilizing to slow the spread of the coronavirus—Boutique Crenn's opening has, so far, been pushed back to September.

Crenn has been active on Instagram throughout the pandemic, imploring her 302,000 followers to help #saverestaurants and expressing her gratitude to front-line medical workers. There have been more joyful posts, too, videos of Bello and Crenn, sequestered at home, dancing and folding colorful scarves to make face masks.

Rebel Chef, written with British journalist Emma Brockes, features a similar mix of playfulness and polemicism. Above all, it is a search for identity, as she picks at the mysteries of her birth, including turning to DNA tests purchased online. "I was very interested to see what's going on through my blood," she says.

In 2004, Crenn visited the French agency that held her adoption records to request their release. Over

the years she has collected biographical details about the woman who left her when Crenn was 6 months old. Likely born to a French woman and a German soldier during World War II, her birth mother was raised in an orphanage in northern France. "It is hard to pin down where a feeling of not belonging originates," Crenn writes in her memoir. "I had some unresolved feelings about my adoption and how I couldn't find a reflection of myself anywhere."

Crenn, who has stopped short of tracking down her birth mother, grew up in a close-knit family in the Paris suburbs. Her adoptive father, Allain Crenn, worked in politics and painted in his free time. He enjoyed dining in restaurants and often brought his little girl along. "I loved the theater of restaurants... almost a slow movement around me, like a symphony of dancers," she says, recalling her earliest dining-out memory, at 9 years old.

The Crenns, originally from Brittany, often retreated to a country house near Quimper on the Atlantic coast. It was there, assisting her mother, Louise, a financial adviser, with family meals, that Dominique learned to cook, working with tomatoes plucked from their garden and with potatoes gathered from her maternal grandmother's farm. She would often accompany her father to the fish market at dawn, bringing home mackerel, mussels, oysters or live lobster, steamed and put straight on the plate.

After high school, she lived in Paris for a few wild years while pursuing an international business degree. Afterward, she followed a boyfriend to the U.S., chasing a pop-culture-fueled American dream to California, letting her return ticket go unused. "I knew I was leaving for a long time," she says. She has lived outside France, most of that time in California, ever since. "I just felt very isolated in France, a very bureaucratic place, no space for thinking in a different way, an artist's way."

Without any idea what she might like to do with her life, Crenn settled in San Francisco. Shortly after arriving, she got her first tattoo, on Lower Haight Street, a heart with wings, to symbolize the new freedom of her life as an expat.

Odd jobs—including waitressing and cooking gigs at a restaurant owned by another boyfriend—helped pay the rent. One day, she read an article about Jeremiah Tower, a pioneering chef running the city's buzziest restaurant, Stars. Not long after, Crenn walked into Stars and asked him to hire her. "It was like, I need to work for this guy," she says.

"My philosophy was, it doesn't matter how experienced you are—people always lie about that anyway," says Tower. "But if you've got the right work ethic and style, that's what matters. And [Dominique] had that in spades."

Though her only professional cooking experience outside the stint at her boyfriend's restaurant was a summer job making sandwiches as a teenager, she was thrown onto the hot line at Stars, learning the job on the fly and soon fielding 500 covers a night. She turned out to be a natural. "I would do a dish and then she would do the dish, and she would grasp it right away," says Tower.

Crenn was also taken by the way Tower ran his restaurant—sourcing from local farms, writing a new menu every day—and by the spontaneous

energy that consumed the place, which was packed late every night. "I was so in awe how [chef de cuisine] Mark Franz and Jeremiah Tower treated their team, giving them a lot of freedom, trusting them, but still very much, This is the vision," she says.

After she'd been at Stars nearly two years, Crenn was recruited by the executive chef at San Francisco's Park Hyatt hotel. She went on to work in a series of high-end hotel restaurants, including a brief detour to Indonesia to oversee a Mediterranean-influenced restaurant in Jakarta with an all-female staff, and a stint cooking French-Japanese food in the Miyako Hotel in San Francisco's Japantown. For eight years, burnt out by the restaurant rat race, she worked as head chef at the Manhattan Country Club, outside Los Angeles.

Following an eating tour through Spain in 2010—gobsmacked by meals at Mugaritz and El Celler de Can Roca—she began to experiment with the cutting-edge tools and techniques of molecular gastronomy, testing out the applications for dehydrators and Pacojets, immersion circulators and chemical baths. "That trip changed my life," she says.

In 2011, she opened Atelier Crenn with a business partner (from whom she has since split). By its second year, it had earned two Michelin stars. For the first time, Crenn began to reference her own experiences in her cooking, with a mix of French inspiration and California ingredients—elevated and supercharged by the daring techniques enabled by her new high-tech tools. She channeled her childhood memories into modernist creations like A Walk in the Forest, an early signature dish at Atelier Crenn, summoning hikes with her father, with pumpernickel "soil" and mushroom "paper."

She dedicated the restaurant to her father, who had died of cancer in 1999 (her mother is retired in Brittany). A local artist friend, Lucky Rapp, turned a poem that Crenn had written in her father's memory into lacquered wall art that hangs in the dining room across from a miniature Breton seascape he painted. Meals begin with a poem, in lieu of a menu, deposited on the table atop a mossy pedestal, each line, more or less, attached to a dish. A succession of small bites, each one a surprise described as it arrives, follows over the ensuing three or four hours.

At a recent meal the opening line of the night's seasonal poem, "Winter has come with its cool breeze," yields the same one-bite amuse-bouche that's been served at Atelier Crenn since the beginning, a kir Breton, the crème de cassis and hard cider cocktail Crenn's parents served at dinner parties in Brittany, encased here in a cocoa-butter shell. A "most adored gift from Neptune" brings a geoduck and sea urchin tartlet. A caviar, onion and potato creation is a "shimmer of black pearls, tumbling in the ashen cloud." Many dishes still reference memories of Brittany—a buckwheat cracker with caviar, warm brioche as her mother used to make—expressed in beautiful, sculptural, abstract compositions.

The combination of earthiness and poetry has come to be a Crenn signature off the plate as well. As she contemplates the ravaged and uncertain state of her industry, Crenn has drawn from her past experience as a survivor. "I'm keeping positive; I'm a very positive person," she says. "I'm a warrior. I'm the storm when it comes to shit like this." ●

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—MARIA BELLO



COURTESY OF DOMINIQUE CRENN