



# SOMETHIN'S GOTTA GIVE

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN IF CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED DENVER CHEF SEAN KELLY OPENS HIS VISION OF A SOPHISTICATED AND SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE RESTAURANT AND NOBODY COMES?**

**BY REBECCA LANDWEHR**

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## CELEBRATED DENVER CHEF SEAN KELLY STOOD ARMED WITH A MEAT CLEAVER, POISED TO LOP OFF A MAN'S HEAD.

It was 1997, and Kelly, along with his local-restaurant-critic victim, playfully struck the pose for the cover of *5280's* annual dining issue. And why not? Kelly's first restaurant, the Aubergine Cafe, had opened to unanimous rave reviews. This magazine had named him the town's "best chef," and on the cover he was having glossy fun with his success: He appeared trim in his white chef's coat and grinned like a guy who couldn't wait to devour life's next course.

Seven years and three restaurants later, Kelly looks like a different man. And it's not just the additional pounds around his middle and the receding hairline. The confident smile of 1997 is gone. On a fall morning, inside Somethin' Else, the restaurant he opened last September, Kelly sets the table between us. From the kitchen, he brings a small French press filled with freshly brewed coffee, a white porcelain teacup and saucer, and a matching cream-and-sugar set. Inside the sugar bowl is a tiny silver spoon. Never mind that today is a Monday, one of the two days weekly his eatery is closed, the consummate chef has carefully set a table for his guest. No cup for him. He's already had his coffee. He's been up for hours. He's anxious, stressed, and even a bit scared.

Before this storefront space in Cherry Creek was Somethin' Else, it was the site of Clair de Lune, Kelly's third restaurant. Like Aubergine, Clair de Lune earned nothing but glowing reviews, even getting national acclaim from *The New York Times*. Yet Kelly was forced to close Clair de Lune last August, two years after it opened. He couldn't fill the room. And it was – it still is – a very small room.

Forty-two-year-old Kelly is a beefy, koala-bear of a man, wearing jeans and a button-down shirt. As we talk, he sits facing the front windows, which frame a rush of traffic heading east down Sixth Avenue. Behind him is a wall, freshly painted in an earthy tone. Another wall of the restaurant is a mirror, presumably to give the cramped room the illusion of space. Kelly talks a lot, and fast. You can hear his Jersey accent when he gets agitated, like he is now, talking about the death of Clair de Lune, his passion for organic farming, the end of his run as a chef, the personal and professional sacrifices he's made, and why he's doing it all for Somethin' Else.

"I'm interested in moving Denver dining forward," an exasperated Kelly says, shrugging his shoulders. "But people have to go out and eat for it to happen. The restaurant business is as important to the city as the arts, but people will fight for the arts. In San Francisco and New York City people pick up on it and possess this inner responsibility to go out and dine. They realize they have to go out and eat at these places and support them if they're going to survive. It's like sending a check to public television." To hear Sean Kelly tell it, his future is tied to the fate of Somethin' Else, but so too is the future of dining in Denver.

**S** EAN KELLY SAW THE LIGHTS FLASHING IN HIS REAR-VIEW mirror. Next thing he knew he was busted for driving under the influence. It was the mid '80s. Kelly was a kid, the 20-year-old son of a New Jersey cop. He'd been less than a stellar high school student in his hometown of Rumson, N.J., an extremely wealthy New York suburb with pockets of working-class neighborhoods like the one where Kelly was raised. While many kids in town were attending college and aspiring chefs were enrolled in fancy culinary institutes, Kelly was working as a line cook at a local joint, Val's Tavern. Family friends gave him the break. At Val's Kelly fell in love with the fast-paced work and the lifestyle that seemed to go along with it. As Kelly puts it, "the waitresses, the money, the drinking." Then he got nailed for the DUI.

