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Fill'er Up

Los Angeles chef Benjamin Ford is taking the traditional boozier to sublime new levels. Oh, and he's also Harrison Ford's son. BY ANTHONY HEAD

Benjamin Ford is beat. Waiting in line at a Los Angeles coffee shop, he's gulping a can of iced coffee just to keep his eyes open while a barista pours the hot stuff. Now that's tired. It's also understandable. Ford has been logging a lot of overtime to get his new restaurant, Ford's Filling Station, up and running.

Located in the tucked-in Los Angeles suburb of Culver City, Ford's Filling Station has been open since mid-February, and it's been a handful for Ford, its executive chef and owner. "The first few weeks of opening a restaurant can really nip at you," Ford says, hot coffee now in hand. "But I have to be an optimist. I pulled my last 300 bucks from my own pocket and dropped it into the register on opening night just to get us started."

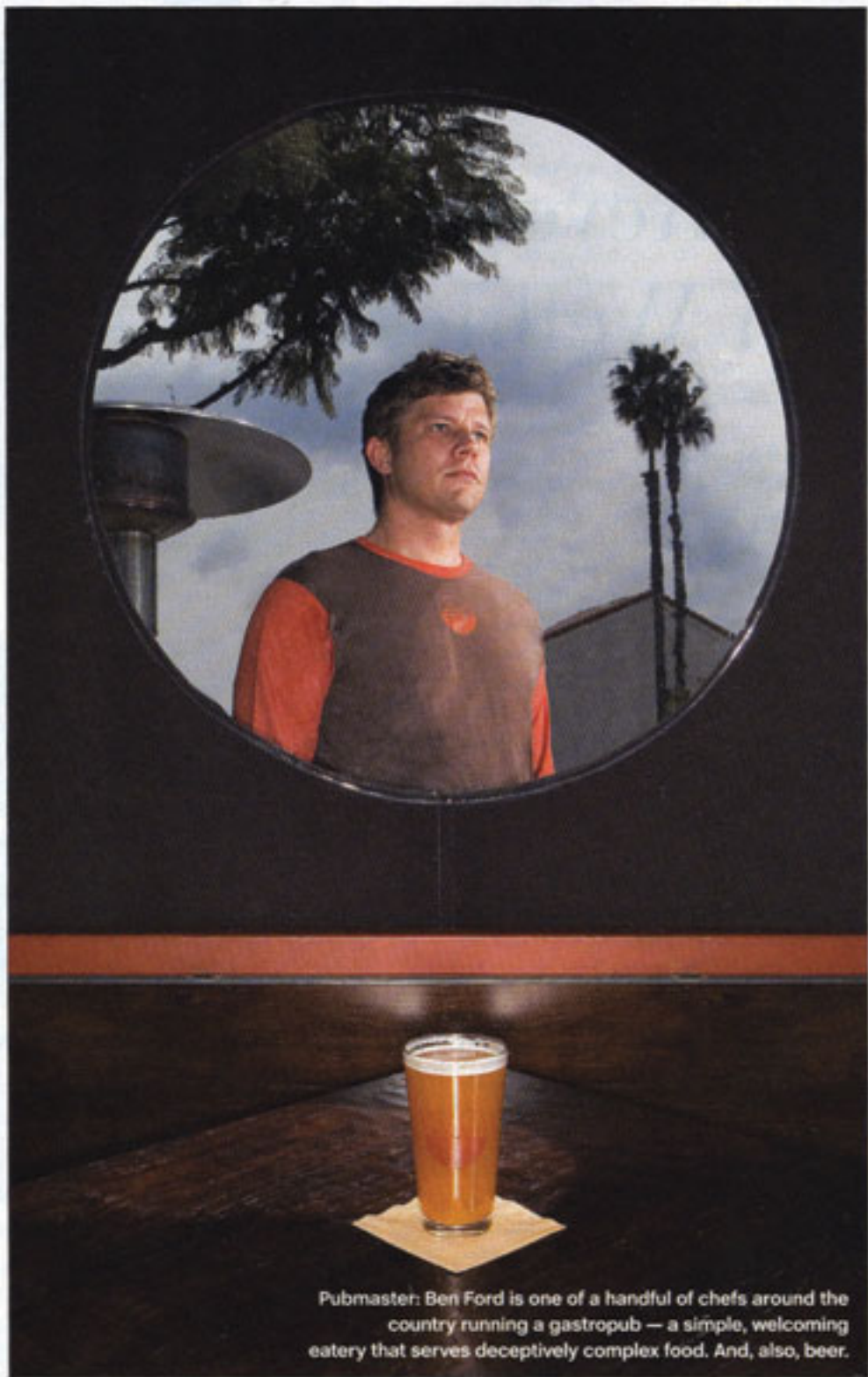
There's a good chance he'll see a return on that 300 bucks. Ford's Filling Station is already a crowded must-visit in L.A.'s busy restaurant scene. Maybe diners are coming to see Ford. He is actor Harrison Ford's son, after all, and does look a bit like Han Solo with

a better haircut. Or, maybe diners are coming because Ford's Filling Station is a gastropub, the hottest restaurant concept going today.

