

The cook and the heart of S.F.'s restaurant world

On New Year's Eve, a young cook named Eric Ehler died. And then he came back. Now he and the restaurant community are grappling with what comes next for the city's culinary workforce.

By Jonathan Kauffman | March 23, 2018

On New Year's Day of 2018, Eric Ehler woke up to find himself strapped to a strange bed.

Before he could start thrashing, his mother — why wasn't she in Arizona? — leaned over him. "You experienced cardiac arrest at work on Dec. 31 in the morning," she said. "You died."





Eric Ehler stands for a portrait at Mister Jiu's in San Francisco, on Wednesday, March 21, 2018. The 29-year-old cook made a full recovery after suffering a heart attack at work. | Rosa Furneaux, Special To The Chronicle

Here he was: 29, a sous chef at Mister Jiu's in Chinatown, a cook and skateboarder, dead and alive again. His teeth hurt. There weren't enough of them. Same with his memories of the last three days.

Meanwhile, his friends, who were crowded into the waiting room at California Pacific Medical Center, trying to figure out how to help pay his medical bills, weren't sure how *much* of Eric would come back.

It's hard not to read what happened to Eric Ehler — his improbable cardiac arrest and recovery, the way the restaurant industry rushed to cocoon him in support and money — as a parable for professional cooking in San Francisco today, with its tectonic stresses and the friendships they forge. Even today, Ehler's co-workers and friends are combing over the sequence of events, hunting for some moral.

Ehler, too, is asking himself what he's supposed to learn from this experience, as he grinds his way back toward normalcy. For the moment, he's giddy he made it back at all.

Mostly, he just wants to cook.

Eric Ehler rides his bike to work at Mister Jiu's. Despite suffering cardiac arrest at work, Ehler still cycles to the restaurant in Chinatown most mornings. | Rosa Furneaux, Special To The Chronicle



Photo: Rosa Furneaux, Special To The Chronicle

By age 29, Eric Ehler had been cooking for a dozen years, but the effects of 80-hour weeks, late nights and stuff-and-run meals didn't seem to have taken a toll on his body. He was still slim and straight-shouldered, possessed of some internal motor that propelled his speech in combustion-engine spurts.

Ehler grew up in Holstein, a small town in western Iowa, adopted into a family of military vets and church-every-Sunday Methodists. Judy and Dave Ehler filled the house with a cacophony of children, both their own and foster children, three or four of whom lived with them at any one time.

Judy describes 10-year-old Eric as a driven and focused child. "When he wanted to do something, he set his mind in every aspect on getting that job done," she says now.

At first, that applied to the skateboard. Ehler would study Tony Hawk videos then head outdoors to practice for hours, shuttling between the TV and the driveway until he could replicate all the micromovements that turn a quick step-back and a pop into an ollie, then ornamenting his ollies with 360-degree spins and kick flips.

At age 17, he left home to attend culinary school at a community college in Cedar Rapids and found cooking wasn't much different than skating. He'd pick up a new dish, make it over and over again until he got it right, then make it again another thousand times, trying each time to do it faster or better.

In 2008, his best friend Mason was killed in a car accident. The death sent him reeling out of his teenagerdom. He realized that he had to leave Iowa behind, too. He packed a few bags of clothes and his knives and flew to San Francisco in search of a kitchen job.

Like most journeymen cooks, Ehler's career took him from kitchen to kitchen in the ensuing decade, not to mention a 2011 pop-up called Seoul Patch (Ehler was born in

On days off he'd skateboard between his old jobs, seeing friends or spending the day with fellow restaurant folks mowing through bowls of noodles or hamburgers or bottles of rosé. Or — which is even more telling — he'd work some more.

“If you're short-staffed, if you need anything, he'll bend over backward to lend a hand,” says Liza Shaw, former chef of A16 and Merigan Sub Shop and a good friend. When she was opening her sandwich shop, Ehler would volunteer shifts and fill in occasionally afterward.

