

A DAY IN THE KITCHEN WITH
**FIVE TOP
TOQUES**



NEW YORK, THE CITY THAT NEVER STOPS EATING—AND EATING WELL. THAT'S WHY OUR MOST CELEBRATED CHEFS ARE NOT ONLY GREAT COOKS AND MASTERS OF INVENTION, BUT ALSO ENERGETIC DYNAMOS. THEY TIRELESSLY SEEK OUT THE FINEST INGREDIENTS, CONCEIVE MENUS, STIR STOCK POTS, TASTE-TEST SAUCES, SUPERVISE STAFF, GREET PATRONS, AND PIONEER CULINARY TRENDS.

BY KIRI TANNENBAUM ■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY TARA DONNE



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"Because of the high quality of the ingredients, cooking must be gentle."

—DANIEL HUMM

Daniel Humm

EXECUTIVE CHEF, ELEVEN MADISON PARK

11 MADISON AVE. AT E. 24TH ST. ■ 889-0905

A sweet, boyish grin is a permanent fixture on Executive Chef Daniel Humm's face. At 30, he's already received serious attention from the food community—he was named *Food & Wine's* Best New Chef 2005 and earned a four-star review from the *San Francisco Chronicle* for his work at San Francisco's Campton Place Hotel. Last March, Humm came east to head the kitchen at Eleven Madison Park, where he has installed a delicate modern French menu.

Previous page: Grilled watermelon with heirloom tomatoes, basil, and aged balsamico.

Left: Delicate, pristine "Fantasy of Eggs" combines osetra caviar, sea urchin foam, and a coddled organic egg with hints of Meyer lemon.

Right: "We do a lot of slow cooking, especially for fish and meat. Not very high heat," notes Humm, a congenial figure in his elegant dining room.

Below: After accepting the reins at Eleven Madison Park, four of his Campton Place staff—three sous chefs and the sommelier—agreed to follow him.

At a towering 6-ft.-4-in. tall, Humm (pronounced "whom"), an unmarried native of Switzerland, is an impressive presence. Each morning, he rises at 7 a.m. and runs eight miles through Central Park. A good run can determine what kind of day he has; should it be missed, he feels he suffers. "I usually go up Fifth Avenue and make the loop. I love it. It's like I need it," he says. Then he enjoys a healthy breakfast of museli. By 9 a.m., with a thousand things on his mind, he heads down from his Madison Square apartment to the restaurant, which is a few blocks south.

Humm's first order of business is to make sure his team is prepared for the day ahead. "It's almost like being a coach," he explains. "Everyday is a new challenge and everyday you need to motivate people." He checks to see that everyone is on top of their game and ensures that all the ingredients have arrived and are of the utmost quality and freshness. "In a big restaurant, you have to be organized. There is no room for error." Humm then gets



his hands dirty making the pastas and stuffing ravioli, but he especially enjoys layering lasagna. "I love doing it and I think I make it better than anybody." Plus, he considers pasta-making a soothing activity. "It just makes me calm." The calm before the storm—because once diners arrive, the kitchen is abuzz and Humm is right there with his team, making sure every dish is properly seasoned and presented. "I taste every soup, I taste all the sauces, and I garnish all the plates with herbs and finishing sauces. Each dish needs to have a great balance of acidity, saltiness, and sweetness," he explains. "If you taste one element too much, you know there is no balance. If you don't taste it at all, then you know there is not enough seasoning."

Between lunch and dinner, Humm brainstorms new recipes with his line cooks. Each week a new dish is added and current dishes are improved. "If we put a dish on the menu, I hope that three weeks later it will be a much better dish." During dinner, it's back to the same tasting and testing routine. Humm ends his workday between midnight and 1 a.m. If he has energy left, he enjoys meeting with friends for a drink; more often he winds down by strolling toward the Empire State Building on his way home, looking forward to doing it all again the next morning.



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*"If it's a simple dish, the
simplicity must be respected."*

—ROBERTO PASSON



Roberto Passon

EXECUTIVE CHEF, ROBERTO PASSON

741 NINTH AVE. AT W. 50TH ST. ■ 582-5599

Left: At his eponymous restaurant, Passon prepares *tagliata di manzo al refosco*—thin slices of rare Angus beef over French beans and roasted potatoes in a refosco wine reduction.

