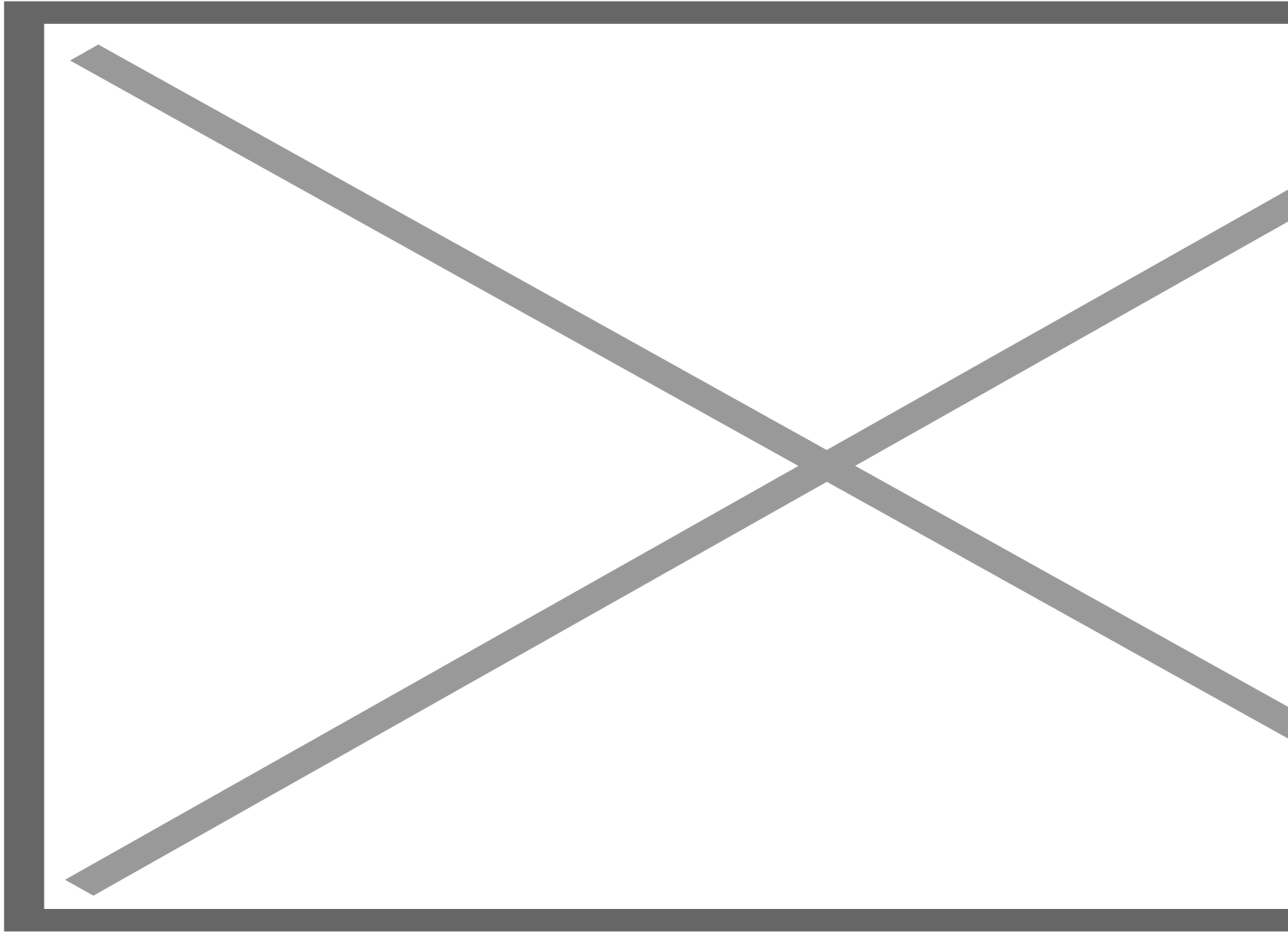


Carmy Berzatto's will to change

The protagonist of *The Bear* wants to believe that art and excellence don't require trauma and abuse.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue



Ebon Moss-Bachrach, Ayo Edebiri, and and Jeremy Allen White in *The Bear* (Courtesy of FX Networks / Hulu)