“In the chef world he just seems to understand everything,” says Luke Chappell, owner of Luke's Local, a grocery and prepared-food delivery service whose kitchen Ehler ran for two years. “He's got that really forward-thinking mind but understands the full business.” More than that, Chappell adds, Ehler instituted a daily family meal at Luke's. It wasn't just great for staff retention. It was just how Ehler wanted to be in the workplace: part of a crew.

“Cooking food is my favorite thing in the entire world,” Ehler says.

Yet like most of the cooks he knows, the toil of the job, not to mention the wages, took him to some dark places. The restaurant world produces two different types of stress. The good stress he loved: getting crushed on the line, body and mind swallowed up in movement. “Nothing's funner than getting destroyed on a Friday night with all your buddies. You're going down and digging yourself out of that hole,” Ehler says.

But the bad stress was inescapable. There were nights when fish orders never arrived, when the cooks arrived at the start of service underprepped, when mistakes threw the whole line off and the yelling could send the entire crew home in guilt and anger, or to the bar to scour the shift away with gallons of beer.

In October, Ehler joined his first Michelin-starred kitchen when Brandon Jew hired him to be a sous chef at Mister Jiu's, with the intention of having Ehler eventually run the



Eric Ehler prepares trout at Mr Jiu's restaurant in San Francisco's Chinatown, on March 21, 2018. | Rosa Furneaux, Special To The Chronicle

It was exactly the kind of new project he loved to plunge into. At the same time, taking a new job at the highest-profile restaurant he'd ever worked at, spending 80 hours in the kitchen, overseeing private dinners and testing new dishes seemed to truss him up in stress, which tightened as the holiday season barreled toward New Year's Eve.

"It wasn't the most stress I've been under in my life by a large margin," Ehler says, "but maybe all the stress in my life led up to that moment."

The night before New Year's Eve — or rather, 1:30 in the morning on Dec. 31 — Jew, Ehler and three other cooks were finishing up a 14-hour shift prepping dishes for Mister Jiu's prix-fixe holiday dinner.

Jew says he was blanching tiny rice dumplings by the dozens. Ehler had just finished portioning out hundreds of fillets of black cod. Standing at one of the prep tables in the middle of the kitchen, he cracked open a beer to celebrate the achievement.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jew says, he saw Ehler's knees buckle and his body fall forward, his face cracking against the floor. "For a split second I thought, 'He's being dramatic, he's just exhausted,'" Jew says. "But he was face down. So I ran over there, and he was starting to bleed from his mouth because he hit the ground so hard. He was making a really strange sound. I think he was just trying to breathe."

The strange noise stopped all too soon. As one cook called 911, the others rushed toward Ehler, whose body was turning blue. Jew says he freaked out — not just out of concern for his employee but because he felt impotent not knowing what to do.

Another cook stayed on the phone with the 911 operator, following instructions for rudimentary CPR. *Press on the chest, one, two, three. Hold his nose and force air into his mouth.* At 1:30 in the morning, with deserted streets, it took just six minutes for paramedics to arrive and take over with a defibrillator. It took two shocks with the paddles to start him breathing again.

But he didn't wake up.