Right: With manager Alessandro by his side, Passon reviews the day's menu.

Below, right: Passon specializes in creative preparations of pasta, meat, and seafood at Puttanesca; Roman *specialiti* at Scarlatto; and fine Venetian cuisine at Roberto Passon.



Born in Switzerland and raised in Udine, in Italy's Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, 36-year-old Roberto Passon, one of the most peripatetic chefs in Manhattan, received on-the-job training during a three-year stint working at the two-star Michelin Antica Trattoria Boschetti in Tricesimo, Italy. "It was like the reality TV show *Hell's Kitchen*," he recalls with a chuckle. "That was my reality." Appropriately, as executive chef for a trio of Italian restaurants in the New York City Restaurant Group—his namesake Roberto Passon, Puttanesca (581-4177), and Scarlatto (730-4535)—Passon now spends his days running around the Manhattan neighborhood known as Hell's Kitchen, juggling three kitchens, three staffs, and three dining rooms within nine blocks of each other.

"I'm supposed to have a life outside of here," he confides, "but I don't. I'm pretty much focused on my business life." Fortunately, his commute time is minimal, as Passon, who is single, lives above Puttanesca. He wakes up and heads downstairs to the restaurant, where he checks the orders and smooths over any trouble spots. "By 11 a.m., you know what problems you're going to have that day,"

he notes. If a staff member is out, for example, he finds someone from one of the other kitchens to fill in. He ensures that all of the food coming out of all his kitchens is flawless, and that each of his inspired dishes is impeccable—succulent *moeche ripiene* (meaty soft shell crab that's been coated in egg yolk and deep fried until perfectly golden); lightly stewed octopus surrounded by potatoes and celery sautéed in olive oil, bay leaves, and garlic; and smoky monkfish wrapped in speck and enveloped in a creamy sauce of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, butter, olive oil, garlic, lemon, and white wine.

After lunch at Puttanesca, he sprints to Scarlatto, then to Roberto Passon, then back to Scarlatto, checking to make sure things are running smoothly. All the while, he usually has a cell phone firmly pressed to his ear. "I am on the phone all the time," Passon laments. "Utility companies, food orders, someone trying to sell me something. Then someone sends me three cases of orange juice by mistake and I have to call him back...I'm talking all day long."

He returns to Roberto Passon at 6 p.m. to supervise the dinner service. "My style is rough and meticulous at the same time. I prefer strong, fresh flavors." His cuisine is simple, without unnecessary spices, seasonings, or decorations that hide the fresh ingredients. "If the quality of the food is great, you don't have to cover it up."

The day ends around midnight, when Passon climbs the stairs to his apartment and sometimes spends time working on home renovations. But most of the time he just calls it a night.



Marcus Samuelsson

CHEF AND CO-OWNER, AQUAVIT

65 E. 55TH ST. BTW. PARK & MADISON AVES. ■ 307-7311

CHEF AND CO-OWNER, RIINGO (IN THE ALEX HOTEL)

200 E. 45TH ST. BTW. SECOND & THIRD AVES. ■ 867-4200

Chef and restaurateur Marcus Samuelsson immerses himself in a myriad of passions—writing, charity work, painting, and cooking. That is, when the 36-year-old is not hosting *Inner Chef*, a TV show on Discovery Health, or performing his duties at his two eateries—Riingo, an American spin on Japanese cuisine; and Aquavit, the renowned contemporary Scandinavian restaurant with which his name is synonymous.

Most days start at 7 a.m. with this ritual: He runs (outside or in the gym), then returns home to read *The New York Times* on his Manhattan terrace. He feels it's imperative to stay on top of politics, finance, and the arts. "I need to know who is the customer coming into the restaurant, I need to know who is in town, I need to know what is happening in Europe," Samuelsson stresses. Next, he heads to his corporate office in Midtown, where he attends to business matters with the help of his assistant H el ene. By mid-morning, he is on his way uptown to Aquavit, where he runs the kitchen during lunch, first discussing alterations to the menu—"what's not seasonal, what we need to do better"—with his chef de cuisine. "We change three dishes a day." After the two-hour lunch service, he returns to the office to tie up loose ends and, perhaps, meet with colleagues such as the recipe tester for his new cookbook, *The Soul of a New Cuisine: A Discovery of the Foods and Flavors of Africa* (Wiley, Fall 2006), in which he takes readers on a tour of the cultures and cuisines of Africa. "African food is not about eating zebra," he says. "It's very sophisticated."

