



# AMERICAN MOUTH

THE LOUD LIFE  
AND BIG LEGACY OF  
JOSH OZERSKY,  
THE GREATEST, WILDEST  
FOOD WRITER OF  
HIS GENERATION

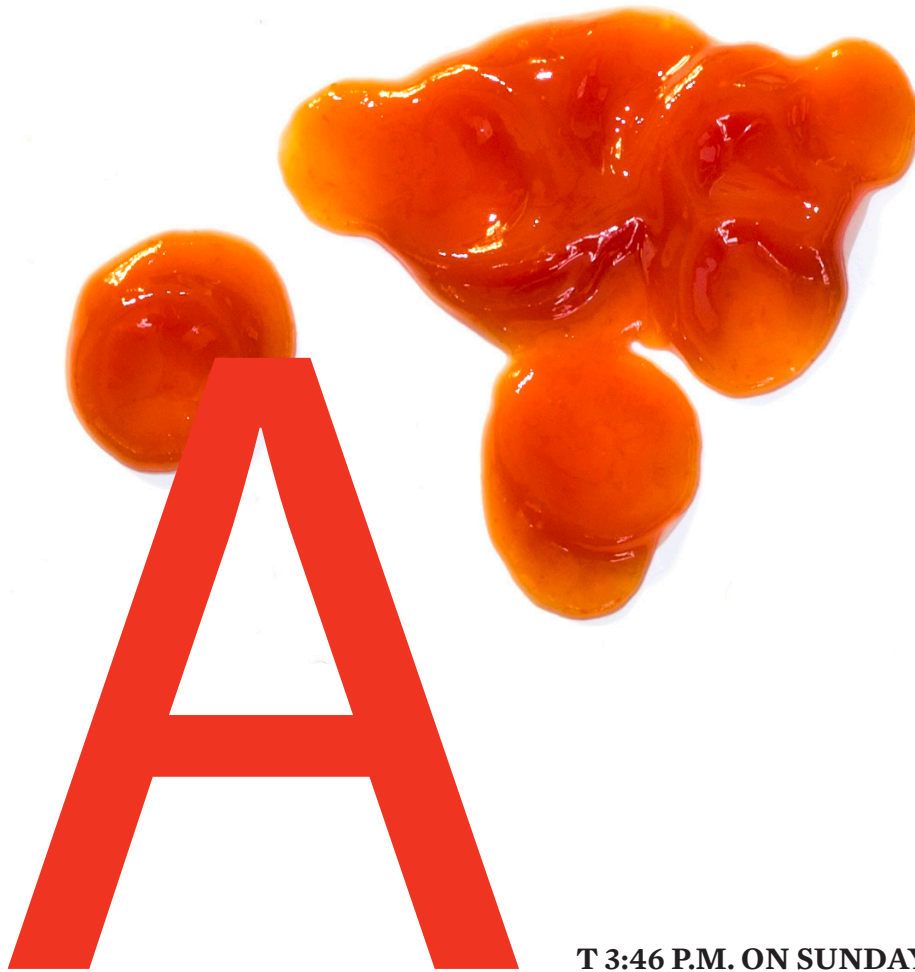
BY NIGEL DUARA

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL NOVAK









**T 3:46 P.M. ON SUNDAY,**

May 3, 2015, the famed food writer Josh Ozersky texted his friend Meathead Goldwyn, a Chicago-based cookbook author, asking about dinner plans. Ozersky was on a whirlwind Midwest food tour, though the year before he'd moved to Portland after falling in love with its restaurant scene. Goldwyn didn't see the text until the next day. By the time he read it, Ozersky was dead, after a night of drinking and singing—both loudly. He was 47. Goldwyn called him the “most erudite and most passionate food writer of this young century.”

South Miami of the 1970s wasn't too different from South Miami today. It's a place of orderly, grassy medians and fading Jewish delis, marooned between the glitz of the beaches to the north, the McMansions to the east, poverty to the west and to the south—the kind of American Nowhere that emerges like a volcanic island from beneath the seas of Somewhere.

