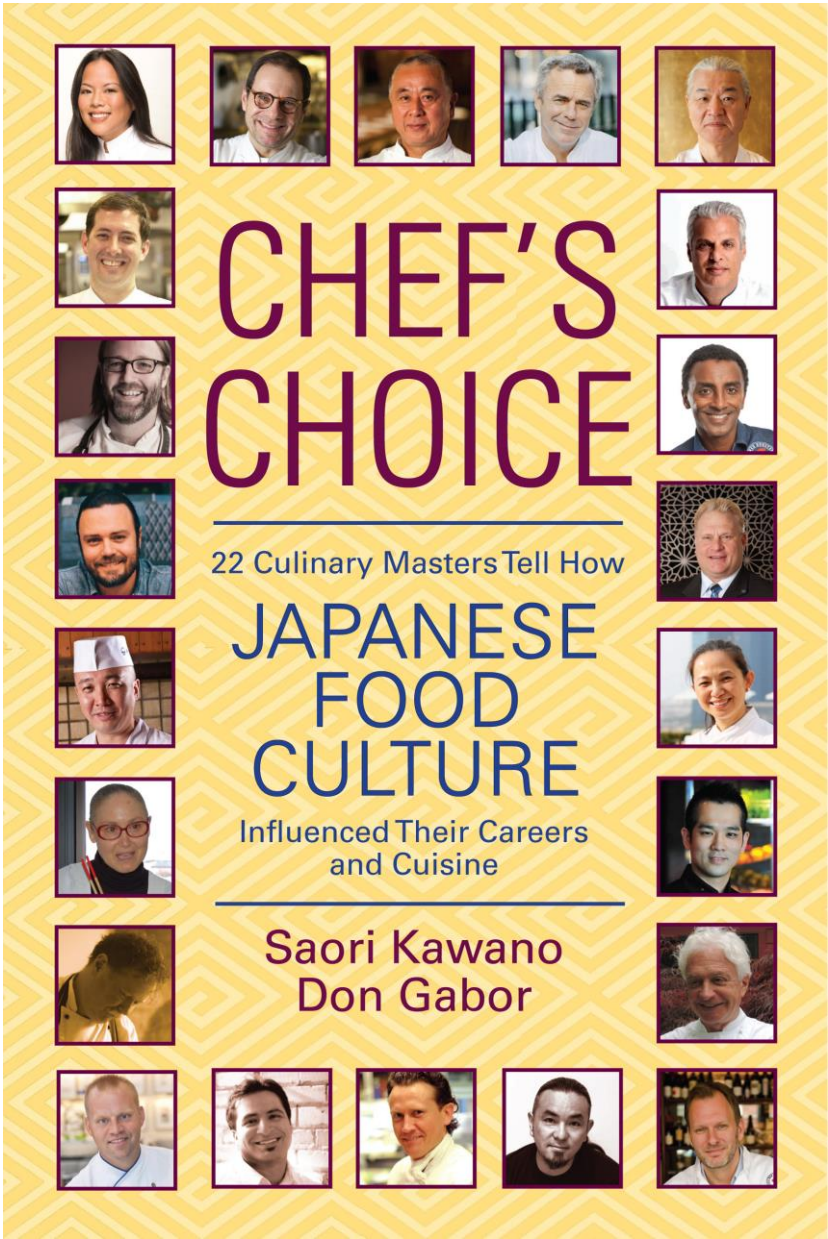

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FOURTEEN

MARCUS SAMUELSSON

Chef/Restaurateur, Founder of
Marcus Samuelsson Group

Marcus Samuelsson was born in Ethiopia and was raised by his adoptive parents in Sweden. He studied at the Culinary Institute in Gothenburg, apprenticed in Switzerland and Austria, and came to the U.S. in 1991. At 24, as Executive Chef of Aquavit, he became the youngest chef 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 and has received numerous other culinary awards.

Marcus Samuelsson is the author of several cookbooks, including, *The Soul of a New Cuisine*, the winner of the James Beard Foundation's Best International Cookbook. He is a visiting professor at Umeå University School of Restaurant and Culinary Arts in Sweden and is an advisor to the Institute of Culinary Education in New York City. Today Marcus Samuelsson divides his time between his New York City restaurant, Red Rooster Harlem, his non-profit, Careers Through Culinary Arts, and other charities. His latest book, *Yes, Chef: A Memoir* was published in 2012.

Influences

In terms of cooking, the main language in the kitchen—the only language—is good taste and good food.

When I first started studying cooking in Switzerland, I thought that after I mastered German and French, the rest would be easy. I thought, "Okay, ta-da! I'm learning German now. I'm learning French." But it didn't get easier once I mastered the languages. That's when I realized that language is important. But in terms of cooking, the main language—the only language—is good taste and good food.

