Farewell, Florent

After 23 years, on June 29, the legendary 24-hour French diner at 69 Gansevoort Street in Lower Manhattan will close its doors and bid adieu to an era of heroic AIDS activism and many moons of all-night eating, scheming, living and loving at its charming bistro countertops—the same countertops that once supported the naked bodies of HIV-positive POZ cover subjects. We say, with awe and reverence, “Au revoir, Florent.” Here, POZ founder Sean Strub reflects on his—and the magazine’s—long history with Restaurant Florent.

June 25, 2008 By Sean Strub

POZ profiled legendary restaurateur/activist Florent Morellet in our second issue— June/July 1994. But the magazine’s relationship with Florent—the man as well as the famed all-night dining and hangout spot in Manhattan’s Meatpacking District—predates the founding of *POZ*.

In 1992 and 1993, as I began thinking about launching a magazine for people with HIV, I was often at Restaurant Florent brainstorming with friends and colleagues, reflecting on the epidemic, licking my wounds after an ACT UP demonstration or political skirmish, or just relaxing amidst the camaraderie of those who shared a passion for social change. Florent himself provided a reliably friendly ear, inspiring voice and oh, what mischievous eyes.

Florent was also open about his HIV-positive status, which was unusual for a restaurateur; this was a time when many people, fearing contagion, avoided restaurants they believed to be staffed by gay men. His openness about his health made the restaurant a refuge for many of us, especially when our disease announced itself to the world with visible wasting or KS lesions.

Many people knew Florent had HIV—and not just because we profiled him in *POZ*. Near the bottom of the old-fashioned menu board—the type with little plastic letters inserted into slots on a dark background—there was a curious series of three-digit numbers. They appeared almost random: 243, 278, 367, 299, 552, 441… set at different heights. A line drawn from one to the next would look like the jagged top edge of a mountain range.

These numbers were Florent’s CD4 count—a measure of the body’s immune strength well-known to POZ readers. No one ever had to ask Florent “how are you?” with the earnest concern of someone really asking “are you sick right now?” The status of Florent’s health—at least this important measure—was posted for all to see.

We asked Florent about this when we interviewed him for *POZ*: “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."

POZ's 10th anniversary issue

When artist Spencer Tunick photographed 85 naked people with HIV at Florent for our 10th-anniversary cover, there was one detail in the photograph that escaped the attention of many readers. The photograph shows all of us in our naked glory spread out on the floor, banquette, stools and countertop at Florent. But in the upper left-hand corner of the cover, right above where it says "10th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE," the menu board with Florent's CD4 counts can be seen. And a few inches away, sitting naked on one of the counter stools, is Florent himself.

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I first visited Florent late one night in the mid to late 1980s, with my friends Andre Ledoux and Larry Fain. Both have since died. We had been out at a club—probably The Saint—and it was 3 or 4 a.m. We were discoed-out and hungry. We usually went to the Brasserie, which was in the East 50s and open 24 hours. But one of us had heard of a new 24-hour place in the meatpacking district (before it became the Meatpacking District) on Gansevoort Street, and we were game to give it a try if we could find it.

Find it we did, in a desolate, dark, industrial not-yet-neighborhood with cobblestone streets and sidewalks slick from slaughter-house slime. The restaurant itself, an old diner in the middle of the block, was a luminescent mirage, looking as out-of-place and perfect as a stage set. The nearby streets were deserted, save the occasional leather-man heading to or from the Mineshaft or Anvil, or a working girl (or boy) trolling for clients.

Inside, the restaurant was bustling with a lively mix of club kids, drag queens, fashionistas and other denizens of New York's mid-80s downtown scene. That first night was memorable, and many repeat visits soon followed.

When I moved into the neighborhood in 1992, I became a regular. I would see Florent arrive at the restaurant and greet staff and customers. As soon as he sat down, one of his staff would emerge from the kitchen with a tasting plate of several small bowls; he would taste the various sauces, suggesting less salt in this one, a little more tarragon in that one. His effusive personality elevated the spirit of everyone in the room—staff and guests alike—the moment he entered the restaurant. To this day, Florent exudes an aura of love and caring that only improved the taste of his food.

We did not meet personally until during the 1992 Democratic Convention. Hal Rubenstein—a friend of Florent's who would become one of *POZ*'s first contributors—movie producer Howard Rosenman and I headed there one night after the Convention. Florent joined us for dinner, and I was captivated by his warmth, authenticity and passion for politics; I knew I had found a treasured new friend.

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A few months later, Florent and I started work on a project, a big benefit at Industria Superstudio (also in the neighborhood) to welcome Torie Osborn as the then-new executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington, DC. Florent and I cochaired the event, along with Tibor Kalman, the

legendary artist who designed Florent's menus and graphics; Mario Cooper, an openly HIV-positive political activist who had managed the 1992 Convention; the dancer Bill T. Jones, who graced the cover of the second issue of *POZ*; and several others.