Josh Ozersky spent his childhood in South Miami, son of a fond but emotionally absent father and a vivacious but unpredictable mother. A fat, lonely child, he found solace where many fat, lonely children find solace: in fast-food hamburgers, in his case cooked on a dingy grill at South Miami's Dadeland Mall. In an essay titled “My Life in Hamburgers,” Ozersky once described his first conscious memories: “my plump little fingers clenching madly at tiny Royal Castle burgers, digging into the cloud-light buns with the same animal glee with which I plunged my face into the frosting of my first birthday cake. There was never a time when I didn't love hamburgers and overthink them.”

Ozersky took his first stabs at adolescent freedom by walking

alone to Burger King. In 1982, after a move to New Jersey, his mother died of a narcotics overdose. “I woke up; he told me to go back to sleep,” Ozersky wrote in a memoir of his father for *Saveur* magazine, perhaps his most-quoted piece. “I did. But when I got up in the morning, she was dead. We didn't talk about it. We talked about food.”

In “My Life in Hamburgers,” he recalled: “The best, and worse, and most damaging ... hamburger of my life was handed to me one morning while still reeling—in shock, really—from my mother's sudden demise. ‘I'm going to go to McDonald's,’ my aunt told me, in a solemn whisper. ‘Do you want anything?’ Did I ever! I had been hiding inside hamburgers for most of my life; this one swallowed me whole, and it took me years to get out. Maybe I never did.”

This food-obsessed child went on to become a Rutgers undergrad, an NYU grad student, and a

Notre Dame doctoral candidate in American history. Ozersky wanted to write, and wanted to write about food. His widow, Danit Lidor, says he knew he had to be in New York City.

It was the early 2000s, and New York food culture was going through a Zen moment. Simplicity reigned. Vegan restaurants, even a raw-food place, cropped up and succeeded. Meanwhile, respected food writers tended to be card-carrying Europhiles, in love with Paris and Tuscany; the certified progressives usually advocated for the emerging farm-to-table movement or critiqued suburbanized America's mass-quantity consumption. (Eric Schlosser's industry take-down *Fast Food Nation* appeared in 2001, and Morgan Spurlock's anti-McDonald's documentary *Super Size Me* followed in 2004.) Alice Waters, founder of Berkeley's upscale-crunchy Chez Panisse, was often portrayed as a sort of living saint of mindful cooking. Anthony Bourdain inaugurated food writing's gonzo wing, steeped in bad-boy professional kitchen culture, with 2000's *Kitchen Confidential*. Prominent reviewers like William Grimes and Frank Bruni, the era's successive *New York Times* critics, emerged from old-school newspaper backgrounds.

Ozersky broke from all of this. He set upon food writing not as an arbiter of taste or ideology but as a voracious and opinionated consumer, "a Runyon-esque hustler in contemporary, tidied-up NYC," as *Vanity Fair*'s David Kamp would describe him. Ozersky extolled bold simplicity over preciousness—sea salt, yes; edible sea foam, no. He began with first-person accounts documenting his own copious meat consumption under the name Casper Gutman in something called the *Westside Spirit*, eventually moving on to more widely recognized outlets, like the *New York Post* and *Newsday*. In 2003, under the pseudonym Mr. Cutlets, he wrote *Meat Me in Manhattan: A Carnivore's Guide to New York*. The book takes its readers on trips to meat palaces around the city—the personal and joyous narration luxuriates in the inner workings of the famous Peter Luger Steakhouse and in Italian sausage at an old-fashioned meat market in the West Village.

In any previous decade, Ozersky might have faded into obscurity, but his sharply self-drawn character and emphatic taste proved perfect for blogging. By 2004, he was editing Grub Street, *New York* magazine's pioneering food blog. But if his voice was right for the Internet, his intellectual, historian's temperament made the medium an awkward fit: he wrote several times about the burnout caused by blogging's incessant pace, and he sought out writing gigs that would allow him to be more reflective.

He could also be critical of the foodie culture he covered—a trait that would mark his whole career. You can hear it in his biting take on perhaps the foremost food writer in American history, M. F. K. Fisher, who died in 1992, and her literary progeny. "All were alike card-carrying members of the upper bourgeoisie, and their target readers, then as



## OZERSKY EXTOLLED SIMPLICITY OVER PRECIOUSNESS— SEA SALT, YES; SEA FOAM, NO.

now, were people just like them, or people who wanted to be just like them," Ozersky wrote in a piece titled "Consider the Food Writer." It was a typical Ozerskian swipe, wrapping populism in prose both cultured and aggressive.

