

Fungirl

SUQI KAREN SIMS

Subject: Fungirl article

From: Lucy Lin-Carmichael lucky LucyLC92@gmail.com

To: Cheryl Winn Editor@BuenApetito.com

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Dear Cheryl,

I hope this email finds you well. Thank you for the opportunity to cover Kyle Vitaly's new mushroom-forward restaurant, Fungirl. As a freelancer, I don't normally get the opportunity to write features—much less interview someone as high profile as Vitaly.

As you requested, the article is structured in the standard *Buen Apetito* style, covering the chef, the ambiance, and the food, in that order. However, Fungirl is not a typical restaurant, and I had to take some liberties. I know *Buen Apetito's* motto is “just the facts; trim the fat,” meaning we stay as apolitical as possible, but I could not write this story without including, well, some marbling. In other

words, I have gone over the 5,000-word limit. Sorry.

Anyway, the article (and photos) are attached. To my credit, the story is still about the chef, the ambiance, and the food. It's just about much more.

Thanks again,

Lucy Lin-Carmichael
Freelance Food Writer

Fig 1: Fungirl menu cover

Fungirl

Chef Kyle Vitaly's Magic by Mushrooms

The Chef

“Even now, when I close my eyes, I see her. I see the mushrooms blossoming along her collarbone—enokis, shiitakes—trailing up to her face, her eyes dead and dark as American dirt. The fungus-spouting clay-baby, they called her on the news—with four limbs and no heartbeat, the creature who blinks but doesn't breathe. Living, but not really alive, not in the animal sense. Decidedly un-human and un-person. No one knew what to do with her—it—whatever. But I did. I called her Fungirl. I was the one who named her. That was me.”

—Chef Kyle Vitaly

Chef Kyle Vitaly speaks like a typewriter: fast, hard, and in punctuated syllables that staccato into viney parables. He met with me before dinner service, in a side office reserved for interviews and press releases, a neat, streamlined room that looked like it belonged to a dentist, not the Restaurant of The Year.

“You’re from *Buen Apetito*? They usually send Geoff,” he said, when I introduced myself. I told him Geoff is now the editor of *Gentlemanly*, but he sends his regards. He waved a hand and beamed at me with teeth born to eat, glistening and unforgiving. “I will probably hear from him there, then.” He glanced me over, his Bunsen-burner blue eyes like potato peelers against my skin. He was deciding if I was worth his time, if I would be a worthy substitute for Geoff. “Do you need a rundown of my history, or did you do your homework?”

I had. It’s an impressive history, and most foodies know bits and pieces. His mother was a Russian immigrant who raised him on buttery perogies and bitter nostalgia. His father was an angry man, but rarely around to threaten their small Brooklyn apartment. At 14, Vitaly started ditching school to work in kitchens, where he read Bukowski between mise en place and dishwashing. He later trained at the Culinary Institute of America, then Le Cordon Bleu in France, ending his education with a stint in Japan in 2008. Before founding his flagship bistro Roshia, Vitaly sliced through the ranks at Manhattan’s finest, including Plum, Natochan, and even Midtown’s La Mère Du Papillon.

French, Japanese, and or New Americana: Vitaly had conquered them all by the late 2000s. In a 2012 article for *The City Slicker*, he claimed sardonically, “I made Japanese food so much better than the Japanese apprentices—I was linked to two attempted suicides.” His 2016 Chelsea popup, Kornbred, was praised by food critic Jerry T. Werthers for “elevating Southern food out of the swamps.” Vitaly seemed unstoppable.

But then, as he puts it, he got bored.

“Honestly, after Roshia, I got tired of winning. I thought about opening a fine dining taqueria or a refined Szechuan restaurant, but even that felt too easy. I needed to find something new. Something different. Something that would change the way we eat forever.” In 2018, in a move that shocked the food world, Vitaly closed down his restaurants—every one of them. He fired his staff and promised to come back bigger and badder than ever.

“For a while, I thought I had fucked up. I had taken everything I’d built and spat on it,” says Vitaly. “I was furious, looking for inspiration in shit vodka

and saltines, trying to burn away my palate in an act of self-flagellation.” Vitaly pauses, shifts his expression into a pointed focus, then slides something across the desk. “But then I learned about *her*.”

