

Swede & Spicy – Marcus Samuelsson

The worst storm of the century is being predicted which is a little odd for this time of year. Parts of nearby New Jersey have shut down in a state of emergency and the public schools in New York are closed. It's a bone chilling 30 degrees and an icy sleet has started to fall.

Inside the Scandinavian restaurant Aquavit, on 54th Street between 5th and 6th avenues, soothing jazz plays in the background as a coat check person relieves customers of their burdensome gear. Rain, sleet or snow, it's apparent that New Yorkers will not be kept away from fine dining as the lunch crowd swells in the downstairs area. The former Mayor of New York, Ed Koch, is at the restaurant

on this day.

Once inside Aquavit, it's easy to forget the troubles just outside the door. Its simple yet elegant décor fits right in with the tony clientele. Upstairs in the café with

By
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its low ceilings, a bar made of blond hardwood dominates the room while small booths line the walls. With its subdued lighting, the effect is cozy and intimate. Downstairs, natural lighting filters through glass skylights six stories high, while sheets of water glide down a large burnished copper faced wall.

Welcome to the world of Marcus Samuelsson, co-owner and executive chef of Aquavit. Well, actually, the kitchen is his universe where he reigns supreme and the rest of the world has stood up and

taken notice of his innovative and delectable creations. The 30-year-old has a list of accomplishments that would rival those twice his age. He is the youngest chef to ever receive a three-star review from *The New York Times*; in 1999 he received the James Beard Foundation award for best Rising Star Chef; the Culinary Institute of America celebrated him as one of The Great Chefs of America; he was awarded a four-star rating in *Forbes*; a three and a half-star rating in *Crain's* and *People* magazine named him as one of "America's 100 Most Eligible Bachelors." Get the picture?

He's lean, somewhat tall, with large intense eyes framed by a thicket of dark lashes. He has well-defined cheekbones, sports a goatee which wraps around a smile full of gleaming white teeth. He radiates a sense of contained energy, like lightning in a bottle. The Ethiopian born Samuelsson was



Marcus Samuelsson

orphaned at three years of age and was adopted and raised in Sweden. His love of all things culinary was sparked in his adolescence by his grandmother, a professional cook.

"My mother had this idea that

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she never wanted to send us to day-care and every day my grandmother came over or we went to her house. She's old fashioned. Twelve months a year you were cooking...winter time you were pickling everything that we had, filling up the pantry, spring time was picking up the spring onions, summertime was picking strawberries, and fall was picking berries or going mushroom hunting. Summertime, when I went to my dad's side of the family, we would fish," remembers Samuelsson.

"We were always around food. Whether you liked it or not you were really good at it when you were 10 or 11 years old. You had to be because if you go out fishing on a boat, you just can't sit, you gotta work. It was a twelve months a year job and I was with people that I liked, my family. Even if I didn't pay attention, something rubbed off."

What rubbed off has grown into Samuelsson's signature style, which is based on three components: flavor, texture and aesthetic. Fans of his creations expect the unexpected. He often infuses Ethiopian flavor into his Scandinavian dishes.

"Not until I came to America did I really have the opportunity to cook with and learn about Ethiopian flavors; they are very unique," says Samuelsson.

While Samuelsson has studied at the Culinary Institute in Goteborg and has had cooking stints in Austria and France as well as on board cruise ships, he says that Americans have a unique luxury. "The average American has the opportunity to eat global food really well. Anywhere. In any major city you have at least 10 different cuisines, more probably."

Samuelsson makes sure that he stays on top of his game by continuously coming up with new creations. "In the afternoon I leave a gap where I do nothing and only work on creative, on food. I sit down and think about food in different ways, like what's going to happen when you put your food in your mouth and swallow..." he says.

For example, his Lobster and Tuna Roll is served with a wasabi sorbet, sevruga caviar and mustard oil in a cool crystal beet broth. The look and taste are exquisite. In a world where presentation is everything, his dishes are picture perfect.

The lunch time crowd starts to dwindle and as they drift outside, back into the daily grind, Samuelsson disappears behind the doors of his kitchen. He's off to create, off to inspire.

On the Cover:

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