Every day our meetings were in German, and the menu was in French. Then I had to communicate back with the guys I worked with in Munich. So it was always this back and forth, back and forth. It was organized chaos, so mistakes happened all the time. And we got yelled at all the time. I think I was cursed at in every language there is—and it always sounded the same. But getting yelled at helped me develop the ability to exchange ideas with people. Now I appreciate all those different curses and insults thrown in my face in all those different languages. I learned that if I wanted to be a chef, I was going to get yelled at a lot.

My goal was not to get yelled at, and then I became the guy who told staff, "Don't do this or that," but I didn't yell.

As a young chef, when my bosses yelled at me, I threw up. I even cried. At that time, I was so young that I didn't really know how to handle it. But the stress always made a big knot in my belly. I would run to the bathroom, throw up, come back out, and work. But I couldn't give up. I was the representative of my family, so it wasn't just about me. No, no. It was also about my mom and my dad and my sister—everyone who helped me get a scholarship to study cooking in Switzerland. That's why, once I got here, I knew that if I got yelled at it didn't matter.

There are some chefs who are natural yellers. Their attitude is, "It doesn't sound like shouting to me. That's just the way I talk." One chef I worked for was like that. He was much older than I was. And he just spoke in one voice—loud! He was screaming all the time. When I came to work, he'd shout, "Good morning!" When he yelled at me to come to his office, I had no idea what would happen. He might say, "I'm sending you … go now." Or it could be, "You did a good job." Or, "Get the hell out of here." It didn't matter. It was always in the same loud tone. At least he was consistent. He came from a different generation. He had a lot of pressure on him every day and just never let his guard down. But he got everything he wanted. We did everything for him, and he did everything for us. There was never a problem with communication. I still think about him to this day.

There was no way I could quit, so I had to figure out ways to hide from the yelling. I joked, "Choose your torture. Which one do you want—the knife or the words?" My goal was not to get yelled at, and then I became the guy who told staff, "Don't do this or that," but I didn't yell.

I'm not a chef who yells. I don't think it's a sign of strength to be a yeller. I don't like to step out of character. I don't like to get angry. If you're angry when you make a meal or angry when you eat it, the

food is not going to taste good. If you're angry, you're not focused. You're hopeless in the kitchen. I'm very demanding, but I think there are other ways to show that I am serious.

Cuisine

Cooking is similar to being a fashion designer—I'm always working one season ahead.

When people come into my restaurant today, I can't stop thinking about what we will be doing six months from now. For example, if it's January and we have a winter menu, I'm thinking about the menu for June or July. A menu takes about six months, from concept to starting point. If I'm working on the menu for late spring or early summer, I am probably thinking about that menu when it is snowing outside.

I spend a lot of time developing new dishes for that menu, too. Let's say you are my special customer. I know you love trout, so I'll get the ocean trout from XYZ and the other ingredients from some other place. I form an intimate relationship with the vendors. If it is January, we'll serve the trout with a seasonal vegetable, for example. But if we don't have seasonal vegetables yet, we will use something else like garlic and whatever else we can substitute. We can add some ingredients, and this fish is going to be beautiful.

For me, judging a dish is very internal. I ask myself, how does it taste? How does it look? I watch how my customers react to a new dish. Sometimes when I am developing a dish, I need to serve it three, four, five, six, seven times. By then I have the size right, I have the cuts right. I've settled on doing it a certain way.

Many of the cooks in New York are from other countries, myself included.

In America, many chefs fresh out of culinary school have a big challenge. If they haven't been raised around food and cooking, they can't say, "I know how to do that." No! To really understand ingredients and know what goes into a dish, they need a lot more experience. That's why I think that a lot of cooks who are immigrants do better in our kitchen. Even if they don't have money to go to culinary school, they were raised around food.

Many of the cooks in New York are from other countries, myself included. We grew up around taste—salt, sweet, sour, bitter. We all have different things in our library of culinary knowledge based on the journey that brought us to America. Here people eat potpies or snacks for dinner, or they go to a Pizza Hut. That kind of eating ruins their sense of taste. And they don't break bread together. Getting together to create a meal where everyone has a role—cooking, setting the table, eating—this has been forgotten. So being a cook is not just about the ingredients. It's not just about the cuisine. It's the whole experience.

Ingredients

If you allow yourself to take the time to learn about the source of your ingredients, you can be a great chef.

I think the most important ingredient is water. As a chef, I rely on clean water every day. In my kitchens, we use water for everything, from mixing it with other ingredients to rinsing produce to washing dishes. In Japan, every chef is trained to pay attention to the water. Every chef needs great water to cook great food. If you allow yourself to take the time to learn about the source of your ingredients, you can be a great chef.

One really useful Japanese ingredient is yuzu, and it's popular for many reasons. Some chefs think it is a combination of lemon and lime, but yuzu is neither. People may think that the tastes are similar, but they aren't. Yuzu works so well in cooking and works so well in flavor tests.