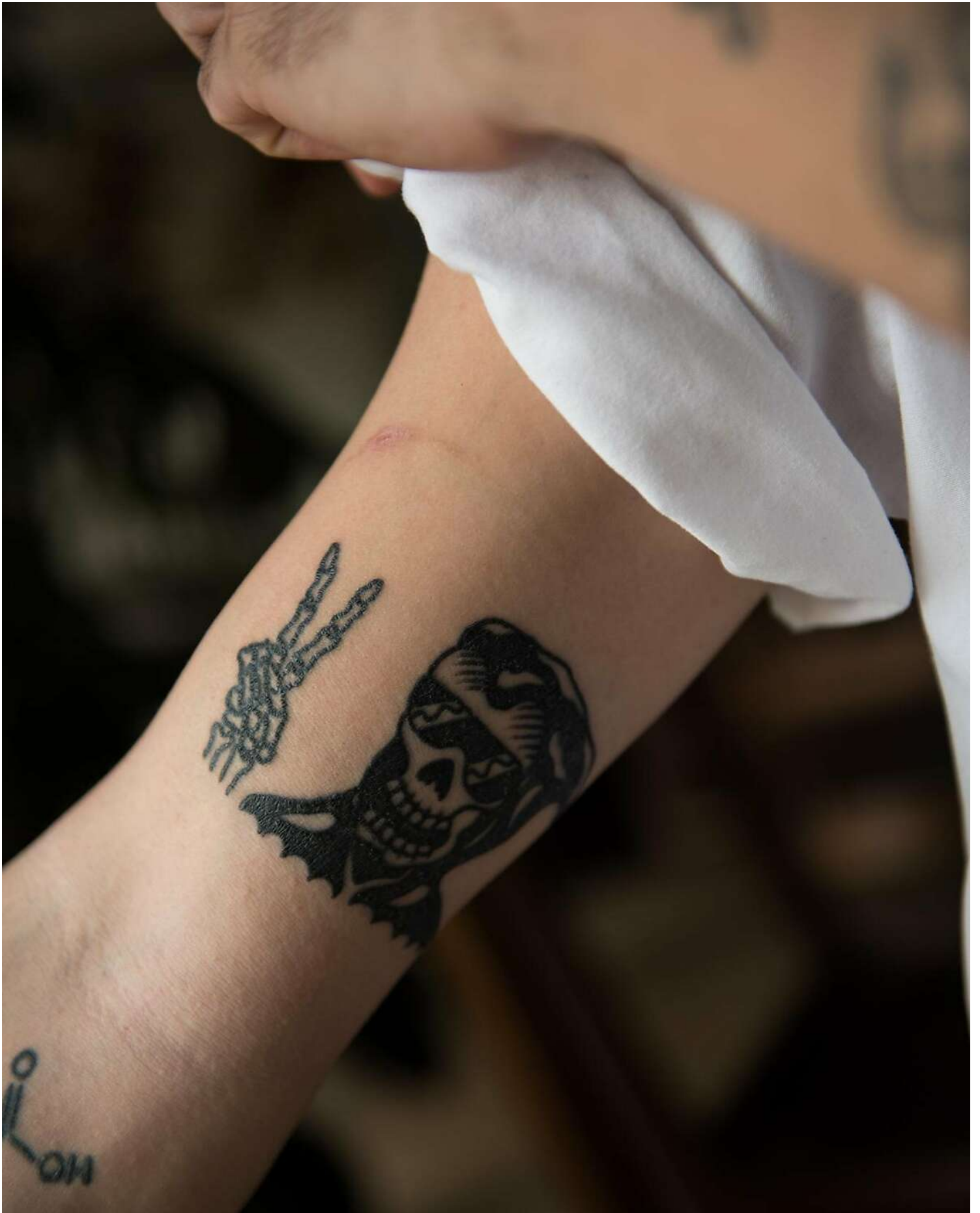
Half an hour later, Valerie Luu, co-owner of Rice Paper Scissors and one of Ehler's closest friends, awoke on the couch at her mother's house in Santa Clara to see several missed calls on her phone from Jew's wife, Anna Lee. She called the Jews back and learned that she was Ehler's emergency contact, and that he'd had a sudden cardiac

“I remember getting in my car, listening to a James Blake song come on and thinking, is this going to be the soundtrack to something bad?” Luu says later. “It was scary and lonely.” She got on the highway, telling the back seat of her car, *Eric, you better not be dead, don't be here.*

Even as she was getting dressed to drive to San Francisco, Luu had shot off emails and texts to anyone she thought might be awake in the middle of the night. At the hospital, the flurry of messages and calls increased: Eric's had a cardiac arrest. Do you know how to get in touch with his parents?

It took four hours, three friends, some “deep Googling” and even a call to the police department in Lake Havasu City in Arizona, where Dave and Judy Ehler were spending the winter. Finally Luu placed a call that Judy answered.