Florent and Tibor created invitations for the fundraiser that were unlike anything I have ever seen. The invitation was comprised of a small cardboard box with a real banana and a real plum in it, wrapped in tissue paper, along with the printed invitation and reply card. It was beautifully designed, clever and irresistible.

There was a problem, though. As soon as we mailed the invitations, an unexpected heat wave hit Manhattan. Temperatures soared into the 90s. Anyone who could get out of the city—especially of the fundraising ticket-buying class—left for Fire Island, the Jersey Shore or whatever country refuge they could find.

Our boxed invitations, with suddenly not-so-fresh fruit, were delivered late in the week, mostly on Friday and Saturday, when many people were not home. The box did not fit in the small mailboxes of many apartment buildings, so the recipients just got a slip from the post office notifying them of their package.

The fruit rotted fast. To our dismay, many of the invited guests opened their invitations to find a mass of fruit flies.

Fruit flies aside, the event was terrific.

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Florent has been one of the most eligible bachelors in New York, as well as one of the best husbands. I have never known him to be happier than he is right now, with his partner, writer Peter Cameron (most recently, *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful To You*, published last year by Farrar, Straus & Giroux).

In the late 90s, when Florent was single, I hosted a party for him at my home in Pennsylvania. I invited all of my most eligible friends, but no love match was to be found. I always wanted to go out with him, but we never seemed to be single at the same time.

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When *POZ* was preparing its 10th-anniversary issue, we wanted it to be something special. Survival in the magazine industry is difficult enough; add on the peculiarities of a magazine about the epidemic, created and run by people with the virus, and one can understand why the publication's 10-year survival was an occasion worth noting.

Walter Armstrong, our editor-in-chief at the time, had prepared an extraordinary issue, chronicling the highlights of what we labeled "the *POZ* decade." Reviewing the lineup for the issue, I became sentimental, thinking about all we had accomplished with the magazine as well as everyone we had lost. But while the inside of the magazine was coming together nicely, we did not yet have a great concept for the cover.

I left the office and walked down the block to Restaurant Florent, where I had a cup of chamomile tea and reflected on the 10 years since I had started *POZ* and how the magazine had changed since its first issue, when we were widely acclaimed simply for "showing the face of the epidemic."

That might have been the most important contribution *POZ* made to fighting AIDS-related stigma: simply showing real people with HIV leading their lives, with all the ups and downs, challenges and opportunities, joy and misery that every life entails.

We showed “the faces” of the epidemic and, in the end, they did not look that much different from the faces of everyone else. A decade later, the face of the epidemic was no longer so unknown. What could we show now?

Then I thought about an HBO documentary I had seen a few days earlier. It was *Naked World*, about artist Spencer Tunick’s photographing large groups of naked people in public places. Bingo!

I went back to the office and ran the idea past Walter. who liked it as much as I did. We tracked down the name of Tunick’s art dealer and sent an email, describing what we had in mind. Less than an hour later, a response came back: “Spencer likes your idea. Please call him.”

During our conversation, Spencer said he was intrigued by the idea of photographing a group of people with HIV, but warned us that it usually takes three or four months to coordinate such an event. I told him we had less than a month before our cover had to go to print, but that I was sure we could get a sufficiently large and interesting group together on short notice. We talked about locations and I suggested Restaurant Florent (without having discussed it with Florent). Spencer was in.

When I got in touch with Florent, he was immediately enthusiastic. We settled on a date—early Saturday morning, March 13, 2004—and started to publicize the event.

Asking friends to show up at 7 a.m. on a cold Saturday morning in March in order to get naked in a restaurant is exactly the sort of thing we at *POZ* do best. We got right to work sending e-mails, posting notices on bulletin boards and making phone calls.

Two weeks before the event, we got word that HBO had provided funding to the filmmakers who had made two previous documentaries about Spencer Tunick’s work—Arlene Donnelly Nelson, David Nelson and Helen Hood Scheer. They were commissioned to make a short film about the *POZ* project. We started working with them, and they quickly became a central (and beloved) part of the event, filming several of the participants as they prepared for the big day.

On the day of the event, people showed up, shivering, and huddled inside and around the restaurant. The tables and chairs were stacked on the sidewalk outside. Some were there to get naked, some to be supportive and some just to witness the spectacle. The crowd was large, including a ton of press, there to cover an outrageous story about people with HIV getting naked in a diner.

We gathered inside and started receiving directions from Spencer. Before we took off our clothes, it became apparent there were many HIV-negative friends who had shown up for support and wanted to participate. Insisting the photo include only people with HIV, Spencer asked them to step outside. They were disappointed, but when I said “finally, it’s the HIV-negative people who are getting kicked out!” everyone laughed.

Spencer talked for a few minutes about his work and what he was going to do. He told us that within a few minutes of getting naked, it will feel totally natural. I did not believe him; there was little that felt less natural to me, at that time, than nakedness.