But the Japanese ingredient I like most is smoked fish liver. When I went to the Tsukiji Fish Market in Tokyo, I learned a lot about it. I saw how the Japanese care for and preserve the freshness of their fish. I have never in my life seen so many types of fish. I can't even describe my excitement. I've been to fish markets all over the world, but nothing compared to the Tsukiji Fish Market.

Training

Culinary schools are doing a great job of pushing international cuisine ahead. But they're in a transition.

In the past, culinary schools, such as The French Culinary Institute, the Institute of Culinary Education, and The Culinary Institute of America, have focused primarily on French cooking and Italian

cooking. Today's chefs want to learn about other cuisines, too. It sounds like I'm not pro-French. I like French cooking very much, but I think the culinary schools need to be open to other cuisines. Now the cooking schools are beginning to recognize the need to include other cuisines and are adjusting their curriculum.

Right now the cooking schools have another dilemma. How can a new chef who has just paid $70,000 for cooking school tuition afford to take a typical nine-dollar-an-hour restaurant job? I don't know what the solution is, but it's very difficult when you do the math. This brings up the question: Who is the cooking school for? In the past this was never the question, because cooking schools were for those people who wanted to learn how to become cooks or chefs and didn't go to college.

Today, the schools have a more diverse group of students. Now many people are attending cooking school because they want a career change. A potential chef might say, "I was a lawyer, and now I want to try cooking." The guy or gal who didn't go to college can't afford to go to cooking school, so he or she goes directly into a restaurant and learns the basics from the other cooks in the kitchen. This is not a bad or a good thing. It's just a different way of entering the profession.

When students graduate, they are told, "You're just at the beginning, the beginning, the beginning!"

In terms of training curriculum, I think cooking schools do a good job of teaching basic cooking skills. They also provide students with great tools. They have the best kitchens, computers, the best libraries with the latest cookbooks, and excellent teachers. Although American

culinary schools are good at training, the fact remains that many students are frustrated because they have paid so much money to go to culinary school. Then when students graduate, they are told, "You're just at the beginning, the beginning, the beginning!" And it's true.

For example, the other day I got a phone call from a student and a couple of his friends who wanted to ask me questions about buying a restaurant in their neighborhood. They asked me the type of questions that I would never have asked at their age. But they missed the point about experiencing the journey of becoming an owner/chef. I didn't even know where to start with them. I was completely baffled, so I couldn't reply. These young people think, "It's me, now. Now! Success now!" I don't believe that young chefs like them will succeed in the restaurant business. However, I'm inside the culinary schools a lot, and I see that they're making an effort to change that kind of thinking.

Passion is what we're looking for in the people we hire.

We are very picky about who we hire. How do we choose our people? For me, it's attitude. Attitude is definitely number one. We are looking for a sense of confidence, but not arrogance. In general, I think women are more confident than men. The guys' confidence often translates into arrogance. But I think that if you have the confidence and a true passion, if you really want to go somewhere and if you're humble at the same time, then you can work here. If you're passionate about food, you can be 15 or 50 years old. Age doesn't matter.

At the same time, being a chef is very much like being a blues musician. You can be 65 and seem young or 16 and seem old. Success

in the kitchen has nothing to do with age or what you can do. The skills can be learned. Skills come with practice and performing the same tasks every day. But today, most young chefs do not come in with a high skill set, because they lack experience. Passion is what we're looking for in the people we hire.

We're essentially looking for an eighteen-month to two-year relationship. Any commitment less than that is not enough. And the most important communication skill for young chefs in the kitchen is a willingness to share. They have to share everything they know. That's why we pick people who are really committed and willing to put in the time. The chefs who stay with us can be very successful. After they have worked with us, they can go to Sweden, they can go to Japan, they can go anyplace they want. They might even move to Daniel or to Jean-Georges afterwards. We see that all the time.

A Day in the Life

> *"Why did you do that? We've worked all damn day. Why did you throw all the food out?"*

When I was in France, some of the best cooks there were Japanese. Actually, they were the older Japanese guys who really loved being in Europe. They knew Japanese food, and they were highly skilled cooks. At one restaurant I worked in, there was a French chef who always paced back and forth in the kitchen. One day, for whatever reason, the French chef threw out all the prep for that day. Afterwards, when we were all in the refrigerator, the Japanese cook asked the worked all damn day. Why did you throw all the food out?"

The French chef answered the Japanese cook by punching him in the belly! But the Japanese cook's stomach muscles were so strong that the French chef just howled because he hurt his hand. I started to laugh, but the Japanese cook never changed his expression and didn't say another word. There was no doubt that the French chef was embarrassed, but so was the Japanese cook because he didn't want to embarrass his boss. I think the French chef almost broke his hand, and all that time I was laughing. We were in the refrigerator, and I knew that I was going to get hit next, and I had no idea what to do. This incident demonstrated where we all were at. In France, I expected this kind of behavior, but the Japanese cook showed the French cook, "You really can't touch me. You're really in shock right now, because you really can't touch me." I don't think I will ever forget that!

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