

Nevin Roy

Five chairs. I don't want these to be filled by five of the most famous or most decorated people, dead or alive. I want the five people who were told they couldn't, but then did anyway. Leonardo da Vinci sits at one end. He was born as an illegitimate child in 15th-century Italy, meaning he was barred from formal education and shut out of every guild that could have taught him practical knowledge. So, he taught himself everything in an era that said he wasn't supposed to. He's a true Renaissance man who didn't wait for permission, but just kept working. Marie Curie sits next to him. The French Academy of Sciences refused to admit her because she was a woman, even though she had already won two Nobel Prizes in two different fields. She's still the only person to ever do this. Yet, she didn't argue; she just kept working. It's honestly inspiring: the discipline to not let someone else's ceiling become yours. Kendrick Lamar is across from her. He grew up in Compton, he was told that his style wouldn't sell, and yet, he won a Pulitzer Prize. What strikes me isn't the accolades, like him having the most Grammys of any rapper. It's because he changed his style to conform to the audience. His music was true to him, and eventually the world caught up. Zohran Mamdani, next to him, was polling at 1% a year ago. He knocked on doors, talked to people on the streets, barely getting traction at first. But through his grassroots movement, he was able to beat a former governor and his own party's establishment to become mayor of New York City. And Jalen Brunson. He was doubted at every single level despite having the accolades to back it up. His dad played for the Knicks, losing the NBA Finals to the Spurs in 1999. Not only did Brunson join the Knicks, but became their captain and led them to win the championship against the very same team that had last beaten them. He avenged his father and the millions of Knicks fans, winning their first championship in 53 years.

Food is important to me. The food has to be diverse to represent their varying origins, but I don't want a nice catered spread that is irrelevant to everyone. For Kendrick, I'm getting a bacon cheeseburger from Tam's Burgers in Compton, where he's been eating for decades and featured in his music. For Mamdani, I know he loves a variety of foods from his home of Queens, like goat biryani from Kabab King in Jackson Heights and lemon potatoes from Bahari Estiatorio. For Brunson, it has to be his bodega order: a toasted everything bagel with egg, cheese, hashbrowns, and spicy mayo, the sandwich that bodegas across New York are now selling as "the Brunson." For Curie and da Vinci, I'd switch it up and go based on their origins: a French cassoulet for her, a rustic ribollita for him. Even if it was considered peasant food, I want it to be elevated so they can all have good food.

Was there ever a moment you almost believed them? That's what I want to ask all of them. Da Vinci would definitely respond first, after sitting with it for a bit. He's the guy who spent decades working in near-total obscurity, notebooks full of ideas far ahead of his time. I think his answer would be about obsession: if you're consumed by the work, the doubt is irrelevant. Curie would push back on that. After all, she lived in a world that was actively hostile to her. She'd argue that obsession isn't enough when everything is designed to stop you. She'd say that something else has to carry you through it, but I doubt she'll be able to name it. Kendrick would sit for a bit before he brings it to somewhere a little bit different: not talking about doubt from the outside, but doubt from the inside. The question of whether what you're doing is worth anything and is real to you. It makes sense, since the hardest thing for him was being unsure of his work. After all, he's the guy who took five years off between albums to be with himself and reconnect with his roots. Mamdani would connect that to something bigger. He would argue that doubt isn't only personal, but also political. The systems that tell you "no" are

also benefiting from you believing that. His campaign was about flipping that on its head for his community, showing them the game was rigged. And then Brunson. Honestly, he'd be straightforward about it, saying yeah, but then he went back to work. It also helped that he always had his teammates by his side, helping him get back up whenever things went south. It's easier to shake off the doubt with a support system. They were the underdogs in their championship run, always being doubted, yet they always succeeded in the end, with the most dominant run in history.

By the end of the night, I think da Vinci and Kendrick would go deep into what it means to create in a medium people don't take seriously until they have no choice. Curie and Mamdani would be arguing about whether change comes from working within the broken systems and fixing them from within or burning them down altogether. And Brunson would probably pull the whole table together around that one, because his answer to all of it is collective. Nobody achieved what they did alone, but he'd be the one to say it out loud. That's the dinner I want. Not because these people are famous. Because they each decided, at some specific moment, that someone else's opinion of them was simply incorrect. And none of them made that decision in a vacuum. I want to be in that room.