A gastropub is a bar and grill with fine-dining flair. Or, maybe it's a high-end restaurant that has removed its jacket and tie. Either way, it's a place that serves high-quality food — nay, *cuisine* — without all the maitre d' stuffiness. And, gastropubs are popping up everywhere from trend-

setting Manhattan to Chicago to Tulsa. Though each is unique, gastropubs share certain common denominators, such as comfort in the dining room and seasonal ingredients in the kitchen.

The last of those is what has brought the now heavily caffeinated Benjamin Ford to an L.A.-area farmers' market. Nosing over the baby bok choy, the chef attempts to explain what gastropubs are, as he sees



Pubmaster: Ben Ford is one of a handful of chefs around the country running a gastropub — a simple, welcoming eatery that serves deceptively complex food. And, also, beer.

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Food

them. "A gastropub is actually very complex," Ford says, shoveling some fingerling potatoes into a plastic bag. "It's a melding of two ideas. There's a lot of duality to play with." For instance, the name of his restaurant evokes a gas station that might have been found on old Route 66, but Ford says it's really a metaphor for comfort food. Ford's Filling Station is meant to replenish the spirit as well as the appetite. See? Duality.

"I think there's a real honesty to this restaurant," Ford says. "From the start I wanted it to be a neighborhood spot, and most of our customers, it turns out, are walk-ins. We're actually thinking about disconnecting the reservations line completely."

It's doubtful that such a move would do much to ease the nightly overflow of hungry guests eager for the affordable fare.

Ford is trying to intellectualize American cuisine. "A gastropub is very complex," he says.

Like other gastropubs across the country, Ford's has become popular for serving a cuisine that's highly representative of the cooking techniques and indigenous ingredients of a specific place while remaining approachable to your average palate. At the now-famous Spotted Pig in Manhattan, the region of choice is Italy, albeit with an English and Irish accent. In Ford's case, the region represented is the United States. On Ford's regularly changing menu, you may find entrées such as brook trout and walleye pike. Supporting players, too — a light spinach souffle alongside the flat iron steak, or marinated olives with roasted leg of lamb — make you feel like you're eating your way across the U.S.A.

Still, this isn't a diner in Topeka. Ford is trying to intellectualize the concept of American cuisine. In part, he's doing that in the kitchen with multilayered approaches to simple foods. He's also doing that in the dining room, attempting to democratize the notion of fine dining by keeping ambience and presentation comfortable.

Ford's Filling Station is definitely comfortable. Exposed brick walls are dotted with black-and-white Ford family photographs. A patchwork of colorful Persian rugs covers the floors. The music sounds like an FM radio station from 1979. If it sounds bar-and-grilly, it is. But that's where the duality comes in. Next to a 12-inch-

tall replica of a vintage gas pump there's a selection of books that you'd likely not see in a burger-and-fries place — Chaucer, García Márquez, Joan Didion. They belie the truth about the gastropub's lofty culinary ambitions. Still, something about the ambience makes the place perfect for relaxing at the bar with a pint of Anchor Steam.

The gastropub concept evolved in Great Britain a few decades ago as traditional pubs finally tired of the jokes about drab British food. The first gastropub, The Eagle, opened in London in 1991 with not only an alluring chic to its shabbiness, but also a decidedly upscale Mediterranean menu teeming with squid and pancetta. There are now hundreds of British gastropubs; most are overhauled older taverns with innova-

tive dishes but still plenty of traditional English character.

London's culinary counterpoint, Paris, also experienced a gastro-revolution in the 1990s after star chef Yves Camdeborde opened Le Regalade. When he served haute cuisine to the masses — *voilà!* — the gastro-bistro was born.

The United States has been developing upscale pub grub for a while, but the gastropub didn't officially mature until 2004 with the opening of The Spotted Pig in New York City. It's often cited as a "Mario Batali restaurant." He and his business partner Joe Bastianich, who together own some of the country's most influential restaurants, are investors and advisers. But the real credit goes to chef April Bloomfield, who came to The Spotted Pig after successful tenures at London's celebrated River Cafe and Berkeley's temple of California cuisine, Chez Panisse Restaurant and Café. Bloomfield's Italian-accented menu features dishes like roasted striped bass with cranberry beans, and prosciutto with roasted radishes.

Though The Spotted Pig is anything but fancy, it received a Michelin star last year when the first Michelin dining guide for a U.S. city was published. Batali's celebrated, and infinitely more expensive, Babbo got the same rating — one out of a possible three stars. "At first I was a bit surprised that we got one here," Bloomfield says. "But

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I was very happy, too."