In the course of his career, Ozersky would deride Michael Pollan, the influential activist/author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. He would eulogize the economic role of the East Coast chain Friendly's and its ilk, and defend "industrial" food, a stance that prompted writer Mark Bittman to proclaim, in the *New York Times*, that "Josh Ozersky is at least a little out of his mind." He even bristled at the bacon boom that caught on along with protein-centric diets in the early 2000s and spun into bacon fests, bacon clubs, and, heaven help us, a bacon camp in Seattle: "The 'bacon explosion' style of cooking has always seemed to be a cheap shot, an automatic reflex, a proof of conformity and lack of imagination."

"There was a Hemingway-esque pugilism to his writings," wrote critic Tim Carman. "He always seemed primed for a fight."

Ozersky also styled himself as larger than life, willing to eat anything, any time, in enormous quantities, washed down with a requisite amount of booze. A product of the Me Generation and the New Journalism tradition of writer-centered reportage, he seemed most comfortable using “I” as his main character. He was self-aggrandizing, a quality few people recall with any malice. Self-mythology was simply the byproduct of his prodigious gifts as a writer. “I fraternize widely with chefs, probably too much, but invariably from a privileged civilian perspective. I get to waltz into their kitchens, chat away, ignore everyone else, and pick dainties from passing trays without even asking,” he wrote.

Hubris or self-confidence, it seemed to pay off. In 2013, long-time *Esquire* editor David Granger hired on this cavorting, self-conscious libertine to be the magazine’s most prominent food writer. Ozersky bought himself a vintage Rolex and filmed himself signing his letter of acceptance. Ryan D’Agostino, a former editor at *Esquire*, remembers e-mails from Ozersky, elated at his own prose: “This is the best thing I’ve ever written,” was a standard refrain. At *Esquire*, Ozersky’s writing reflected a conviction that some things are good, and other things must be done away with—*now!*—lest they detract from worthwhile enterprises.

## HE SET UPON FOOD WRITING AS A VORACIOUS AND OPINIONATED CONSUMER.

“Many writers sound like other writers, this ‘*New Yorker*’ style,” *Esquire*’s Tom Junod says. “Josh sounded like Josh. There’s two kinds of writers. There’s the ones who will go out and report all this stuff and have a great time and see all kinds of things, but they won’t write that, because it doesn’t fit the story they thought they were going to write. Then there’s the other kind of writer. The one who brings back the good stuff. He brought it back.”

The *New York Times* declared him a member of the “Fat Pack,” the coterie of oversize gourmands, mostly food writers, known for eating and eating and eating. He became a persona. Along the way, Ozersky produced a series of books, some applying a historian’s rigor to subjects anathema to the Euro-Californian-organic wing of American food. One explored the cultural meanings of Colonel Sanders. Another, in retrospect, was the book he was born to write: *The Hamburger*.

*“What do Americans think of when they think of the hamburger? A robust, succulent spheroid of fresh ground beef, the birthright of red-blooded citizens? Or a Styrofoam-shrouded Big Mac, mass-produced to industrial specifications and served by wage slaves to an obese, brainwashed population? Is it a sizzling disc of goodness, served in a roadside restaurant dense with local lore, or the grim end product of a secret, sinister empire of tormented animals and unspeakable slaughtering practices? ... An icon of freedom or the quintessence of conformity?”*



AT OX, Northeast Portland’s wildly successful restaurant inspired by beef-centric Argentine grilling traditions, they still speak in awe of the way Josh Ozersky ate: pulling a beef bone to his great gaping maw and, with his front teeth, gnawing and pulling at the thin “rubber band” of fat most people leave on the plate. This is how Ozersky consumed. It was also how he wrote—in a robustly American voice, always smart but never moderate, celebrating what he loved.

But writing about food, or “enlarging on trends,” as Ozersky described his role, can be as difficult, financially and personally, as any creative pursuit. In one article, Ozersky offered a partial personal inventory: “I’ve been in a bad marriage, survived a doctoral program, suffered obsessive episodes requiring medication, lived with a girlfriend who worked as an escort, struggled to keep a business afloat, been in tax trouble...” Family, for one thing, was difficult for him. David Ozersky, his father, an underappreciated painter, died of an undetected cancer four days after reporting a backache. (“[H]e never talked about himself, but I believe he thought of his whole life as the waste product of his art,” Ozersky wrote in the *Saveur* story.) His first marriage was indeed a disaster, according to friends and Lidor, his second wife. Heavy and self-conscious about it, he nonetheless preferred very thin women—“tits on a stick,” as Lidor says. He pursued them zealously, but usually got no closer to them than a friendly zoo bear might.