In order to regain his driver's license, which was necessary for Kelly to travel to better restaurant opportunities, he got a lawyer, paid the fees, completed the court-ordered rehab (group therapy with heroin addicts), and supplied the mandatory urine samples. The hassle, humiliation, and the depressing stories he heard in the rehab meetings, all amounted to more than enough to convince him to quit booze for good. Kelly's brother, Patrick, remembers that time as a turning point. "He told me he'd quit drinking because

### THE GHOST OF CLAIR DE LUNE

Kelly's acclaimed restaurant (below) served exquisite meals in this intimate setting. The restaurant closed in August 2004. Top right: Kelly posed for the 1997 cover of *5280's* dining issue when his Aubergine Cafe was rated the city's best restaurant. Bottom right: A photo of a young Kelly and Julia Child hangs in Somethin' Else.

he saw there were responsibilities he wasn't taking care of," says Patrick, who also lives in Denver. "The restaurant scene had carried over to his lifestyle, and work had become all about the party scene. He realized he had talent, that food was his passion and it was time to step up to the plate and do what he needed to do to be an adult and anchor his life." Sean Kelly realized that he had, as he now says, an "addictive personality," and that it was far more productive for him to be addicted to work.

He started working at a restaurant owned by one of his father's acquaintances – a convicted felon who'd served time after

getting in trouble with a Las Vegas casino, and who paid for the lawyer who represented Kelly during his DUI troubles. Under this boss, Kelly worked out of nearby Philadelphia, helping the guy manage steak houses around the country. During the course of his duties, Kelly began dating a female bartender who was attending the University of Pennsylvania. Shortly thereafter, in 1991, his girlfriend moved to Denver. Kelly came out for a visit and never left. He stayed for love, but was also immediately attracted to the town. Back on the East Coast, with its old money and its preoccupation with degrees and pedigrees, it's harder for a working-class kid who screwed off in high-school to advance, even in the kitchen. Kelly saw Denver as a good place to make a fresh start.

His start in Denver was a most inauspicious one: He manned the pizza oven at Sfuzzi in the Cherry Creek Shopping Center. On the cusp of an economic boom, Denver was flush, just beginning a 10-year run of good times in the restaurant business. Kelly bounced around a few more kitchens in town before landing at the second incarnation of Kevin Taylor's legendary Zenith. There, in less than a year, Kelly made his mark as a chef and was hired away to be the opening chef at Barolo Grill. Barolo opened big in 1992 and was a smashing success. By 1995, Kelly had established himself as a respected chef and had developed a small but devoted band of diners. With the boom at its peak, the kid from Jersey found two silent partners and opened a restaurant with a name he probably couldn't have pronounced in high school, Aubergine Cafe. And he became a star.

"At the time, everyone who worked there knew they were working at the best restaurant – for the best chef – in town," says Paul Attardi, who waited tables at Aubergine for six years. The restaurant sat 40 people and served Mediterranean cuisine. During the next seven years, Kelly garnered critical accolades from local and national press and won a legion of fans. He picked up a meat cleaver, put on a chef jacket, and posed for the cover of *5280*.

At Aubergine, Kelly could do it all his way and he quietly yet unmistakably schooled Denver on his food philosophy. As a child, Kelly would often visit his grandparents' Rumson, N.J., garden. He, along with his two brothers and sister, were expected to work on the farm. After the tomatoes were picked, young Kelly would sit on a stool





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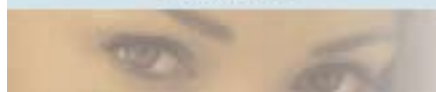
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in his grandmother's kitchen and watch her cook. Everything was picked fresh, prepared carefully, and enjoyed in warm, intimate community. And so it went at Aubergine. As the visible owner, whenever possible chef Kelly used fresh, locally grown organic vegetables and served all-natural meats.

"That guy was so into organics and freshness, it was his life philosophy," says Joseph Wrede, who worked for Kelly at Aubergine in 1995. Wrede is now the owner of Joseph's Table in Taos, N.M., and in 2000 was named one of *Food & Wine's* best new chefs. He says Kelly is a Denver pioneer of a "New American food revolution."

"He was pushing that idea of organics before anyone else there. He imprinted me with a belief system that I still follow."

## HE THINKS THERE SHOULD BE A NATIONAL HOLIDAY WHEN EVERY AMERICAN READS *FAST FOOD NATION*, THE BEST SELLER THAT PUTS A MAGNIFYING GLASS TO THE U.S. FAST FOOD INDUSTRY AND ITS IMPACT ON AMERICAN WORKERS. "THEY SHOULD TEACH IT IN THE SCHOOLS LIKE SEX EDUCATION."

