

## FEATURE



### **The new Toronto cuisine**

BY EDWARD KEENAN March 19, 2008 14:03

Under the angular cathedral ceilings of Daniel Liebeskind's "Crystal" addition to the Royal Ontario Museum, four chefs are talking shop, waiting for the photographer to set up. Two of them are expecting children (one is already a father) and they weigh the toll the restaurant business takes on family life. They talk about the difficulty — and the illicit possibility — of finding real game meat in Toronto. They share notes about experiences working in New York and invitations to visit each other's restaurants.

One of them is a former Canadian R&B star who shared a stage with James Brown; another was once an aspiring punk rocker who still hits Sneaky Dee's for nachos at the end of a hard day. One of them is less than a decade out of the Israeli military. Among them, they have studied under some of the best chefs in Canada, the United States and France. All of them are under 35, and each describes, in his own way, how a new Toronto cuisine is emerging from their kitchens, rooted in established culinary traditions but reflecting local ingredients and inspired by the global village of their city.

The photographer calls to them and they head to the washroom to change into their uniforms. A new generation of elite-level Toronto chefs is ready for their close up.

There's an establishment in the Toronto food world — a hall of fame full of active chefs who, for varying lengths of time over the past two decades, have put Toronto on the culinary map. You know their names: Susur Lee, Mark McEwan, Jamie Kennedy, Marc Thuet, Chris McDonald, Michael Stadlander, Claudio Aprile, David Lee, Anthony Walsh. Those are the men in white (and in Toronto, for some reason, they are all men) whose creative energy fills the food-porn pages of glossy magazines, who make international best-chef lists, who show up on the Food Network.

But as they see their tall hats elevated to the rafters even as they're still racking up points, another younger group of chefs has slowly but steadily emerged from the prep line to begin defining a new school of local cooking.

"I grew up in Toronto, I've lived here my whole life, so what I try to do with food — I don't know whether I call it 'Toronto Cuisine,' but that's my approach," says Ted Corrado, the 33-year-old chef de cuisine at C5. "Growing up in Toronto, you can't help but be exposed to all the different cuisines, all the cultures we have here. These are things we take for granted — Chinatown, Little Italy, India Bazaar, Koreatown, there are so many options for us. It's what we know and personally it's what I know, and it's how I relate to food."

The child of Italian immigrants, Corrado says he blends the traditions he learned at his mother's knee with the eclectic internationalism of his hometown. He blends local ingredients, makes everything in-house (he's starting a cheese program at C5) and is happy to experiment with the latest international trends.

When Restaurant Associates, the company that runs C5, went looking for a chef to run the signature restaurant at the reopened ROM, Corrado, the one-time punk, was a surprise choice. The previous ROM kitchen had been run to great acclaim by Jamie Kennedy, and the option to hire a big name was certainly available to the new management. However, they wanted a fresh face to help define the new ROM — someone who would make his name with C5 rather than lending his reputation to it.

Corrado had been cooking in Toronto for a decade. A graduate of George Brown's culinary school, he'd run a kitchen in his early twenties at Veni, Vidi, Vici on College Street, which he says showed him how much more he needed to learn.

He started working under chef Lorenzo Loseto at Zoom for the Rubino Brothers, and stayed with them for much of a decade, helping to open kitchens at Rain and Luce. By the time he heard about Restaurant Associates' search for a chef for the ROM, he was ready.

But as he talks, Corrado keeps steering the conversation to praise for other young chefs in Toronto. He's excited about a guest chef program coming up at C5 that will see Nathan Iseberg from Czehoski and Bertrand Alépée and Jason Inniss of Amuse Bouche cooking in his kitchen. He talks up local suppliers Cumbrae Farms and Cheese Boutique, and sings the praises of Craig Ally of Marben and Mark Cutrara of Cowbell.

"I don't know if it's the position I've found myself in or if it's just the timing with so many young chefs coming up, but there seems to be a real community being built. And that's one thing I'm really excited to contribute to — instead of keeping ideas in your kitchen, sharing ideas and bringing a community of chefs together.... I don't know if that's a new thing, but at the end of the day I think that will help the industry as a whole — some sort of energy is building around this. It can only help."

If bringing together different traditions is a signature of Toronto's cuisine, Eran Marom, a 28-year-old Israeli immigrant who arrived in Toronto by way of France and New York City, may be a quintessential Toronto chef. After a stint cooking in the Israeli army, he was trained in French cuisine under Paul Bocuse at L'École des Arts Culinaires in Lyons. After apprenticeships in Michelin star-rated restaurants, he worked at Daniel Boulud's restaurant in New York. Then he had a personal religious conversion, becoming Orthodox in his Judaism.

