

THE ORIGINAL
BEEF
CHICAGO AND



SUBSTITUTIONS



The Bear creator
Christopher
Storer, left, with
cast members
Ayo Edebiri and
Jeremy Allen
White on location
in Chicago

FOR THE MAKERS OF *THE BEAR*, THERE WAS NEVER ANY QUESTION THAT CHICAGO WOULD PLAY ITSELF. PRACTICAL LOCATIONS WERE KEY, AND THE BEAUTY IS IN THE DETAILS.

WRITTEN BY STEVE CHAGOLLAN

JUST WHEN YOU THINK FOODIE CULTURE HAS PEAKED,

another seismic shift comes along that makes you rethink everything you thought you knew about what we eat, where it comes from, and how it's prepared.

For many TV viewers, that shift came with FX's *The Bear*, which is set in Chicago and chronicles a James Beard Award-winning chef's attempt to revive a run-down Chicago Italian beef sandwich joint that was bequeathed to him by his brother, who took his own life.

The show became a binge-watching obsession this past summer for anybody who has toyed with the idea of cooking professionally, experimented in the kitchen during the COVID lockdown, or craved foodie entertainment that went beyond competition shows and preciously photographed master-chef profiles.

Much of the show's gritty authenticity comes from its sense of place and the experiences of Christopher Storer, who created the series and acts as writer, exec producer and co-showrunner with Joanna Calo, who also shared directing duties with Storer. His resume includes the 2013 documentary about renowned chef Thomas Keller of French Laundry fame called *Sense of Urgency*, a mantra that *The Bear*'s protagonist, Carmen, played by Jeremy Allen White, tries to drill into his ragtag crew.

It helped that Storer and *Bear* producer Tyson Bidner, who first worked together on the Hulu series *Ramy*, were on the same page from the get-go. They aimed for a no-holds-barred depiction of how real kitchens work, including the dysfunction of a staff resistant to change, and the close-quarters, physically demanding, even dangerous environment that goes with working in a restaurant, using practical locations and cramped spaces to their advantage.

"When Tyson and I were talking about putting this show together," says Storer, "and even when talking to Tyson about budget and what an eight-episode order looks like for a show like this, we started to realize the thing that was important was to really show how hard it is, how gnarly it is. And in that sort of gnarliness, and then intensity, you see a different beauty of the food, which is to say like it's just as beautiful when it's grimy and sort of intense."

Storer grew up in the Chicago suburb of Northridge and knew Chris Zuccheri, owner of the storied Mr. Beef on Orleans—the restaurant that inspired the series' fictional Original Beef of Chicagoland. Consultants included Storer's sister Courtney, who cooked at such acclaimed LA eateries as Trois Mec and Animal, and real-life chef Matty Matheson, who plays handyman Fak in the series and is credited as

coproducer. Storer himself has also kicked around kitchens in his time as a line cook.

The food world is often glamorized, even fetishized, in movies and on television. But Storer and Bidner wanted to steer it in the opposite direction to attain the kind of naturalism that was evident in the tween drama *Eighth Grade* (2018), which Storer produced, even if the emotions and the deep-seated conflicts in *The Bear* are ratcheted up to a feverish pitch.

"I do think it's hard to get right because first and foremost, you need a producer like Tyson who understands the story you're trying to tell," says Storer. "Secondly, I think it is such a difficult job to do, which is why it's also great that we had my sister Courtney and Matty around, telling us when it looks semi accurate or not accurate at all. I think the spirit that's sometimes missed in other food things I've seen is that they seemed to be about one person.

"Anyone who works in a restaurant will tell you it's really a team thing, and it depends on the execution of a bunch of people. They all have to work in rhythm and in sync. It's a job not a lot of people can do, which is why the people who can do it are really special."

The dynamic is not unlike producing a series. "Every second in a kitchen counts," says Bidner, "and every second on a production counts. I think for Chris and I, one of the big things we try to do is create an environment that's very relaxed and very calm so that there's not a lot of chaos. Let the chaos be on screen."

Adds Storer: "I think having that knowledge of the ticking clock of the show definitely informs how we make it and allows us to keep a great atmosphere on set. Because Tyson and I know what each other is capable of. He knows how many pages I can do (as a director) in a day, and I know how he likes to put the apparatus together."

Time management on *The Bear* began with having the entire season's screenplays in hand before a single frame was shot, thanks to Storer and his writing team. That meant there would be no last-minute curveballs to throw the production off track. "Every show I've been on that is successful starts with getting the scripts on time," says Storer. "It allows me to look at the big picture and strategize as far as cross-boarding, shooting out locations, shooting out actors who are coming in from LA—those sorts of things."

The organization paid dividends for the filmmakers. They were able to shoot an episode in four and a half days, "which is fairly quick in television," says Bidner. It bought them extra time and earned them bonus points to deal with contingencies



Pablo Gambetta (1st AD),
Tyson Bidner, Chris Storer,
Andrew Wehde (DP)

that added immeasurable value to the show. An example was getting red-hot actor Jon Bernthal to play Carmen's brother Michael in a flashback sequence—a key scene that established his charisma and why his death rocked the lives of virtually every character on the show. Bernthal was busy filming the Showtime series *American Gigolo* in LA, so the filmmakers had to travel to where he was.