**T**O HEAR KELLY TALK, AMERICANS are eating themselves into a national disaster. For Kelly, cooking is not just about the plate that's delivered to the table. It's about community between the farmer, the chef, the server, and the diners. Meals are meant to be prepared, savored, and enjoyed the way they were in his grandparents' kitchen. "That's where I learned how things should taste," he says. "I thought a tomato should taste like a tomato from my grandfather's garden." He believes that when restaurants are run right, healthy food is acquired in a socially responsible way – from local farmers – and served in an environment where the shared experience creates positives that transcend a single dining experience and ripple throughout the community. He thinks there should be a national holiday when every American reads *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser's best seller that puts a magnifying glass to the

U.S. fast food industry and its impact on American workers. "They should teach it in the schools like sex education."

His philosophy guides his life away from the kitchen. Kelly lives small and simply. Aside from his mortgage, and a single American Express card (the only card that won't let you carry a balance), he pays as he goes. He doesn't have cable and has made it this far without learning how to use a computer. A man of such standards – the French-press coffee and porcelain teacup were not necessary for our chat – and rigorous expectations can be a difficult boss. Stories of Kelly unloading on staffers are the stuff of legend in Denver restaurant industry. At Aubergine, so goes one story, Kelly regularly chewed out employees in the walk-in freezer. Yet Wrede

doesn't remember any such Kelly contretemps. "I don't even think we had a freezer there," he says. "Sean was all about 'fresh in fresh out.' Besides, he's an intense man, he didn't need to yell, he would just look at you – that would be enough. His standards were known and you didn't want to disappoint him."

At Aubergine, Kelly consciously extricated himself from the kitchen and moved into the role of businessman. Largely because being a chef meant long, hard hours, and that was time he'd rather spend at home. He'd married Randi Smith, the girlfriend he had followed from the East Coast, now a professor at the University of Denver. And in 1998, the couple became parents of twins (a boy and a girl). They had been planning to start a family, but twins were a surprise. "Sean realized the amount of work and energy that goes into kids, and it was a decision he thought long and hard about," says his brother, Patrick. "When they found out about the twins, he took it seriously, he knew it was going to be even harder to juggle everything."

The new father stopped serving lunch at Aubergine and structured the business so he could spend more time at home. Besides, lunch didn't bring in a lot of money anyway. It's purpose was to bait customers with lunch and hook them for dinner. And by 1998, many diners had indeed been hooked; the cult of Kelly had reached a critical mass.

"That place was a tight ship," says Attardi. "He didn't have to be there all the time cooking every dish. He trained everybody, and he stepped away to spend more time at home. He could get there later in the morning and leave at eight, and there was never a problem in the kitchen. Never a problem on the floor."

With something of a routine established at home and at Aubergine, Kelly tried to parlay his success into a second restaurant, an Uptown spot called The Biscuit. Kelly thought it'd be relatively easy money – open a nice coffee shop to serve a burgeoning Uptown neighborhood. But The Biscuit was on a one-way street that went the wrong way for crucial rush-hour customers. The Biscuit lost money from its January 2000 opening and grinded to a halt in less than a year. The Biscuit took its toll on Kelly. It bled money and robbed him of precious family time. One month after he closed The Biscuit, in January 2001, Kelly sold Aubergine. "I had to take a break," he says.

At the time of the sale, Aubergine was a profitable restaurant. It was at the height of its popularity, with a year left on its lease. That made it the perfect time to sell, because the buyers would get an established business with rents negotiated years ago. Kelly also knew if he stayed at the location he'd want to put in at least \$40,000 of improvements. In other words, he got out while the getting was great. (Only a few months later came the devastating 9/11 attacks, an event that ended that 10-year-run of good times in the Denver restaurant business.) In retrospect, though, Aubergine was a golden era for Kelly. "I didn't realize how lucky I had it then," he says.

