



WINE ME, DINE ME, CEVICHE AND LIME ME

Chef Aarón Sánchez talks food, summer grilling tips, and Terrazas wine

Words by Vanessa Pascale

Inside the Moët Hennessy building in N.Y.C, an appetizing spread is set out for Chef Aarón Sánchez and me. Thinly sliced meat, cheese, toasted almonds, green olives, a basket of bread, along with Terrazas Reserva Torrontés and Malbec (which the chef-TV-personality-author-restauranteur is a Brand Ambassador of), comprise the tablescape. The heavily tattooed chef, widely known from Food Network's *Chopped*, is donning a button-down shirt, insulated vest, and jeans. "Nice to meet you. I appreciate you taking time to hang out a little bit. This isn't so bad, is it?" asks Aarón. Bad is nowhere near the word I'd use. Honor. Treat. These are more suitable words for this experience.

"When you're trying to marry wine with certain foods, what you want to do is be able to create harmony --just like with food," Aarón says as he serves me. "If I start to compose a dish, I want to make sure I have the right amount of acid, the right amount of fat, seasoning. All of those same things go into the process of making wine." We sample the coppa. He swirls his wineglass on the table and takes a sip of Torrontés. I follow suit. "For me, that's very tropical. What you want there is something to cut that fat, so this has really good acid, and also has a very tropical fruit, that really works well with that fatty meat." While there is cheaper Torrontés out there, he encourages buyers to spend a few more dollars for this "beautiful and lush" white wine by Terrazas.

As a Terrazas Brand Ambassador, Aarón has been developing recipes that pair well with their wine and hosting wine dinners with an emphasis on Reserve Malbec and Torrontés. He created a shrimp ceviche recipe that complements Torrontés nicely. "Dynamite pair!" he tells me. "If they pay just a couple more bucks for something like a Malbec, you are going to get so much more quality, and you're going to get so much more in the bottle as opposed to the \$6, \$8 Malbecs that are in the market."

"Let's have a little bit of cheese and I'll hook it up for you," he says. We take a sip of the red wine. "You see how that plump fruit, that cherry, and that blackberry in that Malbec play with the cheese a little bit. This Malbec is really the benchmark Malbec, in my opinion, in all of Argentina." He gives me a brief history lesson on how Malbec, one of the five grapes of Bordeaux was brought to South America from Europe during World War II. "It's big and it's juicy, approachable and versatile," he beams about the Malbec. "Have that with a grilled piece of meat... This is the barbeque wine for this summer."

It was a flattering recommendation from Chef Duff Goldman, who I interviewed a few years ago, that had me jump at the chance to interview Aarón when the opportunity presented itself. "Awe, that's so sweet of Duff. I enjoy him so much," he says of his good friend. "He's very much an individual. I just love that. I have a restaurant in Baltimore, he lives in Baltimore, works there. Got a lot of love for my man, Duff." His Baltimore restaurant that he's speaking of is Johnny Sanchez --it's second location is in New Orleans. (At the time of our late-March interview, Aarón was preparing to relocate to New Orleans from New York.)

Johnny Sanchez serves “tacos, ceviches, and things of that nature,” he tells me. Right now, his favorite dish on their menu are the crawfish enchiladas. “We do a lot of seasonal stuff using local New Orleans’ ingredients. We’re also doing this awesome whipped goat cheese with beets, chickpeas and good, yummy stuff. We just did a little dinner down in New Orleans this weekend.” Part of the reason for relocating to New Orleans is to center himself a bit more, since he travels often, and so that he can return to what he does best: cooking.

Being in the restaurant is very important to him. He enjoys saying hello and taking photos with his customers and fans. “When I started doing television, I felt a responsibility to make myself available as much as I can to the people that support me. And that’s a responsibility that I take very seriously. When I’m not relaxing, like with my one day or something, I’m always at the restaurant, even if I’m not in the back working per se. I’m still there influencing, inspiring.”



Aarón is right at home in restaurants. His mother had a restaurant for thirty years -- it’s where he worked as a teenager. At 21, he landed his first chef job. “Not going to tell you how old I am now, but, I’m definitely in my 40s, OK?” he laughs. “The idea of preserving your culture, in my case, Mexican food, my family legacy, that’s extremely important. I’m not cooking for financial gain, notoriety, for any of that. I’m cooking for my family legacy, my culture, the fans, people that support me. I’m living the dream. And I can’t be more grateful for the people I work with and people that make me more productive... I couldn’t be happier with where I am right now.”

This summer, in addition to working with Terrazas, Aarón is focusing on his latest book, which will showcase more of his personal life. “My other books have been about food specifically with some anecdotal stuff. Now, I want people to know a little bit more about me, like I write poetry. I want some poetry inside the book. I want family photos.” He is also very passionate about outreach in the Latin community, and “being a voice for all the Latinos in kitchens around the country. That’s something I am going to be working on a lot next year.” He sees a South American restaurant, based in New Orleans, in the near future, too. “I just love that food. I love the diversity of Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Columbia. I’ve been to all those countries, so I know the food.”

For more on Aarón, visit: <http://chefaaronsanchez.com/>

What was the first dish you mastered?

“I think it’s the idea of layering flavor, like being able to take dried chiles and cook them down with roasted onion, tomato and garlic, taking those dried chiles and mixing that, straining that, and making that part of a sauce or stew, that’s kinda the technique I’ve really refined and gives weight to dishes.”