In the late afternoon, he returns to the Aquavit kitchen. His cuisine is a reflection of his varied life experiences: Swedish heritage, extensive training as a European



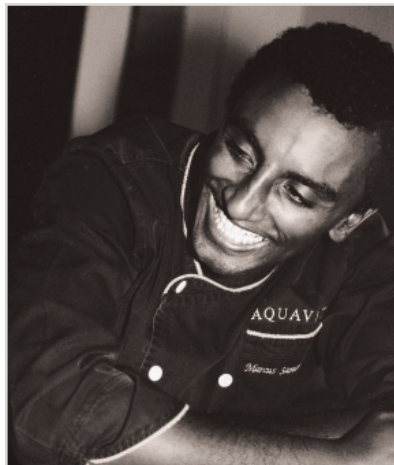
Right: Spice-rubbed venison with fennel, caramelized ginger, rutabaga, and apple-pine broth is an autumnal selection on the Aquavit menu.

Left: Born in Ethiopia and adopted by a Swedish couple when he was three, Samuelsson was raised in a food-oriented family.

Left, below: With his slender frame, radiant smile, and sharp wit, Samuelsson is immediately engaging.

chef, and the mixture of cultures he has encountered along the way. He prepares signature dishes like a rich *foie gras* ganache, Tandoori smoked salmon, and, of course, traditional Swedish fare—meatballs, gravlax, herring—which he considers comfort food. "I love the kitchen," he declares. "I love the energy and being around different people. It allows you to really express yourself in a way that I like." That's why, despite the many other demands on his schedule, he still finds time for his number one passion, the restaurant. "The kitchen has been my environment as I've known it for 20 years," he says, flashing his signature smile. "Most chefs are a reflection of their heritage and education, where they are today, and where they want to go. For me, that is the modern chef. That is who I am."

After a long day of cooking at Aquavit, working on writing projects, and managing his various business matters, he likes to find time for social endeavors. "Maybe I have dinner with my girlfriend or do something with another chef friend," says Samuelsson. "Or maybe I'm exhausted and I just fall into bed."



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April Bloomfield

CHEF AND OWNER, THE SPOTTED PIG

4 W. 11TH ST. AT GREENWICH ST. ■ 620-0393



thinking about recipes,” she explains. She takes inventory of the other ingredients she needs, and heads to the kitchen to “play around” with her vision. Other times, Bloomfield finds inspiration in cookbooks and dining out while traveling. “If I like the dish, then I like to go back and make it myself,” she confides. Behind the scenes, she is hands-on. “I like to see things reducing and simmering, I love to skim and cook meat perfectly,” she says. In the throws of dinner service, she bounces around the kitchen from station to station. “I’m not really stuck to one section, because we all work together.”

Her cuisine is straightforward and uncomplicated. “I love herbs, because it makes everything fresh,” she gushes.

When The Spotted Pig opened two and half years ago, it occupied only the bottom floor of an 1830s brick building on a street corner in the sleepy far West Village. Designed as a secret hideaway, there was no name on the door, only a decorative pig suspended at the entrance. Still, word soon spread about chef and owner April Bloomfield’s dynamic gastro-pub cuisine—a dressed-up version of British fare with a nod to Italy—and crowds began to descend. Now, this hotspot has doubled in size, adding an upstairs level filled with exposed brick, wooden benches, mismatched throw pillows, and a soundtrack of British underground bands. During prime time, the bar runs three deep and patrons pour out into the street, gleefully downing fine British ales like Old Speckled Hen while waiting to taste Bloomfield’s seasonal menu. Her signature item, a thick juicy burger smothered in tangy Roquefort on a buttery brioche bun, is served with a pile of crisp shoestring potatoes.

“And I like a lot of acidity. We use sheep’s milk ricotta in the gnudi.” One of the menu fixtures, gnudi are pillows of soft, creamy pasta with the addition of rich ricotta that melts in the mouth. “I’d like to think that I cook good, honest food,” she says. “I think people are ready for cheap, comfortable food in a casual environment.”