In his writing, he rarely let up. If he hated something, he really hated it. He wrote: “Brisket sucks. There, I said it. It’s gigantic, it’s misshapen, and only a third of it—the deckle—is fit to eat.” On Brooklyn’s restaurants: “. . . likely to have a name like Testicle or Mutton Hut and specialize in off-cuts three days old, executed unevenly by dedicated but unsupervised young line cooks, and served with habitual insolence by ex-Suicide Girls in the flinching light of small-batch Edison bulbs.”

Given this mode, it’s not surprising that Ozersky occasionally antagonized some people in the food—for example, when he proclaimed Meatopia, a food festival he organized in San Antonio, to be the best festival in Texas. (He scheduled it for the same weekend as the venerable *Texas Monthly* barbecue festival.) And not everyone thought his literary conceits were so cute. His *Esquire* Q&A column was called “*Eat Like a Man*,” and at least one food blog, *The Braiser*, took to criticizing “his inexplicable drive to gender food consumption, often with an anti-lady bent.” One of its writers, Mariella Mosthof, ranked Ozersky’s columns on a scale of one to five “porks.” A five-porker would be a column containing no gender-

**CONTINUED ON P. 90**



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**CONTINUED FROM P. 84** specific generalizations or potshots at women. On the other hand, a column listing the things “a man doesn’t eat”—wraps, macarons, soy milk, cronuts—rated zero porks.

Ozersky became a mascot for the “lardcore” movement of macho men (and women) defining food by the staggering number of flavors, textures, and calories one can combine therein. Propping up an entire movement, Lidor says, was exhausting. And then there were the complications arising from trying to make food writing pay, and of covering a subculture in which you, yourself, are immersed.

Food writing is now where rock journalism was in the 1970s. The stakes are high—successful restaurants can beget business empires—but the commercial and social opportunities sometimes surpass the actual pay for doing the actual job. Everyone knows everyone, and relationships between writers and their subjects can become objects of scrutiny. For example, one of Ozersky’s predecessors at *Esquire*, John Mariani, took a blast from Scott Martelle in the *Los Angeles Times*, who criticized Mariani’s practice of picking the country’s “20 Best New Restaurants” while accepting free food from some of his selections. “A review based on a ‘comped’ meal, especially when the chef knows the reviewer ... raises serious questions about the reviewer’s integrity,” Martelle wrote in 2005.

In the movie *Almost Famous*, Philip Seymour Hoffman, portraying famed rock writer Lester Bangs, put it this way: “You cannot make friends with the rock stars ... they are not your friends.” But Ozersky did make friends with his world’s rock stars, and played a version of the promotional game—in large part to meet the demands of covering a global beat on a shoestring budget. On a junket to

Hong Kong or Seattle, a tourism bureau would foot the bill, with some expectations: he didn’t have to write something nice, but he did have to try everything. His approach made some sense: Ozersky didn’t consider himself a critic, but a historian of contemporary food.

His wife was, by contrast, always suspicious—of chefs, of fellow food writers, of tourism bureaus hoping to corral this big personality into “earned media” praising their city’s dining scene. Herself a former technology journalist who wrote for *Wired* and *Forbes*, Lidor dismisses food writing as the province of the rich: “Only people with trust funds can afford that life.” She says trying to keep up by paying for their own meals while writers for more-established outlets enjoyed big expense accounts nearly bankrupted them early in Ozersky’s career.

Nor did it surprise her when the food writing world turned on her new

**AT OX,  
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husband. In May 2010 Ozersky, then a contributor for Time.com, married Lidor at New York’s Empire Hotel, a wedding catered for free by some of Ozersky’s chef friends, including the baker Jim Lahey and seafood chef Ed Brown. The charitable explanation is that the writer’s friends gave him the best gift they could, because they really liked him. The less charitable explanation is that subjects Ozersky wrote about constantly saw an opportunity to curry favor. The *Village Voice*, the *Atlantic*, and food blogs small and large took him to task for the apparent ethical lapse. He was interviewed on the situation by the *New York Times*.