**T**HE MONEY FROM THE AUBERGINE sale was like an inheritance from the rich uncle Kelly never had. But it wasn't enough to retire – not even close. He couldn't sit still for long, and his addictive personality pushed him back to dreaming of another restaurant. On a yellow legal pad, he came up with Clair de Lune. It was fine dining, fancier than Aubergine. He cooked

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every dish himself. The menu depended on what was fresh. He had local farmers growing heirloom seeds especially for him. What they didn't supply he would troll the farmers' markets himself to find. "Sean's a no-bullshit kind of guy," says Lyle Davis, owner of Pastures of Plenty Farm in Boulder and Big Bang Catering. Davis was also one of the founders of Alfalfa's Markets, the groundbreaking natural food grocer based out of Boulder. Kelly bought vegetables from Davis on the last day of Clair de Lune. "There's a lot of lip service in this industry and I can say there are only two people around here who continually support these principles – Teri Rippetto [chef-owner of Potager] and Sean Kelly."

The Regulars are the people who will spend money for fine dining even on a Wednesday night and keep these establishments in business. Or maybe they'll show up and order a late dinner at the bar on a Friday night – but they're not just showing up for birthdays and anniversaries. "When I was cooking at Zenith, a Regular was someone who came twice a week," says Yontz. "At Vega, a Regular was someone who showed up once a month. And we were really happy to see him."

Jeff Von Stein and his wife, Kathleen, are Regulars. They rotate between four core restaurants: Mizuna, Luca D'Italia, Potager, and Somethin' Else. "We probably go out two or three times a week," says Jeff, the director

**TO PURGE THE GHOST OF CLAIR DE LUNE, HE'S REDECORATED THE PLACE: NEW PAINT, NEW TABLES. BUT THE BIGGEST CHANGE IS THAT LITTLE PLASTIC BOX ATTACHED TO A PHONE CORD, NEXT TO THE CASH REGISTER. "IT'S HARD TO LOOK AT THAT CREDIT CARD MACHINE AND THINK I DIDN'T SELL OUT."**

To manage everything his way, Clair de Lune was small, very small. And, unlike nearly every restaurant in town, it didn't take credit cards. Working-class Kelly saw that credit-card terminal as a big, fat, lazy, silent partner sucking away half his profits. Fine-dining restaurants typically run on profit margins of 6 to 8 percent. Credit card companies generally take a 3 percent cut of total revenue charged to the cards. Kelly's theory may have sounded reasonable, but in reality, dinner at Clair de Lune usually ran about \$120 – without wine. Who carries around that kind of cash?

The bulk of Kelly's business was special occasions. And according to Sean Yontz, Kelly's former Zenith boss, "No restaurant can survive on special occasions." Yontz ought to know. He closed his own fine-dining establishment, Vega, in May 2004. Before that, Yontz was 5280's chef of the year in 2002, while at Tamayo. He has seen a change on the dining landscape since he came up through the ranks in the '90s. He sums it up in two words: The Regulars.

of operational finances at 360 Networks in Broomfield. "What we think about when choosing a restaurant is the quality of food and the service. At some of these places we've known the servers for years and they treat you like family. These places feel good." The Von Steins were Regulars at Aubergine and have continued their patronage of its successor, Mizuna.

The Von Stein's are especially loyal to Kelly. Not only because of his restaurants' food and service, but the personal relationship and community he cultivates. It's the sort of community relationships Kelly shared in his grandmother's kitchen. One night, Kathleen was eating dinner at Clair de Lune with a friend. Kelly saw her and asked where her husband was, and when she replied that he was at cooking school, Kelly said, "Cooking school? Tell Jeff to bring his knives down here and I'll show him how to cut vegetables." Jeff took him up on it; every other Saturday for about six months, Kelly taught him the basics of his cooking. "I didn't pay him, and I mostly got in the way," Jeff says with a laugh.

"Clair de Lune wasn't doing well during that time, and he only did this out of the goodness of his heart."

Consider the effect the Regulars have on the restaurant business. In the year ended October 2004, 140 new restaurants opened in Denver, according to the department of environmental health, yet nearly as many closed, with 110 recorded. Kelly fell into both of those stats. A successful restaurant is a three-legged stool; all the legs must be sturdy and stable. There's the front of the house, the kitchen, and the cash register. A busy restaurant is a happy restaurant. With the Regulars, the front of the house has a palpable energy that invigorates the house. The servers are bustling and diners know they've come to a cool place. Money changes hands and everyone leaves happy. Without the Regulars, a restaurant is a quiet place. No one is making money, and there's a lot of time to stand around and bitch. Since Kelly opened Somethin' Else, it has vacillated precariously between busy and quiet.