It is a printout of a short, sensational article from *The Hourly*, about a page long, and with ads dancing along its margins. Its contents covered a miraculous story that had somehow slipped through mainstream media, maybe due to translation issues or to the slew of earthquakes that had dominated international coverage. Maybe the story was considered too extraordinary to be true: the discovery of a girl-like, earth-based creature, found in the mountains of Taiwan. Through the clay of its skin, the cryptid allegedly grew a variety of mushrooms and fungi, many of them edible. Vitaly keeps the printout laminated and framed in his office.

“I saw her photo, and I knew. Even through the low quality, you could tell those mushrooms were gourmand gold. Delicate folds and gills, luxurious species that can only be foraged—unfarmable without destroying the flavor, you understand? They were draped on her shoulders, layers and layers, like princess sleeves—and I just knew. She was sent to me by the universe. She was my next project. My most important project, ever.”

According to the article, Fungirl was found by two tour guides in Taiwan scouting for a new hiking trail. They cut through the lush foliage, and there she was, lying across a fallen cinnamon tree like a child asleep at school. Around the size of a ten-year-old, her skin blended into the rotting tree trunk, and they didn’t see her at first. When they did, one of them shouted, startled, and Fungirl opened her eyes, black as a beetle’s glittering exoskeleton. The confused tour guides concluded she was a lost child, sick and dying in the forest, covered in mud. Not sure what else to do, they carried her to the nearest hospital. She did not resist. In fact, she barely moved. Despite having what looked like a mouth, she did not speak.

At the hospital, they ran tests. They concluded that Fungirl was not actually a child. She was not even human. She looked vaguely like one, but she had no blood or bones. “Her body’s actually held together by a tightly wound system of dirt composite and mycelium,” Vitaly informs me. In fact, he insists that the pronouns “she” and “her” aren’t technically correct. “She’s really more of an ‘it.’ She has no measurable brainwaves, no heartbeat, no breath. Sure, she looks ‘alive,’ but she’s, you know, really just a very special, newly discovered kind of fungal *system*. A vegetable, or even vegetable *garden*, by kitchen standards. A particularly

successful substrate, if you will. The female pronouns just match nicely with the name I gave her.”

In my own research, it seems Fungirl never caught on in English-language media, perhaps too “international” or relegated to “soft news.” With the limited Chinese I have from childhood summers with my mother (supplemented with college courses), I turned to Taiwanese sources instead, using keywords for “mushroom dirt girl” or “mushroom clay child.” From what I could find, Fungirl stories circulated for about two months in Taiwanese papers, but died down amidst a cyberattack from China on Taiwan’s National Security Bureau. In the latest article I could find about Fungirl before Vitaly’s involvement, she was transferred from the hospital to a research facility in Taipei, where they continued to run tests. I spoke with Dr. Peter Yu Xian Lin from the Taiwan National Research Center for Biodiversity and Emerging Species on the phone.

“Yes. I remember when the lab researched the earthen fungal phenomenon,” said Dr. Lin, who led the team conducting biopsies on Fungirl samples (his responses are translated from Mandarin). “Curious case. We finally figured out that we should feed it compost and keep the holding cell dimly lit, between 21 and 23 degrees Celsius and above 87 percent humidity, with hourly misting, but even still, the clay baby—excuse me, the soil-based *phenomenon*—started to wither inside the facility.” Due to her composition, Fungirl had been nicknamed “Niwawa,” or “clay baby,” by Taiwanese media, after a popular nursery rhyme about a mud doll.

“Additionally,” continued Dr. Lin, “funding for this research was running out due to a change in administration. It was expensive to keep feeding, so the other head researchers and I thought it best to preserve the specimen for the time being, perhaps submerge it in a preservation liquid, freeze-dry it, or even dehydrate it.” Dr. Lin laughed to himself, recounting.

