

Quick look at: Marcus Samuelsson

Age: 35

Comes from: Born in Ethiopia, Samuelsson lost his parents to a tuberculosis epidemic at age three. He was adopted by a Swedish couple and grew up in Sävöden.

Names a typical Swedish spice: Dill seed

What was your favorite food growing up? Fried mackerel and Mom's chicken soup.

On translating Scandinavian Cuisine: Needs no translating!

Travels to: Ethiopia, Zanzibar, and Bahia in Brazil.

Eats: Not alone.

PHOTO: HENRIK OLUND

A CLOSER LOOK AT MARCUS SAMUELSSON

Whether in or out of the kitchen, Marcus Samuelsson sees himself as a creative thinker first and foremost. Aquavit's brightest star may be only 35, but he's already been around the block a few times.

"I've had the good fortune of being able to work with people who know how to take creativity and turn it into business," he says, sitting down for coffee. "Creativity in itself is great but food is also a business, and making it is all about teamwork and helping each other."

Samuelsson came to New York in 1991 as an apprentice at Aquavit and became its executive chef three years later. Soon afterwards, he became the youngest chef ever to receive a three-star restaurant review from the New York Times. In 2003, he was named "Best Chef: New York City" by the James Beard Foundation. That same year, he started a second New York restaurant, Riingo, serving Asian-fusion cuisine. And he also manages to oversee AQ Café at Scandinavian House in Midtown Manhattan.

No wonder Samuelsson feels right at home in New York.

"I want to live an expressive life, and I can do that here. I am constantly impressed by New York. I have traveled and lived in different places, but I always felt I had to hold back part of my identity. New York, with its multiplicity and openness, allows me to live life the way I want to. I always feel that a mixed situation is where things can truly happen. If you're surrounded by people whose background you don't know, you're going to be forced to express yourself if you want any kind of communication, because nothing is implied."

Although Samuelsson is surrounded by the austere and intelligent elegance that is Aquavit, his roots in cooking are less glamorous. He grew up in Sävöden in Gothenburg, where he watched his grandmother Helga cook.

"She taught me how to cook, and you

know, she'd been a maid, she'd been through two wars, poverty... That's when people knew how to make use of things; you picked your own berries, your own mushrooms, you preserved and pickled vegetables. My grandfather always preferred grease to butter, for example, and that's how they lived. And it just makes for a very... genuine way of cooking."

All Samuelsson's summer jobs as a kid were food related; his first was at a local bakery. Then he entered the Culinary Institute in Gothenburg, which he followed up with additional culinary studies in Switzerland, pastry crafting in Austria and, to top it off, the proper classical cooking technique taught in France.

Samuelsson's talent in the kitchen as well as his success in business endeavors may seem intimidating, but he himself seems to shrug it off.

"Cooking is all I know how to do," he says simply. "Now, I am also involved with a lot of photography and writing books and so on, but my confidence is based on food and I must be honest to that. If I had to do something else, I'd probably be working with clothes or art and music, or maybe I'd be an art director for a newspaper."

As for now, Samuelsson has no plans of trading in his chef's cap. He tries hard to keep his daily schedule organized, and he has no clue as where or what he thinks he'll be doing in 10 years.

"There's a creative, bohemian side to me as well as a very organized and responsible side. I have both, which I think you must have as a chef."

But Samuelsson is not only a chef, but an entertainer with a nose for business, too. He's

been featured in numerous publications, and appeared on ABC's "Good Morning America," Martha Stewart Living Television, CNN and The Food Network. He's written a handful of cookbooks, including "Aquavit and the New Scandinavian Cuisine" and "Streetfood." And later this fall he will bring advice to the cooking impaired through "Inner Chef," a new cooking show on the Discovery Home Channel in which we'll see Samuelsson enter the homes of ordinary people, teaching them the secrets behind a perfect meal as well as passing along some secrets on how to use the kitchen in new ways. The first show, in a series of ten, will air November 12th.

Being an über-chef of this caliber, is that something he recommends others to strive for?

"Let me say this. My advice would always be to listen to your inner voice. It's always there. It's there when you're six; it's there, but maybe not as clear, when you're 25. Your inner voice is important. Do not listen to people who tell you [that] you can't do something. My father became the first person in his family to attend university – he became a geologist, and he loved what he was doing. He absolutely loved it, and somehow I got that from him."

Samuelsson views food as a mirror of society. The increasing number of foreigners in Sweden is a telltale sign when it comes to the food eaten there. "We don't drive the same cars we drove in the 50's, so why would we eat the same kind of food? I mean, who really eats lutefisk and surströmming these days, on a regular basis?"

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