

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

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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

See **SWEDE**, page A2

SWEDE

Continued from page A1

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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The Promised Land

The scene is corporate America. A pedigreed lawyer is fighting for survival at a top law firm, trying to keep her job and her lifestyle. BAM! A stranger hooks her up with a few clients and she's on easy street until



she discovers an ugly secret... what ensues is a delectable mix of *El Mariachi* and *The Firm*. It's the debut film, *The Promised Land*, written, directed and produced by Monika Harris.

Dedicated is one word that describes Harris. A graduate of Princeton University and Harvard Law School, 28-year-old Harris was

determined to get her film made. She raised \$65,000 from family and friends to begin shooting. She ran out of funds in post-production and had friends wire her more money because she couldn't wait for checks to clear. She also took jobs as a paralegal, a secretary, and even telemarketed male sex stimulants.

The film maker parmed the campy thriller using her own experience as background. "The recession had hit, WHAMMO! I tried keeping up with friends from school, but you needed a Lojack to find them sometimes. They changed firms like they changed underwear," said Harris.

Her foray into the legal profession sent her

idealistic notions spinning. "When I got out of school, I thought everyone had the same opportunity," she recalled, but she soon learned the promised land of the 90s was a dog-eat-dog corporate world where you get to the top by any means necessary. "Getting ahead in America is not about being driven or being smart, it's about who you know," said Harris.

Who you know is definitely what opens doors a lot faster in Hollywood. Hollywood can be a closed community to outsiders, it's the 90s and only now are we experiencing a plethora of African American movies, although most of these movies are from a male point of view.

"As a Black woman, you have a better chance of being struck by lightning than getting your film out there and distributed," said Harris, only half joking.

Right now, *The Promised Land* is on the festival circuit. Harris hopes it will play at the Sundance Film Festival next year. The success of independent films *Sankofa* and *Sweet Potato Ride* provide inspiration for Harris.

"*Sankofa* is totally inspirational to young people like me who feel totally locked out if you don't have a film that's hip enough or 'hood enough. Being in the 'hood is a story that needs to be told, but it's been told too much," says Harris.

To other independent filmmakers pursuing their craft, Harris gives this advice: "Making a film is like going to war, you have to make it a do or die thing. I had to say if I didn't do it - no one else would."

The Promised Land stars Lela Rochon and Phil Morris. Rochon can also be seen in *Waiting to Exhale* with Angela Bassett and Whitney Houston due out this November. 17

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