“Some of the junior scientists weren’t too happy about that. They had, funnily enough, become attached, even though we all know it’s just a fungus! Even my daughter and wife would ask about ‘sister mushroom’ when I got home. There’s something about the humanoid appearance that disrupts the logic of even the most rigorously trained scientific minds. It is quite cute, though, isn’t it? Such shiny, black eyes, or rather eye-shaped appendages. But in the end, it didn’t matter. A big-shot American—I think some kind of entrepreneur—purchased the specimen, straight from the institute. He promised to keep it warm and

hydrated and even hinted that we could continue our research in the future.”

That entrepreneur, of course, was Vitaly. He promised to build a greenhouse in New York based on the researcher’s findings, provide an ample compost pile to munch on, and of course, allow the scientists open access to study her, if and when they could. So far, they have yet to take the offer. According to Dr. Lin, the team that was studying Fungirl has since moved on to an endemic species of moss that was thought to have gone extinct in the 1880s. “According to some Indigenous sources, the moss is an excellent weight loss aid, so we know government funding will be no problem,” said Dr. Lin. “We’re really more moss crazy at the moment!”

As for Vitaly, he took his life savings, every drop of blood and sweat that went into Roshia, Kornbred—all of it—and put it all into “rescuing my Fungirl,” as he says. When I asked, he refused to tell me exactly how much he had spent on her, and I couldn’t determine the figure in my own research or when speaking to Dr. Lin. Instead, Vitaly stated that he plans to make all the money back within a month of opening, anyway. “I also trademarked her name, of course.”

Thus, Fungirl was found and foraged, studied and tested, then purchased and shipped (via FedEx) from Taipei to New York, where she then bounced along in a crate from JFK to the suburban Eden of Westchester County, close enough to the city for culinary prestige and deep enough in the country for an extensive garden and greenhouse. She’s Vitaly’s newest obsession, and the mushroom dishes he pulls from her body are his latest gift of genius to the world, an exploration of the “truest essence of edible fungi.” It’s a restaurant that Vitaly claims will be a “bigger paradigm shift than molecular gastronomy.” It seems the prodigal son is upholding his promise to both diners and the staff he so unceremoniously fired. On his pioneering new menu, as in the name for his new venture, hers is the only one worthy of sitting alongside his. Fungirl. Vitaly’s Fungirl.

Fig 2: Fungirl menu p1

Our Mission

The ingredients on this menu have been foraged from Fungirl,* a fungal bio-specimen whose appearance mimics that of a humanoid girl and whose “skin” sprouts edible mushrooms of various textures and flavors. Chef Vitaly sourced Fungirl from a research facility in Taipei, Taiwan, where they determined that she is not an animal, nor a plant, but a nutrient-dense substrate, and therefore appropriate for both a vegan and vegetarian diet.

All blossoms, wood ears, morels, and toadstools collected from Fungirl’s body are organic, local, and of the utmost quality and nutrition. Some allegedly provide medicinal or psychological benefits. Most importantly, all of the dishes at Vitaly’s are cruelty-free: Fungirl lives in a free-range greenhouse that has been scientifically enhanced to encourage healthy, year-round sprouting. Our sous-chef, Cherie Su, personally attends to her gardening and cultivation.

At Vitaly’s, we believe in quality over quantity. As such, our limited, plant-forward menu is designed to enhance the unique flavor profile of each of Fungirl’s distinctive, umami-packed fruits. Narratively, our tasting menu begins with ingredients from Fungirl’s extremities, then works its way toward her “heart.” This allows Chef Vitaly to provide the best possible dining experience, as the closer the produce grows to Fungirl’s core, the meatier and heartier the flavor.

Please advise your server in the case of food sensitivities and allergies. However, in order to preserve the authenticity of Chef Vitaly’s artistic vision, alterations and substitutions are strictly forbidden.

Wine pairings available upon request.

Thank you for joining us on this new frontier of food.

Ambiance

After my interview with Vitaly, I was asked to enter the restaurant from the front, for a more “authentic” experience. There is no way to get to Fungirl without a car, although patrons from the city could take the Metro North to Tarrytown before calling a rideshare or renting. Of course, most diners arrive via chauffeur. The main entrance is carved out of a dark, polished wood, twisting in intricate knots and gnarled like a goblin’s knuckles. Although walking through these doors is to enter from outside in, the experience feels reversed. Greenery shrouds the room in glossy leaves so bright and vibrant, you’d think they must be plastic, but of course they are not. Blossoms tumble from the ceiling in fairy-tale vines, scattering the floor with petals in a way that is both delightful and, if you’re a serial plant killer like me, cause for resentment (apologies to the Pothos I abandoned at my old desk job).