At Marron, his "Bistro Moderne" near Bathurst and Eglinton, he keeps strictly kosher while employing the French techniques he was trained in. This seemingly oxymoronic cuisine — French? With no butter or cream?! — results in something sublime and new, and unparalleled in Toronto's kosher scene.

"As someone who believes in God, I can say everything is from God — everything I've passed just to get to this point and start this," he says. He compares the challenge of cooking kosher to the formal constraints of a poet —?the restrictions force you into a type of creativity you might otherwise not approach. At some fundraisers with non-kosher chefs, he's found them fascinated with his cuisine and how his new techniques can inspire them. "You can't play around — butter? You don't have it. It's not here.... There are rules, there's a system, and I like it. With any achievement, there needs to be a commitment."

While word of Marom's innovations has slowly trickled out of the Jewish community to the appreciation of a wider dining public, Scot Woods' arrival as a head chef was one of the most anticipated in the city. From his humble start as a 14-year-old at the Golden Griddle in Milton, he'd worked his way through some of North America's best kitchens. In the late '90s, he worked at Avalon under Chris McDonald when it was the reigning roi of Toronto restaurants, and then made stops at JOV, Canoe and Senses. He worked at Gary Danko's eponymous restaurant in San Francisco when it was considered the best restaurant in the US. He worked in the legendary kitchen of Alain Ducasse in New York City under Sylvan Portay.

By the time he took over the kitchen at Habitat in 2005, the city had high expectations. "It was a very scary venture, but I went for it," Woods says. He introduced a small-plate menu that was well-received and spent a lot of his own money on equipment to add to the repertoire he'd picked up from the greats he'd learned from. "By the time I finished at Habitat, I felt I'd very much developed my style of cooking."

This year, he opened Lucien (with partner Simon Bower) to tremendous acclaim — EYE WEEKLY critics Sean Kelly Keenan and Alan A. Vernon suggested Woods might have made a deal with the devil, and James Chatto of Toronto Life named it the best new restaurant in the city.

He describes his philosophy of cooking as a balance between strong traditional foundations and creativity. "It's integral that you have an understanding of the basics, but you don't want to be a robot.... You can start to deconstruct it once you understand it, and that's how you take things to the next level. What is Toronto cuisine? I think it's just sort of indicative of the cultures that are going on, the social settings —?it's about taking what's going on in the environment, what's being grown here, and we all gravitate to these trends."

Woods agrees that there's an exciting community of young chefs emerging in Toronto, but adds a note of caution: "I think we have a long way to go. There is a community, and it's good, and there's definitely a need for a community —?but I think some people are holding on. I don't want to upset anyone, but some people have these secrets and keep these secrets — I'm not a believer in having secrets. I think we need to build up some more dialogue."

Before becoming a creative force in the kitchen, Roger Mooking had already built a successful career as an artist. He was the MC for Canadian R&B sensation Bass is Base in the 1990s — winning Juno awards, performing at the Olympics, sharing stages with Céline Dion and James Brown. He says he left the music world for George Brown culinary school because he hated the industry. A few years later, at age 34, he's becoming an industry of his own.

After making his name at Barrio Lounge in the east end, Mooking is now the chef and co-owner of two acclaimed restaurants, Kultura on King Street East and the newly opened Nyood in Beaconsfield Village. He's hooked up with the restaurant chain that runs the Fox & Fiddle pubs and the Palais Royale to run their elite-level restaurants, and plans are in the works to open more.

Add to that an upcoming Food Network TV show ("I can't talk much about that right now," he says) and a new album of "food and music pairings" ("Can't talk much about that either"), a toddler at home and another baby on the way, and he's one busy man making the transition from former music celebrity to celebrity chef.

He brings traditions of Chinese ("one of my first memories is wrapping wontons") and Caribbean cooking from his upbringing in Trinidad to combine with his French classical training to a modern, international cuisine.

"I grew up surrounded by a lot of different types of foods from different cultures, and then we came to Canada, which is a multicultural centre. So I draw influence from all of those traditions."

And as for the new Toronto Cuisine, he thinks it's a reality that's exciting, but does want to add a less grandiose coda. "I think there's a sense of humility that is not very prevalent in the industry.

There are a lot of supersized egos, but at the end of the day, we're feeding people. It's really simple. I like to cook, I like to feed people, and I like to do that in a great environment. That's it."

---

Email us at: [LETTERS@EYEWEEKLY.COM](mailto:LETTERS@EYEWEEKLY.COM) or send your questions to [EYEWEEKLY.COM](mailto:EYEWEEKLY.COM)

625 Church St, 6th Floor, Toronto M4Y 2G1