"I pitched FX on going out there (to LA), bringing the central crew and picking up the rest of the crew," recalls Bidner. "We had found a location that worked perfectly in LA. I presented it in a way that they couldn't say no because I wasn't asking for extra money or for extra time. At that point we had been on our best behavior and accumulated all these savings so that we could make it work."

The early scripts also gave the actors time to ingest their roles and engage in a level of prep uncommon in television. As a result, White attended cooking school for two weeks and worked in restaurants in LA, New York and Chicago,

including the Michelin-starred Pasjoli in Santa Monica, learning under the tutelage of Dave Beran. Lionel Boyce, who plays the sweet-souled pastry chef Marcus, traveled to Copenhagen to spend time with world-renowned baker Richard Hart. He also visited haute-cuisine mecca Noma in Copenhagen, which is considered the North Star for Carmen and his sous-chef Sydney (Ayo Edebiri).

"Again, it all goes back to time," says Storer. "We knew Carmy and Sidney had to be classically trained. We knew that they needed to sharpen their skills literally in a lot of different kitchens. Because the scripts were done on time, everybody was dialed in. We could allow the actors to spend the time (researching their roles). You definitely feel it in their performances."

Adds Bidner: "It's more than just learning the lines. There's a lot of choreography, there's a lot of dance within that kitchen. (The actors) spent a lot of time training and learning how to make it all look real."



The Bear creator Christopher Storer, right, with cast members Jeremy Allen White, far left, and Joel McHale. Right: producer Tyson Bidner

The beauty is in the details. Viewers who revel in the cooking process see plenty of it in *The Bear*. We witness a silky reduction for lemon chicken piccata made in real time. We learn that a tray of water placed in the bottom of a baking oven prevents sandwich rolls from drying out and becoming too dense. We discover that a bouquet of herbs placed in a pan of heavy cream for mashed potatoes amounts to a “game changer,” according to Storer. And anybody who’s spent half the day fashioning a complex stock will wince at a scene where a huge barrel of cold, gelatinous veal stock topples to the floor in the restaurant’s walk-in.

“The routine is real, and so much of that came from my sister’s and Matty’s journeys through their culinary careers,” says Storer. “It’s like every day there’s a heartbreak and every day there’s a gigantic win. And you’ve just got to wake up every morning and do it again.”

Adding to the show’s verisimilitude was the use of the locations as written. The series was shot in River North, where the story takes place. The city’s presence is so palpable that it becomes a character in the show. “You could talk to someone who’s lived in LA for the last 30 years, but if they’re from Chicago, they have a deep pride and a deep love for the city that we wanted to have within the show,” says Bidner.

“A big part of that is the food. It’s not just about the hot dogs and not just about the beef sandwiches,” he adds. “It’s just something about Chicago. I was a location manager for 20 years before I built my career up into being a production manager and then a producer. So every script I read, I try to (figure out), ‘How can we tell this story and show off the city itself?’”

For the pilot, all the exteriors and the front of the house were shot at the actual Mr. Beef and the surrounding alleyways. The filmmakers also found a kitchen nearby, which they reconfigured to more or less match the specs of the original.



“We recreated that kitchen almost perfectly,” says Storer, “except making a little more room for dollies to get through. But the size of it is almost to spec to allow that cramped, frenetic, everyone’s-on-top-of-each-other kind of footprint.”

Matheson likened the experience to working in a submarine—a sense of claustrophobia heightened by extreme closeups, and people getting in each other’s faces



when tempers flare out of control. At one point in episode seven (directed by Storer), filmed to look like one continuous take, Carmen's volatile family friend Richie (Ebon Moss-Bachrach) is accidentally stabbed in the back by Sydney. Luckily for him, it was just the tip.

"The space restrictions were weirdly kind of a benefit," says Storer. "I think part of what makes it feel alive and more authentic is we tried to keep it as enclosed as possible. We knew it would add to the tension and would never feel like Tyson and I were just showing off and trying to do like a 20-minute oner. But rather the lack of cuts meant the pressure was just going to keep going up and up."

The hostility in that episode—when Carmen experiences a meltdown so ugly and furious that both Sydney and Marcus turn in their aprons and quit—almost pales in comparison to the withering put-downs Carmen endures (in flashback)

from the head chef in the fine-dining establishment that put him on the map as a rising star. It also points to the series' high-low contrast of what constitutes a satisfying meal out, and the human costs involved.

"Where we are with food today is obviously very complicated and tricky," says Storer. "I think there's a lot of conversation right now about how sustainable some of the Michelin-style restaurants are, and how people are getting paid. All of those things go into what our characters are going through. Specifically Carmy, who has been trained in those worlds, and who is gifted. But he also loves the food that he grew up with, the food from his family.

"And look, I can tell you that I've eaten at some of the best restaurants in the world, and I've eaten at Mr. Beef in Chicago. And I think that Mr. Beef is better than some three-star Michelin restaurants I've been in." ■