

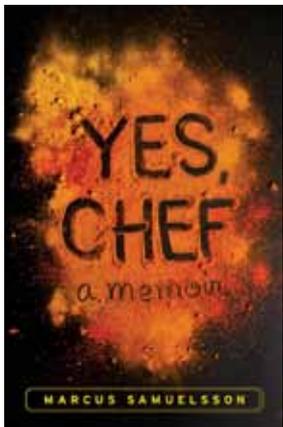
Yes, Chef

Marcus Samuelsson takes Austin by storm.

By Shelly Seale

It began with a simple childhood ritual: A boy who went down to his grandmother's house every Saturday to help her cook dinner. The boy, born in Ethiopia but growing up in a Swedish adoptive family, would grow up to be world-renowned chef Marcus Samuelsson.

After becoming the youngest chef—at age 23—to ever earn a coveted three-star rating from the *New York Times*, Samuelsson cooked for White House state dinners, opened the beloved Red Rooster in Harlem, NY, and founded foodrepublic.com. He has also earned the titles of 2010 *Top Chef Master*, *Chopped All-Stars* champion and James Beard Award winner. On a national book tour for *Yes, Chef: A Memoir*, Chef Samuelsson landed at Central Market in Austin in July for a book signing and to teach a cooking class, which sold out weeks in advance.



The filled-to-capacity instruction kitchen on the upper level of Central Market North was buzzing with excitement as volunteers bustled around in preparation and attendees anxiously awaited the appearance of the celebrity chef. I was expecting a big introduction and grand entrance from Samuelsson, but instead, he quietly entered without fanfare and made his way through the tables, shaking hands with each guest and thanking us for coming. His quiet demeanor was a bit at odds with his rose-embroidered rockabilly shirt and crazy purple tie that indicated a sense of humor and irreverence.

We got right down to business as Samuelsson checked his team's prep and started on the first demonstrated recipe, his own Berbere spice blend.

"It's a privilege for a chef to have different sorts of interactions with the public," he said. "The book signings have been fun, but where I'm really most comfortable is right here, cooking for you."

As he mixed the spices that go in to the Berbere blend, Samuelsson said, "I want to welcome you to Ethiopia. This is what it smells like where I come from."

His signature style really springs from this blending of his Ethiopian and Swedish roots.

"I always cook with Ethiopian spices and sensibility," he said. "Both cuisines work well when you cook with your soul. I touch my Swedish side whenever I pickle and preserve anything, and I show my Ethiopian soul when I make a dish spice-driven."

As Samuelsson himself points out, his background gives him a unique point of view. After all, not everyone comes from East Africa and grows up learning how to cook from a Swedish grandmother. He was only 3 years old when he, his mother and his sister walked 75 miles to a hospital in Addis Adaba, Ethiopia's capital city, seeking treatment for tuberculosis. Although the children recovered, their mother tragically lost her battle with the disease.

One year later, Samuelsson and his sister were adopted by a middle-class family in Göteborg, Sweden, and it was there that grandmother Helga inspired in the young boy a lifelong love of cooking.

"Her meatballs weren't round, but they were delicious," Samuelsson says. "She taught me about rustic food. She taught me to appreciate different cuts of meat. She showed me the joy in cooking. My sister and I always raced to see who could stack up the jars of lingonberry jam in the pantry. My grandmother made cooking and eating fun."

Yet, he is quick to point out that growing up in Sweden, the family ate well without being rich.

"We used what was available. It was fish every day. Pickling and preserving were necessities; today, it's a taste profile," he says. "I see the Texas barbecue culture like that: You can eat well without it costing a lot of money."

In fact, this eating-well-on-less concept is what drives much of Samuelsson's food philosophy.

"9/11 and the economic downturn changed how I cook, and how the public wants to dine; they're looking for more communal, more affordable experiences," he says. "That was my whole intention in opening Red Rooster in Harlem. I wanted to break the idea that great food has to cost a lot of money. I used to cook for the 1 percent; now I cook for the 95 percent."

As far as Texas barbecue, well, Samuelsson admits that it's a cuisine he still has a lot to learn about, but one he loves to eat.



"It's one of the reasons I love coming to Texas. Maybe I can get some tips while I'm here," he told the cooking class as he polled us on our favorite local barbecue spots. Franklin Barbecue won, hands down.

Chef Christina Lee, a Central Market staff instructor, then surprised Samuelsson with a bag of Franklin Barbecue the staff had procured earlier for the visiting chef.

"They even let us cut in line because it was for you," she told him as he dug in.

And his thoughts? He wasn't too crazy about the slice of white bread served with it but loved both the sauce and the coffee-rubbed beef brisket.

"It's real good," was the consummate chef's simple summation.

Other dishes on the class menu for the evening were coconut fried chicken with collard greens, an open-faced gravlax sandwich and Ethiopian-style lamb hash served with a poached egg and Berbere sauce, pickled beets and goat cheese. The hash pretty much sums up his blending of flavors, Samuelsson says.