There's no doubt Sean Kelly knows how to make the kitchen work. But he's never been a front-of-the-house guy. He's not comfortable on the bustling restaurant floor slapping customers' backs. He's never been Mr. Personality and he can't fake it. He'd never make it as a TV chef. Plus, simple things like ordering wine are a hassle for him as he doesn't drink. He's always had his head over the burners, working with his back to the dining room. Now, however, with his back against the wall and his family's livelihood at stake, Kelly has been forcing himself to change as much as he can in order to make Somethin' Else work.

There's his wardrobe. "I need new clothes," Kelly says with a mix of exasperation and embarrassment. "For 25 years all I've worn are these stupid black-and-white checkered pants with greasy T-shirts. I need some new pants, but I don't even have time to go shopping." To purge the ghost of Clair de Lune, he's redecorated the place: new paint, new tables. But the biggest change is that little plastic box attached to a phone cord, next to the cash register. "It's hard to look at that credit card machine and think I didn't sell out," he says. "But I have bigger responsibilities now."

One by one, Kelly is confronting the pitfalls that befell him at Clair de Lune, and he's making changes. Couldn't get a reservation at Clair de Lune? He doesn't even take them at Somethin' Else. Thought Clair de Lune was too pricey? At Somethin' Else, you control how much you spend. Order a glass of wine and a salad and no one will scoff.

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And, of course, Somethin' Else takes credit cards. "I lost money on The Biscuit, I lost money on Clair de Lune; I can't afford to lose money on this," he explains. It wasn't easy, but Kelly made these changes because he believes this is the restaurant Denver wants. He believes it's a restaurant that can succeed and a restaurant his family can swallow. And besides, what else would he do to cover the time left on his lease?

However, there are two things he refuses to change. First, there's the food. He won't give in on that one. "I don't feel that I've compromised with the food," Kelly says. "It's the same menu, just arranged a little differently." Indeed, diners who enjoyed Claire de Lune will note that although the menu at Somethin' Else looks different, the food is pure Kelly. They'll taste the locally grown fresh ingredients, served in the Mediterranean dishes. The roasted almonds and famous Caesar salad à la Aubergine are back. If you look, the fruit de mer from Clair de Lune is there too, you just order it differently. Regular Kathleen Von Stein is love with a new item on the menu, Kelly's blue cheese fondue with homemade potato chips. "They are heaven," she says.

The other point on which Kelly refuses to budge is his commitment to staying out of the kitchen. Somethin' Else is still Kelly's menu, but the cooking is compliments of Seth Black, a longtime Kelly employee. Kelly had made it clear that Clair de Lune would be the last place he cooked. He decided he wouldn't spend that much time in the kitchen away from his family. Now he will become a restaurateur, and hopefully that will be enough to make his dreamy crusade a profitable reality.

**I F YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT, THEN A BIG CITY** is defined at least in part by its restaurants. San Francisco is groovy, pricey, cutting-edge food from Alice Waters' Chez Panisse. New York is Rao's, the Italian restaurant peppered with mobsters and moguls. Los Angeles is The Ivy, with movie stars eating salad. Right now, Denver is a \$35 plate of meat with a few \$8 side dishes of creamed spinach, broccoli with hollandaise, au gratin potatoes. The Mile-High City is home to 17 steak houses, and most are outposts of national chains.

"I don't get it," says Mike Huff, of Adeg Partners, which owns Adeg, Mirepoix, and Table 6. "People complain about the prices at Table 6, but we give them a plate with a protein, a vegetable, and a starch.

The steak houses charge more for a plate of meat, and you have to pay even more for your side dishes."