The Ehlers calculated that it would take them just as long to drive as it would to fly, and set out on a 10-hour trip. “I could feel them going across Google Maps,” Luu says. They arrived in the early evening, just as Mister Jiu's was roaring to life, 150 diners celebrating what a crew of traumatized cooks could not.





Eric Ehler displays his new tattoo, which he got after suffering cardiac arrest at work at Mister Jiu's. | Rosa Furneaux, Special To The Chronicle

“They were very calm,” Luu marveled when Eric’s parents arrived at the hospital, lugging in a bag of snacks for their son’s friends who had camped out in the hospital.

It was the worst day of my life, Judy Ehler counters.

In its annual survey of restaurant workplace injuries, the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics does not track cardiac arrests.

Indeed, of the 71,700 injury or illness events reported by the food service industry in 2016, 98.2 percent were traumatic injuries such as sprains, cuts and burns. Just 160 incidents involved a loss of consciousness not related to heat.

However, a large body of research has tracked the more general effect of work stresses — long hours, economic insecurity, family-work conflicts — on health. For example, a 2015 meta-analysis published in *Current Cardiology Reports* analyzed 27 studies of 600,000 workers in the United States, Japan and Europe and calculated that those who experienced long hours and higher job stress were 10 to 40 percent more likely to suffer from heart disease and stroke.

In his new book, “Dying for a Paycheck,” Stanford Graduate School of Business Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer estimates that such stress-related illness costs employers \$300 billion in lost productivity every year. “Workplace environments in the United States may be responsible for 120,000 excess deaths a year — which would make workplaces the fifth



Eric Ehler puts his shoes on at the end of his shift at Mr Jiu Jiu in San Francisco on March 21, 2018. He finished his fourteen-hour shift at 1.15 AM. | Rosa Furneaux, Special To The Chronicle

The restaurant industry is fueled by adrenaline — the good stress and the bad — and the people who fall in love with it stick with it and tend to ride that adrenaline wherever it takes them. Sometimes that means drug abuse and alcoholism. Sometimes that means burnout.

In Ehler's case, no one, including his doctors, can say whether Ehler rode his own adrenaline into cardiac arrest.

During the time Ehler was in a coma, Judy said she prayed over and over again: Please let him not be brain-damaged. The flow of oxygen to his brain had stopped for two full minutes before the defibrillators shocked him back to life.

But from the moment he awoke, Ehler recovered at a miraculous pace. The doctors moved him out of the ICU on Jan. 3 and on Jan. 5 implanted a cardioverter defibrillator. They inserted a small, flat, hard device under his left armpit and snaked a wire under the skin to the center of his chest, which would deliver a shock if his heartbeat stopped. In the absence of any test results indicating a cause for the arrest, the doctors told him, if it happened once, it will happen again.

The recovery was so quick that the hospital sent him home on Jan. 8. It took no more than a day for Ehler to get antsy. He talked about taking a trip to relax, but the doctors had forbidden him from driving for six weeks, and he couldn't fly until he got a certificate for the defibrillator implant. Ehler sharpened all the knives in the house and invited friends over to cook for them. The itch only increased.

So, 10 days after he was brought back from death, Ehler went back to work.





Eric Ehler prepares sausages at the end of his shift at Mr Jiu's in San Francisco on March 21, 2018. | Rosa Furneaux, Special To The Chronicle

His boss, Jew, demanded to talk to Ehler's doctors, who said a few weeks of limited hours would be fine. Then he spoke to Dave and Judy Ehler. "I can't have it on my conscience if this is something you don't want your son to do," he told them. "I can't change the job. The job is going to be what it demands."

Judy Ehler knew they couldn't stop their son. "It's kind of like the skateboarding," she says. "You hold your breath and say a prayer and hope he doesn't get hurt. He's a young man with a life of his own and he wants to live it. That's his personality and I won't stifle it."

On Monday, Jan. 15, all the tables in the second-story dining room at Mister Jiu's were cleared away. Paper streamers dangled from the ceiling like vines. The large open kitchen was turned into an impromptu buffet, and the line stretched out past the bar, out the front door and halfway down the block.

