

NEXT

WHO'S NEXT

Nick Kokonas

Cofounder
ALINEA AND NEXT

➤ **Big idea:** Reimagining the restaurant experience as entertainment—and pricing it as such. At the Chicago eatery Next, patrons will buy all-inclusive tickets, appear by curtain time (with prime meal times costing more), and enjoy the show. “All fine dining is like theater to a certain extent,” says Nick Kokonas, 42, who will launch Next this winter with Grant Achatz, the chef and cofounder of Chicago’s famed Alinea. “At Alinea, we pay three people to answer phones and mostly tell people that we’re full between 7 and 8 on a Saturday. I started

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thinking that we're going about this all wrong." So at Next, the same meal would cost less on, say, a Wednesday at 9:30 p.m. than on a Saturday at 8, and there's no tip calculating to sully the meal's afterglow. Next's menu will be transformed quarterly (early-20th-century Parisian, futuristic Hong Kong), and diners can buy annual subscriptions. Kokonas is designing his own software to handle online ticketing—more than 6,500 people have already queued up for reservations.

Next's genesis story: On the day **Grant Achatz** was diagnosed with tongue cancer, "I drove down from Michigan and got to Alinea around 10 p.m.," Kokonas recalls. "No one else in the whole



place knew, and he asked me if I was hungry. He usually never cooks for me—there are 1,800 dishes to make for the customers—but I said yes and he cooked up mussels and it was beautiful. I said we could put up a French restaurant and he raised his eyebrows and said, yes, but in six months we'd be bored with it. Things looked pretty grim, but that was the thing we kept coming back to. As soon as we knew he was in remission and he had a future, we started thinking what else we could do and not get bored."



First job: A bicycle-repair assistant at **Schwinn** in Northbrook, Illinois, making \$2 an hour. "I liked ripping things apart and putting them back together," Kokonas says.

Originally wanted to be: "My dad. He had me at 41 and so was well established and always had time for me. I had no idea what I wanted to do professionally, but I just knew that I wanted to own my situation."

Fatherly words of wisdom: "My dad's dad died when he was young, and so my dad never went to college and was an entrepreneur by necessity. He used to tell me that if you had a good idea, the world would conspire to help make it happen for you."

Past lives: A philosophy major in college, Kokonas fell into the derivatives trade after visiting Chicago's **trading floor**. He stayed for a decade, starting his own firm. "I really enjoyed it for 8 of the 10 years," he says, "but the exact quote from my wife



was, 'You're in danger of becoming an asshole. You should quit.' So I quit."

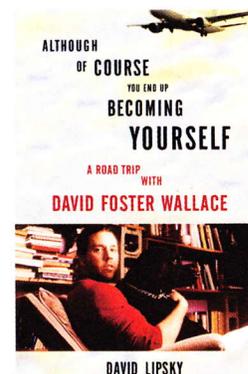
Hometown pride: "I think Chicagoans feel like they have to prove a little something. It's the Second City—we're in flyover country here—but it's a great, great food city."

Palate cleanser: Kokonas's mom was indifferent to food (he didn't even try pizza until he was 13), and his father liked meat well-done. "It wasn't until I met my wife and married into her family that I was exposed to good food and good wine, and I realized I was eating bad food."

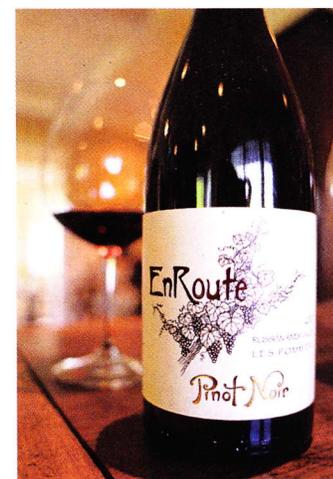
Desert-island food: "Almost every Sunday, I make a big batch of some sort of Italian sauce. My wife tends to worry about the vegetables and the kids getting a balanced diet. I just load in the butter."

False identity of choice: "When people ask me what I do for a living at a cocktail party and I really don't feel like

explaining it, I tell them I'm a writer. They ask me what I write and I say, 'About 200 emails a day.'" Kokonas and Achatz exchanged 1,894 emails during the six-month period of Alinea's creation in late 2004 and early 2005.



Last good book he read: *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, road-trip conversations between David Foster Wallace and *Rolling Stone* contributing editor David Lipsky. "I don't really dig Wallace's fiction because I found it impenetrable," Kokonas says, "but his nonfiction essays are absolutely hilarious."



Guilty pleasure: Wine. Kokonas imbibes daily, with a particular penchant for **American pinot noir**. "I'm skinny and my health is fine, but it's really expensive. A coke habit would probably be cheaper."

If I weren't doing this, I'd be . . . "Playing music, if I had actual talent. [Laughs] But 10 years from now, I'll be doing something completely different than I'm doing now. Who knows what's next?" —KATE ROCKWOOD