To say that the decor of Vitaly’s is “botanical” is to say McDonald’s is partial to reds and yellows. The Hudson Valley, its soft green lawns and milky blue skies, are left to shame behind the door. This is not a garden, but the idealized concept of a garden—Vitaly’s mythical, secret garden. Against the back wall is the bar, its table covered in a thick cyan moss, flanked by stools in the shape of Wonderland-sized fly agarics. The room smells of lilacs and roses and gardenia—but only just—they can’t distract from the main event, the Fungirl feast.

Only ten guests are allowed in each dining party, and service takes place just twice a week, on Thursdays and Saturdays. Inside the room with me are what I assume are CEOs, models, and tech geniuses, dressed in designer suits and smelling as if their bodies are immune to sweat. I check my reflection in someone’s polished shoes, my defiant flyaways dancing in some kind of reptilian leather. I look up at the owner, and it’s a famous face, but one I cannot place. Dinner service is \$999 a head, without the wine pairing.

The hostess, who is insidiously attractive in the way of pharma reps and cult leaders, informs me they are booked well into next year, and only winks when I ask if Gwyneth Paltrow will be making an appearance. I glance around and spot a starlet in my cohort, her face like an Instagram filter, her voice a scathing, soulful coo that would profit either an actress or a pop star. She links arms with the lizard-shoe man, an older gentleman I’m pretty sure is a director, producer, or some combination of the two. Both of them are in sleek, all-black ensembles. The hostess invites us to take a seat at the bar while we wait for service to begin.

I perch on an engorged Wonderland toadstool and skim the cocktail menu: Honeysuckle. Smoked peat. Rose water. Aromatic infusions and botanical washes. I feel unexpectedly anxious after my interview with Vitaly, like I've had too much coffee and the caffeine is tunneling through my veins like earthworms. I place my notebook on the bar's blue-green moss, where it looks like a misplaced prop, rudely breaking the fantasy. The bartender sees it, and we peek at each other. She also looks familiar, but in an intimate, real-life way, and I wonder if I went to school with her. I'm about to ask, but the starlet leans between us and orders a Momotaro martini with peach blossom. She looks at me, then at the diamond bracelet on her wrist, as if my Gap cardigan may infect it. Instead of ordering, I ask for the restroom.

When I slip into the restroom, the chatter silences behind me. The floral theme continues with green subway tiles and faucet handles carved into baroque little roses. It's less enchanted forest and more Gardens of Versailles in here. Vitaly doesn't miss a thing, it seems. Instead of a restroom attendant, there's a display of limited-edition glass perfume bottles, perfectly matched to the floral cocktails at the bar. I spritz myself with a Rosemary Gimlet.

At the back wall, there's even a lovely little French window, shrouded in a muslin curtain that fills the bathroom with the evening's dying light, tinting the ceramic details with pink. I pull the curtain aside and look out. It's a view of the private garden where Vitaly grows most of his ingredients, and behind it, what looks like a greenhouse. Fungirl's.

When I return to the dining room, I know that I have not been missed. At this garden party, I am the fly on a lily petal, ruining the aesthetic. Yet I'm not unhappy to be there. I'm still excited to eat like the New Royals eat, to experience the performance art that is a Vitaly menu. Ever since I worked at a small-town Asian fusion restaurant in high school, I've known that eating is the great equalizer, no matter the restaurant or clientele. We all feel hunger, and we can all appreciate something delicious. The second we all sit down and take our first bite, class and status disappear. We'll just be ten hungry humans, our brains buzzing and our mouths salivating like the animals we all are. By being here, and writing this, I can re-create this magic for others, if not in recipe, then in words.