"This is the most exciting time to be a chef—and to be a diner too. Food is not going backward; it's going forward. While respecting the past, we are also inventing new things for the future," Samuelsson says, adding that Austin is a prime example of where leading American food is today. "It's obviously an artistic community here, and that's what I love about it."

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That's very inspiring to chefs."

Yes, *Chef: A Memoir*, which recently broke in to the top 10 on the *New York Times* bestsellers list, is not only an account of his remarkable journey from Helga's humble kitchen to the top of the culinary world; it also chronicles his struggles and was partly written with aspiring chefs in mind.

"Sometimes I think my success makes others forget that it isn't easy for a black person to make it as a chef in America," Samuelsson writes in his book. "Our ancestors, who built the culinary foundation of this country but were only referred to as 'the help' would be shocked to learn that there are more black men and women who are partners in law firms than black men and women who are executive chefs at top restaurants in this country. When I arrived in New York nearly 20 years ago, you could count on one hand the prominent chefs who looked like me. It's almost two decades later and you can still count us on one hand. OK, two hands if you count the chefs who cook only on TV."

Speaking of TV chefs, I asked Samuelsson if he preferred being a judge of new talent on shows such as Food Network's *Chopped*, or if he preferred competing on shows such as *Iron Chef* and *Top Chef*.

"I enjoy and love being a judge because you can coach someone, but my favorite part is competing and cooking because all the pressure is on you. It's always exciting but it's intense," he says, adding that one of the things he loves about being a chef is being able to teach young people who are passionate and are working toward finding their own cooking style and signature dish. "But you have to be in love with it, not just thinking that you'll be famous and on TV. If you're not in love with it, do something else."

Coconut Fried Chicken

Recipe courtesy of Chef Marcus Samuelsson; Serves 6

INGREDIENTS

- 3 tablespoons peanut oil, plus 4 cups for frying
- 12 boneless, skinless chicken thighs
- Salt
- Freshly ground pepper
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped
- 2 Scotch bonnet chiles, chopped with seeds and ribs removed
- 2 tablespoons red curry paste
- 1 cup coconut milk
- Juice from 2 limes
- 4 tablespoons cornstarch
- 4 egg whites
- 2 cups panko
- 1 teaspoon salt



Coconut Fried Chicken

DIRECTIONS

Heat 3 tablespoons peanut oil in a large sauté pan over medium-high heat. Season the chicken with salt and pepper. Working in batches, add the chicken and brown on both sides. Remove from pan and set aside. Add the garlic, chiles and curry paste and sauté until golden and fragrant, about three minutes. Add the coconut milk, lime juice, 1 cup of water and return the chicken to pan. Bring to a simmer and cook uncovered until chicken is cooked through, about 10 to 12 minutes. Remove from heat and set aside to cool. Combine cornstarch and panko together. Dip chicken in egg whites then roll it in the panko-cornstarch mix. Coat well. Heat the peanut oil in a large, deep pan to 350 degrees. Carefully add the chicken pieces and fry until golden brown on both sides, about four to five minutes total cooking time. Place on paper towel to remove excess oil. Season with salt.

Open-Faced Gravlax Sandwich

Recipe courtesy of Chef Marcus Samuelsson

INGREDIENTS

gravlax

- 1 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons cracked white peppercorns
- 3 pounds skin-on salmon fillet in one piece, any pin bones removed
- 3 large bunches fresh dill, coarsely chopped (including stems)

purple mustard

Makes about 2 cups

- 2 cups dry red wine
- 1 cup ruby port or Madeira
- 2 shallots, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons purple mustard seeds or other mustard seeds
- 4 white peppercorns

- 2 sprigs fresh tarragon, leaves only
- 1 cup Dijon mustard
- 1 teaspoon Colman's mustard powder

pickled fennel

- 1 part vinegar
- 2 parts sugar
- 3 parts water
- Thinly shaved fennel

DIRECTIONS

For gravlax, combine the sugar, salt and peppercorns in a small bowl and mix well. Place the salmon in a shallow dish and rub a handful of the salt mixture into both sides of the fish. Sprinkle the salmon with the remaining mixture and cover with the dill. Cover the dish and let stand for six hours in a cool spot. Transfer the salmon to the refrigerator and let cure for 36 hours. Scrape the seasonings off the gravlax and pat dry. Turn around and cut into quarter-inch cubes.

For purple mustard, combine the red wine, port, shallots, mustard seeds, peppercorns and tarragon in a medium saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat and boil until reduced to 1/2 cup. Transfer to a blender. Add the mustard and mustard powder and blend until smooth. Store in a tightly sealed jar in the refrigerator for up to two months.

For pickled fennel, bring the vinegar, sugar and water to a boil then chill slightly and pour warm over thinly shaved fennel.

To assemble, place three ribbons of gravlax over pumpkin bread. Squirt gravlax with about 1/2 teaspoon-size dot of purple mustard. Top with pickled fennel and dill. Serves 10 to 12 as an appetizer, more as part of a buffet.



Open-Faced Gravlax Sandwich