With the words “you may now disrobe,” the scene became surreal. We all stripped in place, in front of friends and strangers, coworkers and neighbors, photographers and video cameras. We all put our clothes in plastic bags, which were piled behind the counter. There was shy and nervous laughter, and at the beginning, it seemed there was no appropriate place to focus one’s eyes.

Spencer started directing us: ”Stand up. Sit down. Stand up, then close your eyes and gently collapse to the ground. You move over there. You move over here. Sean, will you and the people on either side of you please stand up on the counter? Will those of you along this side please stand on the banquette? Move your legs to the left. Now to the right. Open your eyes. Close your eyes.”

Just as Spencer had promised, within a few minutes it did feel totally natural. Better than natural, it was cathartic and liberating and joyous. Some of our bodies were badly disfigured by the disease or treatments; others had perfect gym-bodies. Yet we were all naked, and we all had HIV. What we shared became vastly more important than how we were different.

That morning, quite unexpectedly, turned out to be one of the defining experiences of my adult life. It was a milestone for me in a lifetime battle against body-shame issues. The HBO-funded documentary, *Positively Naked*, turned into a 38-minute short film and was broadcast on Cinemax a couple of years ago. I was one of the people featured in the film.

In the 10th-anniversary issue of *POZ*, we described the event as “classic *POZ*: provocative, communal, possibly illegal, potentially moving and meaningful (or alternately a big bust), and done days behind deadline.”

Most participants found the experience inspiring, even healing. But like the 10th anniversary of *POZ*—like HIV survival itself—it also raised intense and sometimes clashing emotions: pride and defiance, vulnerability and shame, passion and compassion, desire, love and…loss.

How did it feel to be part of an all-naked, all-positive sculpture by Spencer Tunick? These personal takes, published in our anniversary issue, capture the magic:

"I was nervous, tired, hungry and worried about how my penis would look in the cold. Got to Florent, had a cup of coffee, and then I was ready to get naked. **The incredible sense of solidarity was overwhelming.** Lying in a stranger’s arms, naked, made me feel so close to what humanity is all about. Male, female, gay and straight—this was something I’ll remember."

"PWAs have had to deal quite often with **our bodies changing due to meds—premature aging, lipo, wasting.** And to be with my peers knowing they too have had to deal with these issues was comforting. We don’t often have the place to let it all hang out. It was kind of tribal."

"Something very special happened, and I am not sure how to explain it. In a world where our looks, our clothes, our bodies—muscles, dick, abs—are all so important, somehow this was all cast away, and even **bodies themselves became incidental to who we are.**"

"When we first got there, everyone stayed by people they knew. **Within minutes of being naked, we became one, without fear,** our souls without judgments."

"My friends and I have been to Florent many times, but now I’m the only one left alive. I did this in their

memory as well as for those, like myself, who are suffering but fighting like hell to survive. With each camera shot, I prayed for my friends and was comforted and amazed when **I actually felt the spirits and love of all those we have lost.**"

“The experience ripped up a deep, ugly scar that had taken decades to heal—and re-healed it by the time I had retrieved my bag of clothes behind the counter.”

"I felt nothing but love and friendship among my many brethren, the type I rarely feel in the community at large where **statuses are unknown and where we often encounter the ‘Negative UB2’ attitude.** Acceptance filled the air."

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We knew the magazine cover was going to be controversial in some quarters; full frontal nudity—especially male nudity—does not appear often on the cover of national magazines.

We thought some places that distribute *POZ* in public view might choose to put it behind the counter or distribute it more discreetly, so we gave them a heads-up letter in advance. We expected a few readers to be upset, and some subscription cancellations would not have surprised us.

But we only received a tiny number of complaints. In retrospect, I think that was because people with HIV taking the simple, radical step of showing their bodies was something our readers, the community and the media recognized as more beautiful and inspiring than transgressive.

There was, however, one prominent complaint. A few days after the issue mailed, we got a fax from the office of a doctor, one heavily involved in the epidemic, that he found the cover offensive, demanding his subscription be canceled.

The doctor also happened to be a member of the United States Senate from Oklahoma, Tom Coburn. He also, at the time, was the cochair of President George W. Bush’s Advisory Committee on HIV/AIDS.

I guess our naked bodies disgusted him.

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Restaurant Florent at 69 Gansevoort Street in Lower Manhattan

Florent and I often discussed the changes in the meat market, as the neighborhood gentrified, the sex clubs closed and the meatpacking businesses dwindled to a final few. So when he co-organized the effort to landmark the neighborhood, he knew that such protection would come at a price.

The price came for Florent when his landlord wanted an enormous rent increase, one so great that Florent could not pay it without fundamentally changing the character of the restaurant. The decision for Florent and his long-time colleagues—the intense loyalty and long tenure of Florent’s staff is legendary—to close the restaurant was surely painful.

But while the restaurant may be gone, the values it represents and the example it set lives on. I have in the past, with tongue only partially in cheek, described Florent as a movement, not a restaurant. Long

live the movement.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/florent-closing-hiv-14835-3945