As if on cue, the server asks us to take our seats at a long mahogany table in the center of the room. The seats are assigned based on the short biographies all diners submit with their reservation. He welcomes us, formally, and introduces Vitaly, rattling off the most impressive bullet points of his biography. Then Chef

Kyle Vitaly himself comes in through the kitchen doors, dressed in his chef whites, his smile as pristine and sharp as a Masamoto knife.

“Welcome, everyone,” Vitaly begins, his eyes darting from one elite to another, his gaze lingering on the starlet. “Tonight, we will be feasting on Fungirl. Whatever you thought you knew about mushrooms, forget it. It will be irrelevant tonight.” He winks, and the pop star’s blush turns a shade darker. Her gentleman companion grins, as if he knows something. There are rumors about Vitaly, about the experience of his female staff members, as there are rumors about any chef who makes it big in the industry. But that’s an article for another day.

“A fungus, as you might know, is not quite animal and not quite plant,” Vitaly continues. “It is something all its own, that defies the way we recognize the living and the not-living. Because of their special flavors and properties, they have been used for centuries by humans in cuisine, medicine, and even religious or . . . recreational ceremonies.” Vitaly pauses for a trickle of chuckles. The charm is lathered on thick as cream tonight. It is impossible to deny Vitaly his charisma. His friend Geoff often includes him in *Gentlemanly’s* Most Eligible Bachelors. In a Bo Jorgan podcast from 2010, he’d mentioned he’d wanted to be an actor or a rock star as a child, before discovering cooking. I think he would have done well.

“In nature,” Vitaly emphasizes, keeping his voice low to demand attention, “they have the job of breaking down the dead and breathing life back into the Earth. And that is what I hope to do with our menu tonight: breathe life into these ingredients that, by nature of cooking, must be dead. From the deepest depths of my imagination and the darkest corners of my psychosis, I present to you my newest creations. Together, we celebrate the experience of eating, the experience of simultaneous life and death, the essence of time and existence itself.” A man in the most expensive hoodie you’ve ever seen nods along attentively. I wonder if he invented the app I’m recording this speech on. Maybe he owns my bank.

Vitaly takes a deep breath and presses his hands together.

We all lean in like fish on a line.

“Let’s eat!”

Fig 3: Fungirl menu p2

Tasting Menu

Black Wood Ear “Mushu” Gazpacho

The pungent, Szechuan-inspired flavors of this chilled soup contrast with its cool, velvety texture for a gastronomic exercise in contradiction. The wood ear for this dish grows from Fungirl’s antecubital fossa (inner elbow), which enhances its delicate texture. Goji berries provide a touch of sweetness.

Warm Ponzu “Chicken” Salad

This *Laetiporus* (Chicken of the Woods) grows on the back of Fungirl’s feminine and elegant neck. After starting with a cold soup, we move on now to a warm salad: Thin sheets of the *Laetiporus* are separated, sliced, and sautéed in vegan miso butter, then tossed with microgreens in yuzu vinaigrette.

Formosan Tempura Mushrooms

On Fungirl’s left hip grows a cluster of king trumpet mushrooms, complemented in flavor and texture by the oyster mushrooms on her right rib cage and the toothsome enoki sprouts on her shoulders.** These three hearty mushrooms are bathed in a sweet-potato tempura, flash-fried to perfection, and garnished with cold-pressed extra-virgin camellia oil and crispy shiso.

Shiitake Sake Risotto

Arborio rice and umami-powerhouse shiitake mushrooms are deglazed with unfiltered, organic sake from Nagano Prefecture and cooked with a light kombu dashi to give this risotto notes of germinal sweetness and deep depth of flavor. The shiitake is sourced from Fungirl’s stomach. Topped with seasonal white truffle shavings and plant-based bonito flakes.***

Microdose Meringue

Shaped into the distinctive red and white figure of the fly agaric mushroom, this dessert uses psychoactive mushrooms grown on Fungirl’s sternum. The hallucinogenic properties are extracted from the fungus in compliance with local psilocybin regulation, then added in small, harmless, and legal quantities into a sea buckthorn meringue. Many diners report feeling calmer, more creative, and at great peace, often leaving Vitaly’s with a new perspective and lease on life.****

The Food

When I was in college, I read a book so beautiful, so heartbreaking, that as soon as I finished the last line, I threw it against the wall of my dorm room. It slapped the drywall and fell to the ground, a dog-eared and spine-bent corpse of paper and ink. It was as if by reading, I had drained the book of life, the doomed ending and quicksilver prose soaking into me, filling me to the brim and threatening to overflow. I hated that book, because it was perfect.