“It was dumb of me not to be more explicit about the fact that I did not pay for any of their delicious contributions, and I was wrong not to make





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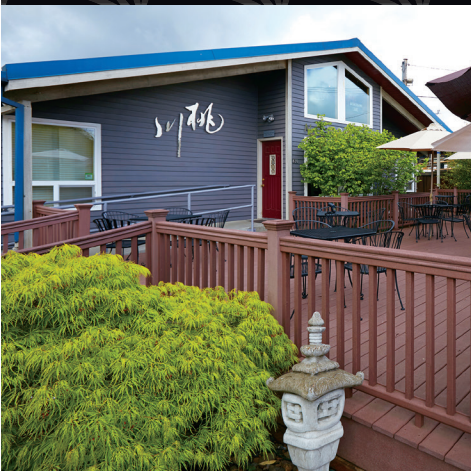
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this clear to my editor beforehand,” a chastened Ozersky wrote in an appended clarification.

Lidor is still bitter about the chefs and PR reps whom Ozersky helped along the way, and who then dropped him in the wedding controversy’s aftermath and, she feels, at other times in his career. “He was so easy to love, and he loved really easily,” Lidor says. “And there were a lot of people that were happy to use that.”

But eventually, thanks to *Esquire*, the website *Ozersky.tv*, and the dozens of food and wine shows he attended, Ozersky became a known commodity in the food world. It meant something to have him attend an event. People wanted to meet him, to give him things, and hope he said nice things about them in return.

At the same time, he had fallen out of love with New York, by then fully in its cronut phase. He seemed to know it was impossible to maintain this life, or at least had the distance to see the caricature that he had become. He and Lidor moved to Portland in late 2014.

“**||** WAS never a huge fan of his writing or his shtick. He moves to town and everyone had a hard-on for him. ‘Oh, Josh Ozersky, you have to meet this guy.’ I’m thinking, fuck Josh Ozersky. I’m like, he’s legitimate to such a small group of people.”

Jason French, chef and owner at Northeast Portland’s Ned Ludd, could be the anti-Ozersky: thin, well dressed, reserved. His restaurant does many things well, all of them in a small wood oven, few of them focused on big hunks of meat. So it was to French’s great surprise that Ozersky came to his restaurant and ordered a salad, trout, and vegetables. It was even more of a surprise when Ozersky said he was growing tired of the person people expected him to be.

“I don’t want to die of a heart attack,” Ozersky told French. “The glut-tony trip is not doing it for me. This is my lot in life. I have lost my choice in what I want to eat.”

This might *seem* like foreshadowing: a six-foot-one man who weighed 240 pounds, according to his own writing, and ate and drank for a living, destined for some kind of Keith

Richards-style superhuman endurance test or a John Belushi-style exit through excess. In fact, the seizure that killed Ozersky in Chicago came about through a lifelong condition, epilepsy, neither exacerbated nor caused by his consumption on that night or any other. He simply seized and drowned in the shower.

**PEOPLE WANTED TO MEET HIM, TO GIVE HIM THINGS, AND HOPE HE SAID NICE THINGS ABOUT THEM IN RETURN.**

If there is a tragedy to Ozersky, it is that he may have been about to break big, and to begin exploring new aspects of his prodigious talent. He didn’t dismiss vegetables as he once did. In Portland, he’d found a food town he aligned with philosophically: he liked that it was cheap, and that Portlanders were living what Brooklyn pretended to live. He loved that cooking is considered an art, and that everyone gets it, from the sous-chef to the dishwashers—that they are part of something. He was beginning to feel the pull of life’s third act—and the idea that he had to survive long enough to see his work celebrated, and maybe that the quality of his life could improve with some changes.

Even without that evolution, Ozersky leaves a legacy: a blazing course charted through a world that in other eras might have been closed to him. If he had been “a better, or at least a healthier, person,” in his words, he would never have taken this up as his life’s work. And yet for all his swagger and bombast, he became great because he stayed true to his humble first loves. He could be exacting and over-the-top. But in some ways he kept his expectations very modest, and never forgot the fat kid from South Miami: “The hamburger, at least, never lets you down.” 🍔



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