Checking In: Food For Thought

Florent Morellet dishes out love and linguini in his downtown diner

January 1, 1999 By Manjula Martin

Florent Morellet is one of New York City's friendliest and most famous restaurateurs. When the sprightly, armed-with-charm Frenchman rollerblades through his eponymous restaurant every afternoon, he sprinkles a flurry of "Bonjour"s and kisses on both cheeks. In the heart of New York's nouveau-chic meatpacking district, Restaurant Florent is a landmark for all types at all hours, drawn as much by the Franco-American fare as by the former Parisian's quirky imagination. While savoring the soup, winers and diners can check out the bulletin board above the bar that lists, along with the date, weather and current events of note, Morellet's once-falling-but-now-flying CD4 counts.

When Morellet—HIV positive for 13 years and maintaining steady health on an anti-HIV regimen of ritonavir (Norvir), d4T (Zerit) and 3TC (Epivir)—spoke with POZ for the first time since he was profiled in the June/July 1994 issue, he was laid up. A rollerblading accident, coupled with a thrown-out back, had the energetic 45-year-old in near-constant pain. We took this moment of uncharacteristic stillness to catch up on old times.

Other than sore bones caused by recent spills, how's your health?
Good. I've been doing this cocktail since 1997. My T-cells have gone from 250 to 730, and my viral load is down from 400,000 to 18,000. I've decided to continue on the same treatment for so long because my immune system is doing so well.

Do you follow any special nutritional regimen?
Not really. I don't have any specific diet, but I do have to watch out because high cholesterol is a side effect of Norvir. I don't do it very well—I love to eat everything! I have a house in New Jersey where I spend the weekends, and I love to garden and cook every day. I always say that my favorite thing to cook is "never the same thing twice."

Speaking of which, how is Restaurant Florent?
Never been better. It's very successful, and it's always fun to come down here. We have a very eclectic bunch, and there's never a dull moment.

You put your T-cell count up on the bulletin board at Florent. When did you start publicly exhibiting your lab results?

The T-cells were up from the beginning. It's not too in-your-face—it doesn't scream in big letters, "Florent's T-cells," but people are inquisitive about the numbers up there, and they'll ask the waiter. I've never gotten a negative reaction. Most reactions I get are very positive, very emotional. It's important to be out about these things. Of course, it'd probably be a different story if I was in Dayton, Ohio. In the beginning, some of my friends did worry that it would have an effect on the business, but I can't say that it has.

Whenever I go to your restaurant, I'm struck by how festive it feels, along with the sense that I'm amongst family. When I was a waitress there, it was unique experience for me to walk into work and get such a strong feeling of being taken care of.
Well, you can't really take care of other people until you've learned to take care of yourself. Being HIV positive has had a positive influence on me in that way—it helped me take care of myself, which I was not doing before. It has given me a life, especially since I've never been sick. It's like I get the best of both worlds. Look at the gay community, for example—it was basically nonexistent before AIDS. And there was little interaction between gay men and lesbians. It was beautiful to see lesbians giving their support to sick men, and the two communities growing closer together. Compared to 15 years ago, I think our community is much better. We take care of each other. We love each other.

Are you in love right now?
Yes. I've been in a relationship for five years. Sometimes people who are HIV positive fear they will never find someone to love them. But I think it's a plus in regard to finding a lover because you find strong people. Someone who won't love you because you're HIV positive would probably have hurt you down the line anyway, even if you weren't positive. I always say to people who are positive, "You're lucky," because you naturally weed out the weak ones. It's like your own personal natural selection.

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