That was how I felt about the meal I ate at Fungirl. This was not a meal of mushrooms. This was a feast of Fungirl, and the two are not the same. One is the *Mona Lisa*, a work of art, sure, but the other is the model—the real woman who died long ago, her living identity disputed, but her dead smile etched into the world's hive mind. I've had beautifully executed food before, at Asian street markets and trendy dinner clubs, and now at the world's most exclusive restaurant. At this stage in the game, after the education and the intuition and the fine-motor skills, it all comes down to the ingredients: the quality and freshness, the first bite's ability to tap into the memories stored deep in our amygdalas, the messy soup of smells, memory, and emotion that synthesize the sweet-salty scent of Play-Doh into the anxious euphoria of childhood.

Did Vitaly's restaurant change how I think about mushrooms? Yes. Was it Chef Vitaly that did so? I believe that honor belongs to Fungirl herself. That is the fatless fact.

At the end of dessert, Vitaly came back out from the kitchen. When the applause died down, he thanked us and asked us to get home safely. I asked if I could meet Fungirl. The other guests laughed, as if I had asked to meet the goat whose milk nursed my chèvre.

"Yes, I'm sure we'd all like to meet the produce, but this isn't a farmers' market," Vitaly said, tagging on a line about how visitors would "disrupt" Fungirl's growing patterns. "It's like with house plants. Feed and water them, but they really don't like to be bothered. We just keep her happy and let Fungirl do her thing. I'm sure you understand." The other guests nodded on my behalf, and I felt like I'd answered a math question wrong in front of the class.

As I sat in my rental in the parking lot, I thought of the greenhouse I saw through the bathroom's French window. I'm not sure what came over me. Maybe it was the Microdose Meringue, but I sat and watched as the lot cleared out, as chauffeurs in white and black luxury cars came and went like surfacing orcas,

swallowing their precious passengers and disappearing into the waves of twilight.

I got out of my car and walked around the building. No one was around, the staff busy cleaning after another successful performance. No one was in the private garden or near the greenhouse. I wanted to see Fungirl. After all, I had already eaten her. I was on assignment, wasn't I? Wasn't it my mission to learn as much as possible? On behalf of the magazine and its readers? Surely *Buen Apetito* would forgive me this transgression. Hopefully, it wasn't illegal.

Up close, the greenhouse looked like an Etsy terrarium, full of tropical plants that had no business this far north. I spotted what looked like a dragon fruit tree, its cactus body pressing against the glass, stabbing into the building's corners. A fruit for a future dish, perhaps, since Vitaly changes the menu every week. I couldn't see past the first layer of foliage.

The door was locked from the outside, a simple switch like on a chicken coop. I opened it and peeked inside. I didn't see anyone, so I entered, shutting the door behind me. I thought maybe they were keeping her somewhere else, the way zoos have both a "real" exhibit and the stripped-down version in the back, where the animals actually sleep and eat. But then I saw the log at the back of the room. Except it wasn't a log.

She was curled in the fetal position, her arms wrapped around her head like the roots of a banyan tree. I crept closer. She looked like she was sleeping, except for the fact that her chest did not rise and fall with breath. Her skin was a rich cinnamon, and patches of lichen grew on her head like hair. I couldn't see her face, but along her spine, across her arms and legs, grew the mushrooms I had consumed less than an hour ago. I wanted to touch them, pinch them like marshmallows between my fingers, enough to feel resistance, but not enough to break or harm.

"You can't be here."

The voice came from behind me. It was the bartender from earlier. Again, I recognized her, but this time, I remembered from where. It was Cherie Su. Before working as Vitaly's sous-chef, she had been on an episode of *Sliced* and won. She had said to the camera that she planned to use the prize money to start her own restaurant. She never did. I follow her religiously on social media and used to subscribe to her blog. But she rarely posts photos of herself. I had felt like I knew her personally, because I had read so much about her, from her, without seeing her face. She looked different, aged.