What ingredients do you always have in the house, so you can whip up anything?

“I always have tortillas --flour and corn-- shredded cheese, Cacique cheese (another brand Aarón works with and creates recipes for), chipotles, adobe, lime, cilantro, and olive oil. Those ingredients I can do anything with: a quick marinade, vinaigrette, a sauce, quesadilla, enchiladas, tacos.”

Do you cook with your son?

“Yeah, right now he’s getting into it. I’m a single parent. Part of the big move to New Orleans is to have a big enough kitchen when he’s with me, we can cook, we can do pancakes together, all that. Right now, I want him to enjoy life and take care of things like learning. In the kitchen, if that process happens, and he shows interest, we’ll do that. I don’t necessarily want my son to be a chef. I don’t wish this life for people. It’s a hard life, in the sense that there’s a lot of sacrifice involved... I want my son to use his head a little bit more. I want him to go to college, ’cause I didn’t go.”

So how did you get into the celebrity aspect of it?

“Well, I think it just happened by circumstance. I started doing television very early on. Myself and Bobby Flay are the longest tenured people on Food Network. I’ve been with Food Network for 16 years, I think almost 19. Like anything else, if I have an opportunity, I’m going to do my best job possible, give it all my effort, love, and passion, and hopefully that will resonate with other people. That’s why I keep coming back and doing things with them. I think the celebrity aspect, it just happened, in general, because of pop culture. But when I started cooking, it wasn’t like that. Kitchens were havens for people that weren’t good at other things. But now it’s become glamorized --cut to the television aspect to it.”

What dish would you prepare to impress somebody?

“Now, I’m just going back to roots --rescue those recipes my grandma did on the ranch in Mexico. Like albondigas, old school meatballs, in a nice little roasted tomato jalapeno broth, garnish with some Cotija cheese, and little bit of mint. It’s great over rice. It’s good in a slider. That’s what I think I would make for you. And it goes great with Malbec.”

Best piece of cooking advice?

“Cook something you’re good at. Cook something you get the most compliments on. Buy a cookbook. I cook out of cookbooks all the time. I love that.”

Do you have any cooking rituals?

“I always make sure to heat my pans up. I use my own pans --I have a line of pans-- and then I put my knives out. I have a particular cutting board I like to use. I always have some Terrazas or Torrontés with me. I put music on. Definitely music. I love a lot of Argentinian music, Spanish music, music from Mexico.”

You had a draw on *Iron Chef* with Chef Morimoto --which is very impressive since he’s one of the Iron Chefs. Aren’t there only a certain number of Iron Chefs?

“There is. And he is arguably the most difficult, the most seasoned ’cause he’s actually the only one who came from Japan, and started in *Iron Chef America*.”

Was that early in your career?

“Yeah, that’s over 10 years now.”

Were you surprised when that happened or did you think you had this?

“I go into everything that’s competitive with expectations to win. Failure is not in my vocabulary. Morimoto is one of the best chefs in the world and he’s a sweet man, but he’s very particular and he likes to cook what he likes to cook. And sometimes I cook for other people. I’m thinking, ‘What would those judges really dig right now?’ That’s how you win, thinking about the people who are judging you.” **ML**



Shrimp Ceviche

Pair with Terrazas de los Andes Reserva Torrontes

Makes 30 2-ounce tasting portions

INGREDIENTS

- 30 peeled shrimp
- 3 habanero chiles, grilled or roasted
- 1 16 oz. can coconut milk
- 4 limes
- 4 oranges
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 tsp. coriander seeds
- 3 T. salt
- 8 cups of water
- extra virgin olive oil (evoo)
- lime juice
- chives, chopped
- cilantro, chopped
- ½ cup rice wine vinegar
- ½ cupe pickled onion

PREPARATION

In a sauce pot, combine the water, salt, bay leaf, coriander seeds, 2 of the oranges and 2 of the limes squeezed and bring to a boil. In a bowl or container set up an ice bath with ice, water and the remaining 2 limes and oranges, squeezed. Add the shrimp to the boiling water and let cook for about 2 minutes. Transfer the shrimp to an ice bath and let cool. Dice.

In a blender, combine the grilled or roasted habanero chiles, rice vinegar, can of coconut milk, and juice of 1 lime. Puree until smooth. Pour just about a cup of this mixture over the diced shrimp, add about 2 tablespoons of evoo and juice of about 1 lime. Add some of the chopped cilantro and sea salt to taste. Mix well and serve in a bowl garnished with pickled onions, chive and cilantro.

Let's Get Ready to Barbeque!

Aarón's Top 3 Grilling Tips

1. Heat your grill up and oil your product (never oil the grill), that serves for two purposes: It creates a crust and it doesn't have that bitterness. When you oil the grill itself, that's going to burn and become acrid. You don't want that. Oil your product and then season it, that way the oil will help seasons stick to the chicken, beef, whatever.

2. If you're going to cook a steak, take it out of the fridge and let it come to room temperature before you throw it on the grill. A lot of times, people take it from a cooler or from a 40-degree fridge and then throw that on the grill. And you want it medium-rare, right? What do you think the inside is going to be?

3. If you're going to put on barbeque sauce or something that has sugar, like molasses or honey, always put it on right before you serve. A lot of times, people paint it on and grill it and it burns and all that sugar will stick to the grill and give a funky taste to the meat. Always glaze your stuff on that little shelf on the back of the grill, and just paint it and close it for a little bit. Then have that glaze [after it's already cooked].