In its second season, the television show *The Bear* (created by Christopher Storer; streaming on Hulu) aired an extended episode in the chaotic home of the Berzatto family on Christmas Eve as abusive, alcoholic matriarch Donna (Jamie Lee Curtis) attempts to prepare a traditional feast of the seven fishes. It is a breathtaking hour of television, generating the same anxiety in the viewer that it depicted in the claustrophobic rooms, the frantic camera movements, and the volume of the conversation rising with the blood alcohol content. Characters yell, bicker, sooth, cajole, and talk over each other, punctuating their discontents with fork throwing and a dramatic vehicular incursion. The show's main protagonist, Carmy (Jeremy Allen White), spends most of the episode pummeled by his family's anger and recriminations. I felt exactly how he looks, wide-eyed and shell-shocked,

helpless to stem the tide but unable to look away.

The Bear's first season followed Carmy's return to Chicago after his older brother Mikey (Jon Bernthal) took his own life, leaving the family's sandwich shop—The Beef—in disarray. A world-class chef who has already racked up accolades, Carmy arrives back home grieving his brother, psychologically broken by a sadistic boss, and looking for a new start. Part prodigal son, part conquering hero, Carmy is greeted with ambivalence by the friends and family he left behind for the big-city pretensions of haute cuisine. In the Christmas Eve episode, a pregnant family member is suffering from nausea and asks for a Sprite. Since there is none on hand, Carmy offers to make his own from scratch. His family looks at him with disdain and disbelief—ordinary people don't just "make Sprite." But this is how Carmy approaches the chaos of his family and the world: he breaks it down into its component parts, discovers the secret of how it works, and tries to put it back together again.

Carmy tries to apply this technique to his new management of The Beef, a hole-in-the-wall pit of chaos, staffed by misfits and stragglers, none of whom have any training in a kitchen. He introduces disciplined cooking lines and service stations, orderly prep and timed dishes. Most of the first season is a pitched battle between the creativity of high kitchen discipline and the sloppy comradery of a dive bar, between elite knowledge and street knowledge, between the kid Carmy was raised to be and the chef he has tried to become. By the time we get to the second season we understand why Carmy might have been driven to work in a high-stress, high-stakes profession with cruel and capricious bosses: as a means of reenacting and trying to repair the same dynamics in his high-stress, high-trauma family of origin. Only now that he has his own kitchen, he is the one with the power to pass on the same trauma to his kitchen family or try to break the chain.

Season two was a nearly perfect season of television because it performed its own culinary magic, stripping the show down to its composite parts so we can understand how they work. Most of the episodes follow individual kitchen staff on their own transformative journeys, while they wait for the restaurant to transform from The Beef into The Bear.

Two years later, I still think about scenes from this season: unemployed middle-aged mom turned line cook Tina (Liza Colón-Zayas) cleaning her knives in culinary school, letting the rigors of discipline free her to new creativity. Or Marcus (Lionel Boyce), a grill master who nurtures dreams of being a pastry chef, discovering a new way to be an artist (and a Black man) as he walks the canals of Copenhagen, where he has been sent to apprentice in a world-class kitchen. And I sat on the edge of my seat during the seven fishes episode, feeling like I was staring into the gaping wound of Carmy's soul, which only made his small steps toward love and normalcy in other episodes that much more poignant.

I often struggle to know when to write about a television show that is still airing new seasons. I carried season two like a flame in my heart for a year, assuming I would write about the show after season three. The third season, however, threw us back into the fires of chaos, as all of Carmy's demons stalk the kitchen, each episode a repetition of panic, near failure, and despair. Much of season three felt like watching the characters imagine they could change by simply repeating their same behavior with more intensity. I felt my blood pressure spike, with none of the attendant existential meditations that made the first two seasons so breathtaking.

I am glad I stuck it out. Midway through the fourth and most recent season, Carmy returns to Donna's house for the first time since that fateful feast of the seven fishes. In a wonderful repetition that is also an inversion, he cooks her a beautiful meal in calm silence and companionship. His ability to do so and hers to receive it are the first signs of something genuinely new emerging in their repetitive patterns of chaos and pain. The season ends with the promise of even more radical change to come.

This is what the show has always been about: against his own experience, Carmy wants to believe that art and excellence don't require trauma and abuse. He wants to believe that we can be challenged by the demands of

excellence to exceed our own capacities and, in answering that challenge, that we can be changed. *The Bear* wants to believe this as well. Change rarely comes in a straight line, in people, a kitchen, or a television show. But I've been nourished by what's been served so far, and I am going to stick around until the end of the meal.