

ARTICLES

Five Questions For... Marcus Samuelsson



Courtesy Hamilton Princess

Marcus Samuelsson, the man behind [Red Rooster](#), Ginny’s Supper Club and StreetBird in Harlem, **Marcus’** in [Bermuda](#) and **Norda** in Gothenburg, Sweden, to just name a few, is no stranger to awards and accolades: he was the youngest chef to earn a three-star rating from the New York Times, he was awarded the Rising Star Chef Award from The James Beard Foundation and he cooked the first State Dinner for President Obama. Still, it is Samuelsson’s commitment to building community that truly makes him stand out among the crowd. He is one of the founders of Harlem EatUp!—a festival that celebrates the food and culture of Harlem and which donates its proceeds to Harlem Park to Park and Citymeals-on-Wheels—and he recently began a partnership with the New York Restoration Project to develop two community gardens in East Harlem to grow and sell vegetables to StreetBird. Indagare spoke with the Ethiopian-born and Swedish-raised Samuelsson about what inspires and influences him when cooking and creating a restaurant, as well as his approach to traveling.

You have a strong sense of community and commitment to building community and partnerships. How does this philosophy apply to Marcus’, your restaurant in Bermuda?

The word restaurant means to restore your community and that philosophy is at the core of every opening we do, no matter what the location. It starts with understanding who was here before us: what is the culture and what can we learn? Bermuda is such a beautiful, exciting world—the island, its indigenous culture, the British influence—and all of its elements are important for me. Marcus’ is a very local restaurant. It took time to figure out how to develop relationships with farmers, fishermen and the community of young cooks who have committed to building the restaurant. Just as important as what goes into Marcus’ is what comes out of it, which is the next generation of great Bermudian hospitality workers. They will be leaders thanks to this opportunity to meet people and train with chefs from all over the world. I look at everything with a sense of past, present and future and with a wish list for that.

An island can be challenging. Most ingredients in our dishes come from the local farms, which we really highlight, and that builds up and supports the community.

When you go to visit new cities, are there types of dining experiences that you seek out? Was there a city that surprised you in how the food would be or how it would influence you?

I’m always excited about a place where they create food that I don’t know how to make, like [Singapore](#) or [Tokyo](#), for example. I can just sit in a restaurant and watch for hours. Most of the time I go by myself and remain in awe—it’s like theater to me.

When I visit new cities, I want to know what they have been eating there for hundreds of years. I want to know about the culture’s DNA. In Singapore, for example, the hawker stands have been there forever, long before any restaurants. You have Indian, Chinese, Malay, Portuguese influences, and these stands teach you about the culture. If you go to the latest restaurant, it is hard for hot new restaurants to upload those past experiences, but it all makes sense in the market.

Tokyo still surprises me. I’ve been 10 times and the many cuisines and their quality amazes me—it smacks me in the head. And it’s always evolving—it’s pretty much a homogenous city but its food is not homogenous at all.

How has travel and your experiences around the world influenced your cooking?

I grew up on the water and seafood like mackerel, crayfish and cod will always be my first love. But going to a place like Tokyo where everything is different, you suddenly realize that you actually know so little and it humbles you. Working in [Switzerland](#) or [France](#), spots that have given me either discipline or a sense of place, and coming from Ethiopia where everyone eats with a spiritual compass, respect that food means different things in different places. Sometimes it’s about a sense of arrival, sometimes it’s about roots and sometimes it’s about the local trade. I have tried to upload all of those elements into Red Rooster and Marcus’ in Bermuda.

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What first brought you to Bermuda? Do you have any tips for visitors, any dining spots that they shouldn’t miss?

It was the grandness of the project and the owners’ family vision that attracted us. All of our projects involve digging deep and gaining an understanding—we need a sense of local relevance and passion because that helps keep our confidence in what we’re doing. We were committed to having world-class art in the hotel and restaurant and wanted to build a big city restaurant in terms of design, but also a place where every customer can see the water and the marina.

In Bermuda, there are many chances to eat by the beach, but the [Hamilton Princess](#) beach club is beautiful and they do beachside dining really well. The local fish is also just great. We never decide in advance what we’re going to serve at Marcus’—the fishermen tell us 40 minutes before they come to shore what we’re having that night. What could be better than that? Walking along Front Street in the evening is also fun because of the great energy there, but I would definitely recommend eating on the beach. That’s living.

What has been your most transformative travel moment?

I would start with eating blowfish by myself in Japan when I was 20 years old. I didn’t speak English or Japanese and I was there alone. I’d saved up my money and I had my blowfish dinner, and then I had to get back to Sweden by myself. I was alone, no one looked like me, it was before the internet existed, and I just had to figure it out. It was very rewarding.

AUTHOR



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