

# Chef Marcus Samuelsson

The celebrity chef/restaurateur talks about giving back

By Vanessa Pascale



Advice for success

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You have to be both passionate about but also fascinated in the craft you're in. Passion and joy can take you to a certain place, but you have to be fascinated. How is this environment changing? The fascination should be around the industry but also, what are you doing to be a part of that?

Chef Marcus Samuelsson

**“To be in the Old Fourth Ward is a big privilege with the history and with Martin Luther King’s house being a block away,”** says Chef Marcus Samuelsson as we settle into a table inside his Atlanta-based restaurant, Marcus Bar & Grille.



Thoughtfully designed, the open-concept restaurant features a wood-fired grill and oven on display; garage doors that open onto a patio; and an old-school feel evoked with vinyl records and an artistic roller skates display — an ode to Atlanta’s roller skating culture. As we chat, we share a plate of deviled eggs, wings, and a wild mushroom taco.

The award-winning chef, who lives with his wife, Maya, and their children, Zion and Grace, in Harlem, New York (a few blocks from his office and the first restaurant he opened, Red Rooster Harlem) and has restaurants worldwide (New York, Miami, Ethiopia, Sweden, Bahamas, Montreal), had been asked to come to Atlanta for a long time, but always Buckhead. “With the history of our restaurants, we predominantly place them in African-American communities where we can create jobs. We wanted to start here in this community, similar to our Harlem restaurant. We have to start here and go to Buckhead later on.”

Opened in 2023, Marcus Bar & Grille serves “comfort food with a fun vibe.” Marcus intended for this to be an extension of Red Rooster Harlem. It was paramount for him to give his patrons an affordable dining experience that feels like a mirror of the city, which meant creating a team authentic to Atlanta. “Gary Caldwell [Marcus Bar & Grille’s executive chef] is such an amazing guy. He just won Chopped, so we’re very proud of him.” Together, Marcus and Gary have created a menu that showcases Marcus’ signature fare with a local twist. The menu features popular dishes like, M’s cornbread with whipped honey butter and maple syrup; grilled lamb chops served with chimichurri, and Southern fried catfish and grits.

For Marcus, owning restaurants is a privilege. “It’s a privilege to dialogue with the public. People come and eat and feel good. Maybe they go on a first date in your restaurant. Maybe they got married in your restaurant. You’re in peoples’ lives in a very specific moment, so I don’t ever take that for granted. It’s a joy, me getting to serve you.” While his restaurants are about his customers, and serving food inspired by his African and Swedish roots, they are also a vehicle for him to give “other marginalized people a chance.” “At Hav & Mar, we focus on women of color in leadership [a theme he aims to continue across all his restaurants]. Majority of the wine list is made by women of color...” Growing up, Marcus hadn’t seen women in leadership roles, and wanted to change this.



Passionate about giving back to his community, Marcus strives to be a resource for others, which is why his restaurants consistently host events and marketplaces. “It’s a privilege to work with a team that’s fully engaged. We travel to Europe, Africa, Ethiopia... We have our restaurant and school in Ethiopia; they learn hospitality. That’s a big purpose. Our restaurant [Marcus Addis] is on top of the tallest building in East Africa.” Having great mentors like late Chef Leah Chase and late Chef Charlie Trotter helped Marcus to grow as a person and a chef.

“Charlie Trotter mentored me for a long time. I got access to a lot of the events, a lot of the experience he did. And Ms. Leah Chase was always pushing me in terms of ambition and what’s possible; she was a true pioneer. Both of them came into my life early, and pushed me. And they were at the top of their careers.” Marcus met both chefs in his mid-20s, during a time he was being presented with myriad opportunities after becoming the youngest chef ever to receive three stars in The New York Times. These days, Marcus is proud to mentor many. “Most of the people I work with, they’re in their mid-20s to early 30s and they push me. I love it... But they also kick my ass everyday, it’s awesome,” he laughs. “I want to motivate.”