Cherie told me to leave, but her voice made Fungirl stir. Startled, I stepped away and watched as the clay huddle detangled itself slowly and deliberately into

a girl. The creature sat up and looked at her caretaker, then turned to look at me. She had a round face with loosely defined edges, like a hand-carved bowl. Her skin looked like freshly tilled soil, smoothed by rain. She didn't have much of a nose, but two holes seemed to mimic nostrils, and her lips were delineated by a darker, redder soil. Was she completely earth? A combination of mud and sticks and roots? Somehow she was held together and seemed to function as a single organism.

But what struck me most were her eyes. Her eyes were black from edge to edge, scleraless, and they sparkled like the polished slate of weiqi game pieces. It was just as Dr. Lin described. Those eyes made you question everything, whatever scientific logic you had thrown out the window in a gut-punching recognition of consciousness. For the second time that night, I saw my reflection. Unlike the shiny alligator shoes, this surface, Fungirl's glistening lacquered eyes, felt alive.

By instinct, I said hello, the way some people apologize to furniture they walk into. Fungirl stared at me, silently, for what must have been several seconds. I stared back, forgetting Cherie Su, forgetting the greenhouse, forgetting Vitaly and my assignment.

Then, like the crack of a tree branch in the dead of winter, she moved, reaching behind her ear and pulling out a white button mushroom. It must have been growing on the nape of her neck. She held it out to me, in the middle of her palm. Her hands looked like my hands, small with long, slim fingers like roots. Except that hers probably *were* roots.

"Well," I heard Cherie sigh. "I guess she likes you."

She shut the door firmly behind her. She still looked irritated, but not enough to drag me out by my feet. "We really need to hire some security. You're the journalist, aren't you? I saw you in the dinner party, with your little notebook."

I waved the notebook at her in response. It caught Fungirl's gaze, and she watched it like a kitten. I flipped the pages with my finger, and to my surprise, Fungirl's twiney mouth twisted into something like a smile.

"You remember me?" I asked Cherie.

"Of course. I always study the guests before service, so I can cater the meal to them. It's easy to do when they think you're a bartender. It's like you blend into the wallpaper. Anyway, it helps me understand who I'm cooking for. You even get an idea of their palate and tastes. I guess it's my superstition: don't cook for strangers. Well, are you going to take her gift or not? She's not made of creminis, you know."

I looked at Fungirl's nest-like hand, the little white mushroom burrowed in it like an egg. I picked it up gingerly and turned toward Cherie, who motioned that I should pop it in my mouth. I ate it in a single bite, raw. It was sweet and surprisingly crisp. I'd always considered white mushrooms the cop-out mushroom, bland and best utilized in soups and sauces. This button mushroom was delicious. I could taste it from the tip of my tongue to my jaw. Despite still being full from the tasting menu, it was the best thing I had that night.

"So she doesn't mind that we... eat her?" I asked Cherie, and she shook her head.

"No, she loves feeding people. She doesn't do it to everyone, though. She won't give Kyle the moss between her toes." She laughed.

"She seems to have taken an interest in you, though." Cherie bent down, and I made room for her. "Maybe because you're the only other person she's seen since he had her locked in this little room, other than me." Cherie knelt by Fungirl, and there was something intimate about the movement that made me realize I hadn't broken into a greenhouse—I'd broken into a nursery. I swallowed my cremini with shame.

Cherie pulled a small spray bottle out of her apron pocket, and Fungirl lifted her head, her eyes closed in rapture. Cherie moved quickly but gently as she spritzed Fungirl down, and I was reminded of a mother washing her child's hair. When she was finished, Cherie placed her hand on the side of Fungirl's face, pausing there, as Fungirl pulled a ruffled mushroom off her chest. She pressed it firmly into Cherie's hands, which cupped the mushroom gently before placing it in her apron, along with the small mister.