The GoFundMe account that Valerie Luu set up while Ehler was still in the hospital raised \$27,100 toward his medical expenses. Would it be enough? Even as he was blarily recovering, the cook's friends — who called their group text thread "the Miracle Boy Support Group" — were organizing a replacement New Year's Eve party and potluck for Ehler that would mirror the fundraiser he'd helped organize in 2017 for victims of a fire in Chinatown.

line, while others offered drinks and silent-auction prizes. Someone recruited a DJ and a lion-dance team to perform. Tickets sold out days before the event. Another \$17,000 was raised.

To edge one's way through the room that night, paper plate in hand, was to realize how small the Bay Area's high-end restaurant world is. *Wait, you're here? And you?* Luu says she'd been bugging Ehler for years to bring all his disparate groups of friends together for a party, and all it took was his cardiac arrest to do it.





Eric Ehler stuffs dumplings at the end of his shift at Mr Jiu in San Francisco on March 21, 2018. | Rosa Furneaux, Special To The Chronicle

Ehler showed up midway through the event with newly fitted false teeth that caused him agony. He couldn't eat any of the food people were stuffing into his mouth, even the cheeseburger soup — an Iowa specialty he lovingly talked up to Californians — the Mister Jiu's staff had made him.

"I have to say, it was like my funeral," Ehler says. When do you get to see 300 of your friends come together, just to be with you? He may have come late, but after the party shut down he and some of the Miracle Boy Support Group went out for karaoke.

Ehler wasn't just lucky to be recovering so quickly. He was lucky to have a boss willing to host a fundraiser, not to mention full health insurance and paid sick days, courtesy of San Francisco city laws.

Now several months after his cardiac arrest, Ehler says he's feeling "cheeky" about the experience. He feels a responsibility to live, and live jubilantly, for himself as well as his friend who died a decade ago. Mason is memorialized in a tattoo that covers his left forearm, where he can see it every time he grabs a pan. Last month, Ehler got a new tattoo, high on his right bicep: a skull with an Elvis pompadour and sunglasses throwing the two-fingered peace sign. *Peace, dude*, it's saying. Or maybe *peace out*. At least for now.

The chunk of metal sewn underneath his skin has only recently stopped hurting. The process of implanting four new front teeth will take a few more months. Then there are

finished, he can't pass it along to someone else.

How long should he cook on the line? Someday, he'd like to open a diner, and he wants to do it in San Francisco, where all his friends live, and where an entire industry showed up to help a man come back from the dead. Is that even a possibility?

"Restaurants just have to change," Ehler says now. "I love the long hours, the competitiveness, the heat of the kitchen. It's just not something you can do for a long time. There (should be) no reason why, if you're a cook, you can't be a cook forever."

Because he didn't have to take months off from work, the money that San Francisco raised has fully covered the stack of bills with triple-zero figures he has accrued. There may be enough extra, in fact, to put toward a new cause: Convincing restaurants to train their staff in CPR.

The San Francisco Health Department requires restaurant workers to train in safe food handling. "I feel like it should be a higher priority for us to also know how to do CPR, the Heimlich maneuver, those kinds of things," Jew says. "There are enough people coming through the restaurant for it to be highly likely for something to happen."

According to Mike Jacobs, manager for the specialty systems of care for Alameda County Emergency Services, only 30 percent of sudden cardiac arrests happen outside the house, but when one does, a stranger who knows CPR can make a huge difference. "Since about 1985 there have been good published documentation that CPR near doubles cardiac arrest survival rate," Jacobs says. "Anywhere between 25 and 50 percent. It's absolutely huge."

On March 12, Jew and Ehler stood in a room full of local chefs and announced their intention to raise money and offer CPR trainings for restaurant workers.

the problems in our restaurants and do something great.”

In the meantime, he's back to 80-hour weeks at Mister Jiu's, at least until the lounge opens later this spring.

He knows he should be trying for a better balance.

He knows it makes his friends and family mad.

But, he says, “I don't know what I'd be doing otherwise.”

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