Clearly she has hit the mark; even Bill Clinton was sighted dining at The Spotted Pig last year. Despite the restaurant’s strict no-reservations policy, the former commander in chief managed to snag the entire restaurant for himself and his party. The rest of us, however, have to content ourselves by grabbing any available stool, lifting a pint of rich ale, and following Bloomfield’s sage advice: “Turn up nice and early.” For nightbirds, the kitchen is open until 2 a.m., which is just about the time Bloomfield returns home to Chelsea.

Left: Bloomfield’s crisp, bright pear salad with fresh greens, spiced almonds, and Roquefort dressing.

Right, above: Absorbed in her work, Bloomfield also enjoys eating dim sum in Chinatown and shopping for cookbooks and records.

Right: The chef takes a brew break with Will Soto, backwaiter, and Randi Lee, general manager.

At a touch over five feet tall, the 32-year-old from Birmingham, England, looks more like an NYU student than a powerhouse NYC chef, but once she starts talking, her shrewdness and confidence are obvious. Like any good Brit, she starts her day with a cup of English Breakfast tea. “That’s really important,” she says. Next stop, the Union Square Greenmarket, where she stocks up on the season’s best vegetables and brings her purchases to the restaurant by mid-morning. “I like to spend an hour in the office



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*"When I accepted an entry-level job here as
garde manager, I didn't talk to
anybody for four months. I was terrified!"*

— DANTE BOCCUZZI



Dante Boccuzzi

EXECUTIVE CHEF AND PART-OWNER, AUREOLE

34 E. 61ST ST., BTW. PARK & MADISON AVES. ■ 319-1660

Each morning at 6:30 a.m., Dante Boccuzzi is awakened by his three children—nine-year-old Francis, seven-year-old Andrea, and 18-month-old Julian. With the help of his wife, the 35-year-old executive chef and part-owner of Aureole “ships the kids off,” and gets his creative juices flowing by indulging his rock-star alter ego, singing and playing the guitar or drums in his Oceanside, Long Island, home. He then boards a Long Island Railroad train bound for Penn Station and spends his commuting time cooking up new ideas for the menu.

Left: Intensely flavorful, pan-seared Alaskan halibut on a mattress of creamy polenta is topped with thyme-braised chanterelles.

Right, above: While growing up in Parma, Ohio, Boccuzzi worked in a pizzeria. Now he runs a fine dining kitchen in the toniest part of town.

Middle: He fondly recalls watching his traditional Italian-American grandmother making *prizzelles*—Italian wafer cookies dusted with powdered sugar and melted butter.

Right, below: He confers with bartender Chad Walsh.



“I consider all the ingredients that are around at the moment or are upcoming. For instance, corn,” he says. “Then I choose a main item to go with it that makes sense, like wild white king salmon. I take the main vegetable and prepare it in two or three different manners—puréed, on the cob, fritters, etc.” Arriving at the Upper East Side contemporary American restaurant by noon, he makes sure all the elements actually work well together. “Sometimes I need to add a starch or a sauce. I experiment or try out the dish if it is something I’ve never done before, but usually I write it up and put it on the menu.” He constantly updates his seasonal specials. The fall tasting menu focuses on squash and chanterelles, and Boccuzzi plans to do a potato tasting menu this winter. “I have a purveyor upstate who grows only garlic and potatoes,” he says. “Fifteen different varieties, all different sizes, colors, and shapes.”

Before lunch service begins, Boccuzzi educates the staff on the day’s specials, makes sure that all the products have arrived and that everything and everyone is prepared. After expediting the lunch orders, he steps out of the kitchen and turns to business matters—catching up on email,



managing costs, writing menus, and answering press inquiries. On Friday afternoons, he leaves the manicured townhouse and heads across town to Times Square, where he takes his weekly drum lesson. “Everything works together,” says Boccuzzi. “If I have a great lesson, I feel like I have accomplished something.”

Boccuzzi returns to Aureole for the evening staff meeting—a review of the dinner specials. A staff meal is prepared and eaten around 5 p.m., and then Boccuzzi goes back into the kitchen. When dinner ends around 11 p.m., he assesses what needs to be ordered for the following day, and then proceeds to Penn Station to catch the train home.

After a long day on his feet, he still manages to play the guitar. “It’s just another passion,” says Boccuzzi. “Whenever I can’t sleep I play music.” He is currently working on a cookbook, *Cooking in Harmony: Notes for the Young Chef*, which combines his two loves—music and food.

Kiri Tannenbaum is a New York City-based food writer.

