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Chef Gregory Gourdet Knows Adversity And He Knows How To Move Forward

He's faced obstacles because of race, sexuality and addiction. Here's how this chef says we can embrace inclusion.

By **Rebecca Treon**

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chef Gregory Gourdet. The Queens, New York-raised son of Haitian parents is a two-time contestant on “Top Chef” and the executive chef at Departure in Portland, Oregon. He has been vocal about his [journey of recovery, from addiction to sobriety](#), which led him to become an ultrarunner. As a member of the LGBTQ community, he’s also an active LGBTQ rights supporter. He has dedicated his time and talent to feeding the homeless and supporting others in the restaurant industry during the coronavirus pandemic.

On being Black and LGBTQ in the restaurant industry

We’re definitely in probably the biggest civil rights movement in the history of time because of not only its impact on all of America but also because of its impact globally. Even around the world, people are reconsidering racism. And I think the latest [Supreme Court decision for LGBTQ job protection](#) is extremely important, and it’s a gift to be able to get some good news out of the government within these times, especially during Pride Month.

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“Hard work is definitely not something that’s new to anyone who works in a restaurant.”

A lot of this feels like we should be further along, and that goes without saying. It’s insane that we’re still fighting for job protection in 2020. I think there’s a lot of protection of certain religious groups who don’t accept homosexuality but have weight in today’s political climate. We’re talking about trying to get everyone to see that we’re all equal, but they’re trying to protect certain groups even if they have values that aren’t open and fair to everyone.

I came out in college, and I feel very lucky that [Jean-Georges \[Vongerichten\]](#) was a really great employer. I truly had really wonderful experiences there. I was a pretty big pain in the ass for quite some time, but I’m indebted to them for the education they gave me. It’s a very luxury, very white kind of space, yes, but at the same time, I felt like I had a really good experience there and they always believed in me and I never felt held back because of my race or sexual orientation.

On the idea of “active inclusion” in the workplace

I feel very lucky that even though I found myself in a very white space going through school and in the early part of my career, I have mentors that believed in me and pushed me forward. At the same time, I clung on to them. I learned a lot

career, so I think that to move forward, you have to just believe in people. I call it active inclusion – it’s actively choosing to put faith and put effort and put resources into people that come to your door and apply to work at your restaurant or your establishment and taking them under your wing and actively being mentors to people. You really need to look past the surface of “This is just someone who works for me.” It’s important to get to know them, understand their story.

Not everyone has the same resources growing up. My story of how I got to a certain doorway will be extremely different from someone else’s. Someone may have to commute for two hours, or maybe they’re sleeping on a couch and they’re putting themselves through school – everyone’s story is different. And if someone is working so much harder to actually make something of themselves, it’s really up to us as leaders to find these people, to seek them out, to look a little bit deeper when someone has something to offer. Maybe they don’t have the best résumé yet, but maybe they showed up 10 minutes early for their interview, they communicate extremely well and they’ve expressed that they’re eager to get to work. It’s about truly taking the time to believe in those people, taking the time to find those people and making a concerted effort to work with those people.



BRAVO VIA GETTY IMAGES

Gregory Gourdet (left) speaks with judge Tom Colicchio during an episode of the Bravo series "Top Chef."

I just feel like we have a long way to go, but together we can do this. If we all completely start looking within ourselves and we all start working with our teams and our management teams, our leaders and our executives, if we're all just actually trying to push the needle forward and we're all truly working on this together and working on it past this moment – past the summer of 2020 – if these are initiatives that we commit to, it's something that we have to do, and it's something that we can do.

“As it stands with our industry right now, because of the coronavirus, it's completely broken down, so we can rebuild it as we want to.”

As it stands with our industry right now, because of the coronavirus, it's completely broken down, so we can rebuild it as we want to. That's the most hopeful and positive thing I can hope for, and that's the most hopeful and positive perspective I

to rebuild if we're courageous and resourceful enough. We can rebuild as we need to. That's after the hurdle of just getting the doors back open, because a lot of us are deciding when and how we can actually open the doors — there's a lot of work to do.

The one thing we know is that restaurateurs are scrappy people and we're going to do whatever it takes to make it work. We're not afraid of heavy lifting and margins have always been really tight. Restaurants have always faced a lot of challenges, be it staffing or product cost, but we're also very determined people. We're driven by passion. This is definitely uncharted water, but hard work is definitely not something that's new to anyone who works in a restaurant.

On dealing with addiction in the restaurant industry

I think a lot of people who have addictive personalities are drawn to [what I was drawn to]: the kitchen and working in the environment of a restaurant that has four stars from The New York Times and three Michelin stars, working with luxury ingredients. There was a lot of pressure on me to be the best and to make the most beautiful food and there was a really high level of clientele. I think that all that mounted with the accessibility of nightlife in New York City, which was already a part of my [life]. I was a raver when I was younger, I love electronic music, so nightlife culture is just something that's always been a part of me and, unfortunately for a lot of us, that comes with the drug use and that also leads to addiction. [A restaurant] is a [convenient] place to have an addiction

and stay up all night with.

Obviously, this is not a lifestyle that's conducive to being successful in a career, or even coming up among the ranks, but I was able to do that. It was definitely rough and definitely bumpy, and there was a time that it was fun. But then it became a pretty big problem with me being late for work and being dishonest with my employers. My performance suffered, but I never really gave up on cooking and I kept learning and I have an amazing mentor who really believed in me.

“When I was coming up in the industry, wellness and self-care and anxiety were not words that were ever discussed — they were never a thing.”

[I left New York and eventually ended up in] California, where my alcoholism really came into play — there are much fewer drugs there and there is a lot of drinking culture. But finally, when I moved to Portland to work at Departure and the Nines Hotel, I finally met someone who's in Alcoholics Anonymous. I really thought about it for a few weeks, thought about if I was really ready to give up drinking and doing drugs and smoking cigarettes for the rest of my life, and I really could feel deep down inside that the answer was yes. That was 11 years ago.



COURTESY OF GREGORY GOURDET

I think my generation, Gen X, held on a little more to this masochistic, “You’ve got to show up early, you’ve got to work really hard, you have to stay late, you can’t complain” mentality. We just grew up extremely different than millennials – we didn’t have the needs that millennials do and we just thought differently. When I was coming up in the industry, wellness and self-care and anxiety were not words that were ever discussed – they were never a thing.

For me, everything completely changed when I got sober. In sobriety, there’s this thing called the “pink cloud” when you just think everything is great because so many amazing things are happening because you’re finally sober. I literally felt like I was on this pink cloud for almost seven years, until things got really, really hard. Five years in, I did “Top Chef,” and then

about who I wanted to be. I just channeled all the energy that I used to spend on partying and staying up late. I focused on making food, I focused on being healthy, I lost a bunch of weight and experimented with different diets. It's a very personal thing, and I truly didn't miss much at all. I stopped going to the bar and I would go running at night and I became a marathon runner and I pretty much trained for my first few marathons after work at night.

I think being able to experiment with different diets has allowed me to learn about all these amazing cuisines from around the world. Health and wellness is still extremely important to me, and getting sober put me on this path of using extreme health as much as possible.

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