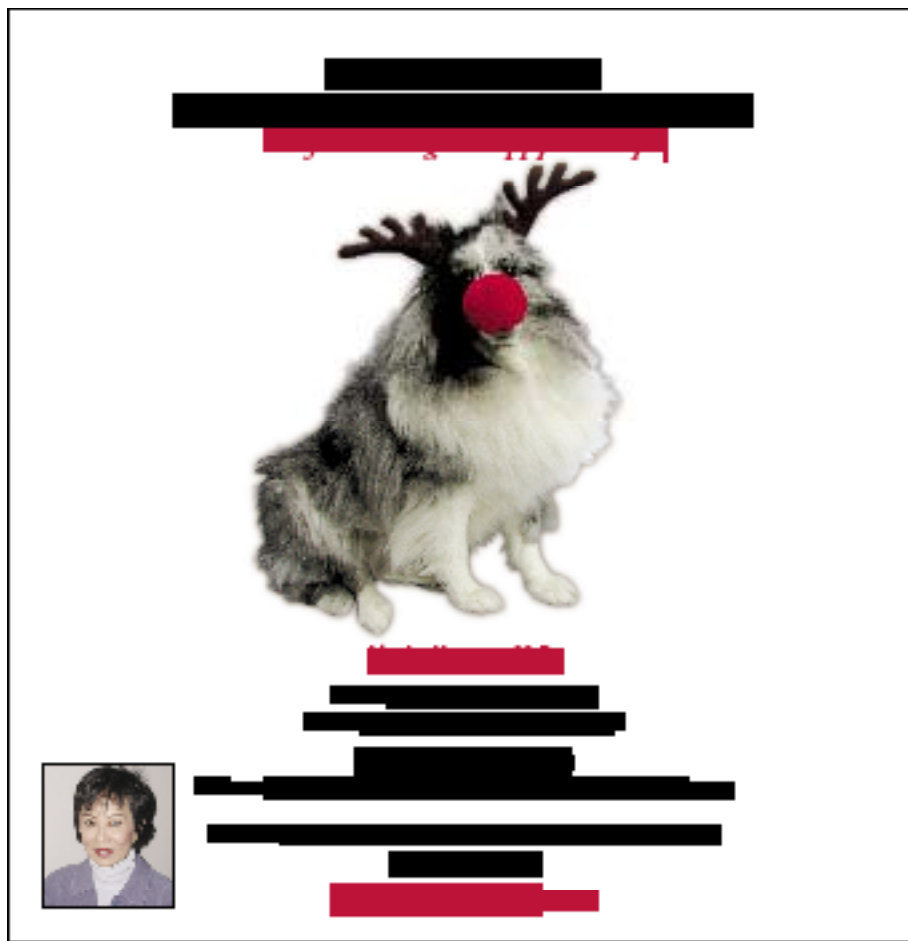
But Kelly thinks Denver is more than a cow town hooked on cows. He believes there are people in Denver who are of his same mind, people who see the community value in springing for dinner at a local restaurant on a Wednesday night. There's a lot of lip service given to socially responsible principles like Kelly's. In order for Somethin' Else to succeed, Kelly needs Regulars who are willing to put their money where their mouths are. "We're 20 people a night away from a good life," he says. "But until then it's pretty scary." He's read his good press, been stopped by strangers complimenting his cooking. He also knows that "if everyone who said they loved Clair de Lune actually went there, it wouldn't have closed." Maybe Somethin' Else will demonstrate once and for all if Denver really wants something else.

**O N THE AUGUST DAY, WHEN** I first met with Sean Kelly, he had just heard some news that saddened him: Julia Child had died. He told me about collaborating

with Child once on a benefit dinner for Planned Parenthood at Barolo Grill in 1994. Instead of hyping his connection to this legend, he recalled a simple story of early-morning phone calls to the Massachusetts office of Child. It was before the advent of e-mail (not that either one of them would have known how to use it), and Kelly was under instructions to phone Child at 6:30 a.m. her time, or 4:30 a.m. in Denver. "I'd work till late at night and come home and set my alarm, but I'd never sleep on those nights - I was terrified I'd oversleep," he recalled. When the morning came and he made that call, "There was nothing like hearing her answer the phone in that voice, 'Hellllloooo!' It was so exciting because it was really her, and I every time I called I never got over it. It was great."

Child once said, "You don't have to cook fancy or complicated masterpieces - just good food from fresh ingredients." There's a picture of Kelly and Julia Child inside Somethin' Else. Kelly hung it above a wine hutch. Maybe the Regulars will notice. ▲

REBECCA LANDWEHR is Senior Editor at 5280. Not known for her cooking, she prefers to make reservations. She usually pays with her debit card.



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