Because of his life experiences (Marcus was born in a hut in Ethiopia that he often returns to with his kids), he always comes from a place of gratitude. “I come from the poorest of the poor. Once you’re out of that, you will always be grateful for where you are. I had tuberculosis and almost died. My mom died, and then we got adopted [by a Swedish couple]. Once you’re out of that dramatic experience, the only way you can go is up.” Armed with the understanding that the world is an extremely competitive place, Marcus knew he had to work hard and focus in order to achieve what he wanted in life.

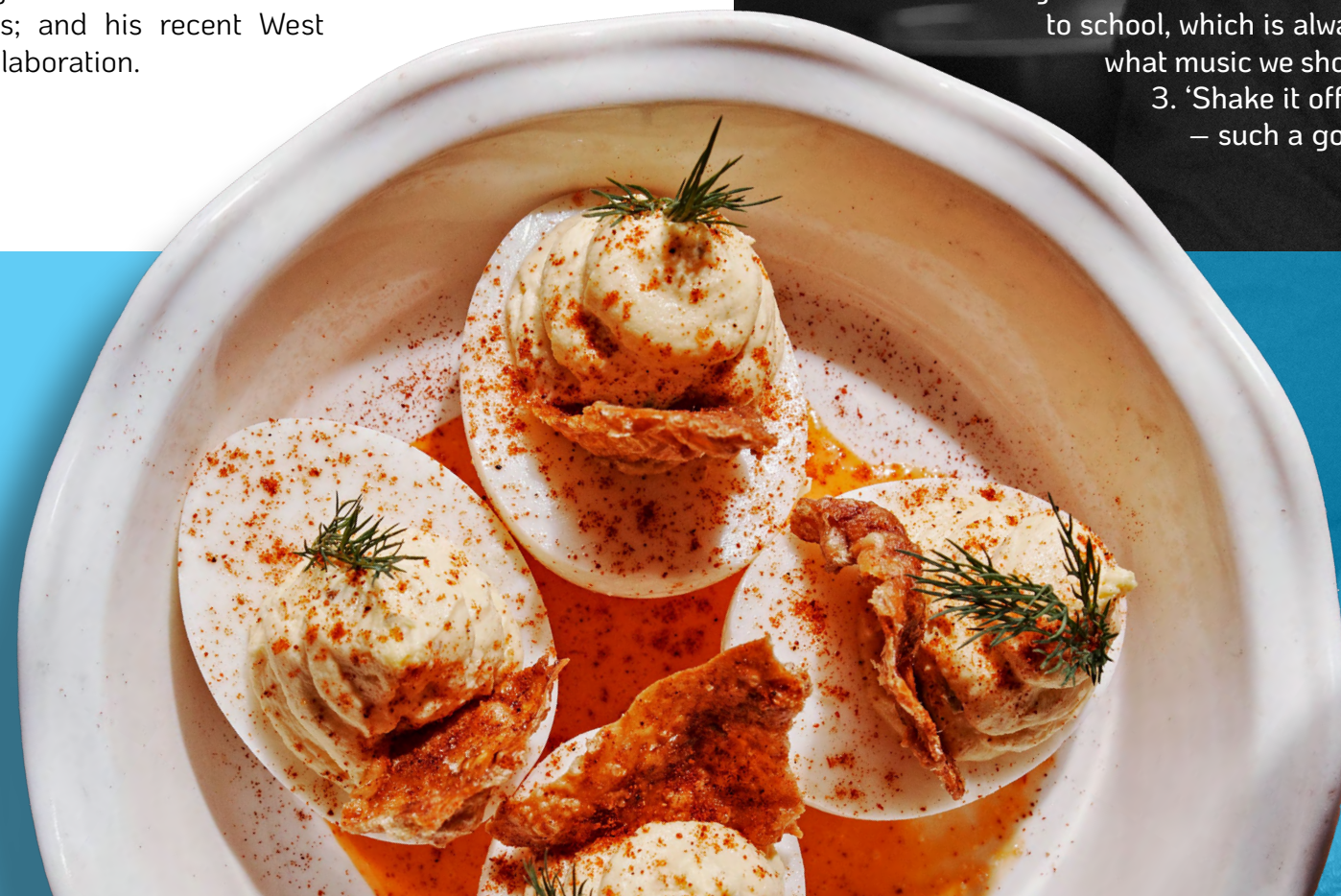


As a teenager, Marcus always thought he would be a soccer star. “I was traveling with a team and then that didn’t happen – only time when I really felt a crisis in terms of like, ‘What’s going to happen?’ I had no clue.” He redirected his energy, team-player mentality, and work ethic into cooking — a world that his Swedish grandmother introduced him to early on when they’d roll meatballs together. “The work ethic came somewhere really between my parents, grandparents, and soccer. It was just like playing sports. You need to be #1. OK, no problem! Just work harder than the other person and learn.”



He received scholarships and at 18, he moved to Japan and Switzerland, where he taught himself different languages, including French and German. “It was hard. I learned a ton. I came to the states when I was 23. I was a sous chef. Then, I became an executive chef. I wasn’t ready for it, but it happened. And like anything, you get a chance, you have two choices: You’re gonna swim or you’re gonna drown. Alright, let’s go! I’m blessed as an immigrant that people saw me and gave me chances. I knew I had to work hard to give it back to them. I’ve always been very appreciative. I have great mentors and always had people who believed in me, sometimes, even before I believed in myself, so that helped me.”

Today, Marcus is an accomplished chef and restaurateur, the recipient of eight James Beard Foundation Awards, a best-selling author, TV personality... the list goes on. Through the years, he has experienced a multitude of I-made-it moments. One standout was working in a 3-star Michelin restaurant in France for a year when he was 21. “The highest level you can work at...You can’t get more prominent. Me getting that job, I felt like I made it. After I finished doing that, I felt on top of the world. I’m broke, but I’m on top of the world!” Other I-made-it moments include opening Red Rooster; cooking the first state dinner for the Obamas; and his recent West Elm collaboration.