What she's not surprised about is that the gastropub concept is catching on in the States. "People want to hang out with their friends and relax in a casual place with good food," Bloomfield says. "These days that place just so happens to be a bar."

Ben Ford just so happens to be more than the son of a famous actor. On the West Coast, he is famous in his own right for his cooking pedigree. Like Bloomfield, he's also a Chez Panisse alum. It was there, working with Chez Panisse founder Alice Waters and her one-time executive chef Paul Bertolli, that Ford developed his fondness for organic, seasonal ingredients.

When his first restaurant, Chadwick, opened in 1999, Ford served some of the freshest seasonal Mediterranean food Beverly Hills had ever tasted. But a funny thing happened during that three-year run during which Ford was finally recognized more for his kitchen chops than for being an actor's son. He decided that Chadwick had become too fancy for his tastes. That's when he decided to open a gastropub.

So he called up Greg Hughes, a friend from college who now, along with his wife, Tara, is a restaurateur in Tulsa. Ford wanted to try out the gastropub concept in Tulsa, in part because he felt the city was "real." For months, Ford shaped the recipes, the decor, even the graphics on the menu until he felt comfortable. It appears that not enough diners shared his comfort. The restaurant closed late last year.

Whatever befell the Tulsa location, Ford's Filling Station in Culver City seems safe for now. After his foray at the farmers' market, Ford returns to his restaurant a few hours before opening for dinner to find several hungry diners out on the sidewalk, peeking through the front windows.

That same kind of excitement greeted the premiere of the eatery earlier this year. In L.A., you see, restaurants don't have "openings"; they have red-carpet premieres. And, as such, celebrities show up. Harrison Ford, for example.

Touring the kitchen with his look-a-like son, Harrison noted, "The place really looks great, and it feels very warm." When asked where Ben got his culinary chops, Harrison took no credit, though. "We cooked a lot as a family," he said. "But Ben never really cooked for me until he became a pro chef."

The Fords cooked a lot as a family for a good reason. Mary Ford, Ben's mother, developed multiple sclerosis when he was a child. So Ben took to the kitchen to help her

out. But cooking remained little more than a hobby, or a pleasant couple of hours spent with Mom, until after college. Ford had been pursuing a baseball career. He was recruited by USC in the mid-1980s and briefly played first and third base for the Cincinnati Reds' farm club in Santa Ana, California. Injuries, though, put him back on the culinary path, just about the same time the gastropub revolution was dawning.

He has no regrets, mind you. Ford is

perfectly happy in the kitchen, even if the work is wearing him out at the moment. And there's plenty more work to be done on the Filling Station. Ford wants to add more American craft beers to the taps and overhaul the wine list to reflect the incredible breadth of domestic wines. But for now, Ford doesn't have time to talk about all that. The doors will open soon, and he has to get cooking. "I just hope I can cook even more tonight than last night," Ford says.

Pub Grub

Four other gastropubs worth a visit

THE PLACE: Standard Tap, Philadelphia
THE LOWDOWN: The Tap might be considered a brewpub, what with the hand-pumped local brews, the dartboard, and the jukebox. But owner Paul Kimport's menu, scribbled on a blackboard, pushes this neighborhood spot up the epicurean ladder. The sausage is homemade, and the seafood is just-caught fresh.
THE DETAILS: 901 N. Second St., (215) 238-0630, www.standardtap.com

THE PLACE: Michael & Louise's Hopleaf Bar, Chicago
THE LOWDOWN: Whether it's mussels for one or two, they'll come freshly steamed in white wine with shallots and crème fraîche at this Windy City gastropub. Other dishes, like bacon and leek tart and grilled rabbit loins, can be washed down with one of the many Belgian-style beers or American microbrews.
THE DETAILS: 5148 N. Clark St., (773) 334-9851, www.hopleaf.com

THE PLACE: Spike Hill, Brooklyn
THE LOWDOWN: Catch the L train to Bedford Avenue, and if you can make it past the bar's exceptional selection of single-malt scotches, then order the traditional Irish fry-up. If that fails to impress, then try the sea bass breaded with panko. And if that fails, go back to the scotch.
THE DETAILS: 184 Bedford Ave., (718) 218-9737

THE PLACE: Gotham Bldg. Tavern, Portland, Oregon
THE LOWDOWN: This loft-style space features Douglas fir logs stacked to cordon off special dining rooms known as the "Birdcage" and the "Beehive." It's an impressive place to get locked in, left with only the roast marrow bones with bitter herbs and grilled bread, or scallop crudo with braised local celery and lobster aioli.
THE DETAILS: 2240 N. Interstate Ave., (503) 493-2646, www.ripepdx.com

"I keep asking my chefs if they'll let me in to do more, but they think it's a trick question." He grins and says, "But the correct answer is always, 'Yes, chef.'"

Los Angeles-based writer Anthony Head must endure many, many three-star meals to do his job right.

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