"Look, I know what you want me to say." Cherie stood and strode to a large barrel hidden behind two overgrown ferns. She snapped open the lid and filled a nearby salad bowl with its contents, a dark earthy substance I could smell from several feet away. It wasn't a bad smell, just strong and distinctive. She handed the bowl of compost to Fungirl. Dinner for my dinner.

"But I'm not supposed to say it, okay? I can't really tell you that it doesn't seem right, turning Fungirl's gifts into a playground for the rich. I can't really say that it's not the concept of eating her that's so off-putting, but the conditions, the high quantity she's forced to produce every week, the fact that she's giving her harvest to me, her caretaker, someone she trusts, and not to ten people she has never met, never should meet, and never will."

She sighs and crosses her arms the way both chefs and soldiers do.

"But what the hell. Not like Kyle can fire me. Who will make his pretentious recipes—recipes that I write? That I make sure no one but I could pull off? Not

Kyle with his bullshit résumé, that's for sure. Go ahead and write it all down. Write down that I think the whole thing's wrong. That I hate myself every time I create the perfect dish from an innocent creature. That I'm the abusive mother to a magical clay baby."

Cherie wiped the compost from her hand. "She should be free in the mountains, not locked up in a third-rate greenhouse. Vitaly lies when he says she isn't living. Anyone who looks at her can see it. And look, I'm not a vegan, I like meat. I'm a chef. I know the price of the industry, the craft, the contract we make with death in exchange for pleasure and art and business or whatever, and I'm usually all for it—but she's different. Fungirl... Funny—that's what I call her—she's not just a living creature, she's like, a person. She's got feelings and preferences and—"

She stopped to smile as "Funny" stuffed her face with handfuls of compost, leaves and twigs falling out between her fingers like potato chips. It was messy and adorable, and Cherie giggled, a sound that softened the serious pierce of her voice. "Well, you know, like that. Quirks. What's more 'living' than that?"

I nodded, and she gestured toward the door. We exited together, and she let me take one last look at Fungirl before the door closed. We chuckled as Fungirl dumped the rest of the compost over her head. Then the mysterious mushroom child stretched, yawned, and curled back into the fetal position. Watered and fed, she went back to sleep.

It was dark now outside the greenhouse, and I could just make out Cherie's face. I asked if everything she said was really on the record.

"Sure. Your editor's not gonna let you publish it anyway. People don't want to know where their food really comes from, what it really takes to pull off something like this. It's all just an industry, at the end of the day. Just greed and performance and money. And it's not like I'm any different. You don't see me busting Funny out of here and going on the lam, heading to the mountains with suitcases full of compost. I'm as stuck here as she is. My cage is just a paycheck instead of a greenhouse."

She pointed in the direction of the parking lot. Through the dark, I could just make out the profile of the Honda Accord I needed to return within the hour. As Cherie pulled the greenhouse door shut and slid the lock into place, I couldn't help myself. "Why didn't you open your own restaurant?" I asked. "After you won *Sliced*?"

Cherie shrugged. "I couldn't make rent."

As I walked away, I heard her whisper, almost to herself, that the whole thing was scripted anyway.

Fig 4. Vitaly's menu p3

Conditions

*By reading this menu, you hereby agree to the terms and conditions of dining at Vitaly's, in which via your first bite, you take full responsibility for your participation in this unique dining experience and thereby release Chef Kyle Vitaly, the Fungirl restaurant group, its employees, and its owners of all liability in the case of physical injury, emotional distress, or crises of conscience.

**Enoki growth is dependent on Fungirl's mood and is occasionally unavailable. In such circumstances, maitakes from Fungirl's kneecaps may be served instead.

***In rare cases, Fungirl resists the collection of shiitakes from her stomach, and the dish is substituted with baby portobellos growing on her thighs. The truffle is sourced from Fungirl's axilla (note that all use of body parts in this menu is metaphorical and is to simply explain the location of certain fungal growths, not to indicate that the specimen in question is sentient or of the kingdom Animalia).

****Some customers have experienced mild paranoia, a sense of hopelessness, feelings of entrapment, and acute anxiety upon consumption of trace psychoactive or hallucinogenic compounds. These feelings are temporary and are a normal part of the unique dining experience here at Vitaly's.

Request the attention of your server if you experience distress.