*“For me, it’s having a chance to cook in many places and engage many communities. I feel like we make it when we have, Fariyal Abdullahi [executive chef at Hav & Mar] and Sherry Cardoso [executive chef at Metropolis] in New York, two young women at the highest level, crushing it. [Majority of his executive chefs are women.] For me, it’s not about opening the restaurant, but what comes out of the restaurants. We have Gary here, he’s going to be a star chef. He’s learning right now. There’s many moments of making it, and there’s many failures... My success is based on the incredible support I got from my parents, they’re not around anymore, but no one does anything alone. That success is shared with my parents, my mentors, and my wife.”*

When Marcus is not taking international business calls for his restaurants or at the restaurants collaborating with his chefs, he’s being a father and husband. “I get up pretty early, make breakfast for the fam... Maybe I’ll make sweet potato pancakes for the kids or waffles, a lot of fruits. Make their school lunch. Today, my son got a snapper sandwich. Roasted vegetables, roasted things he can eat with his hands. He loves crispy chicken. I’ll make it and put it in the freezer... I dip it in a grain flour. He can eat like any other 8-year-old, I just want it to be a little bit better, taking some sugars out, taking some trans fats out. I bike our daughter to school, which is always fun. Figure out what music we should listen to. She’s 3. ‘Shake it off’ by Taylor — such a good vibe.”

Now, Marcus is focused on his restaurants and thinking of what 2025 will bring. *“That’s part of running a company, you’ve got to constantly be very much in the present, always grinding, always thinking of stuff that’s inspiring. You have to give something to the community. I’m deeply in love – the passion, the cooking of food, that, for me, the creativity and journey around that and the people I’m with on that journey always inspires me. This is what’s fun. When I wake up, this is what I’m thinking about – besides my family. I always said, the day I wake up and don’t think about this anymore, I’m done!”*

