

ComebackKid

By Leah Furman



David Burke Fromagerie

Chef David Burke brings his internationally renowned cuisine home to New Jersey.

When I meet David Burke at his David Burke & Donatella on Manhattan's Upper East Side, he looks a bit frazzled. "My daughter is driving me nuts," he tells me, obviously loving every minute of it.

Turns out the celebrity chef—who has four restaurants, two cookbooks, a popular line of frozen deserts and an internationally distributed line of food flavor sprays to his name—has just dropped his nine-year-old off at a Madison Avenue salon, where she and the stylist have convinced him to let her get her hair highlighted. The pre-teen is visiting from Tennessee, where her mom is blissfully unaware of the fact that baby is getting her first dual process. "I'm just going to say she's been at the beach all week," Burke says, with a sheepish grin.

After taking a second to figure out where we're going to chat and deciding on the furthest reaches of the dining room, which is just beginning to quiet down after the lunch rush, we sit down and begin to talk about David Burke's newest venture and the thing that's got all of Monmouth County talking—the David Burke Fromagerie.

MAR: Can you tell us about your history with the Fromagerie?

David Burke: When I was a junior or senior in high school, I had been working at the Navesink Country Club for about a year when I got the opportunity to work at the Fromagerie. It had a grandiose reputation for great service, so I decided I would jump ship and work there before I went to college.

MAR: Did you know you wanted to be a chef at that point?

DB: I had already applied to the C.I.A. [Culinary Institute of America], and I was just waiting to start. I knew I wanted to be a chef from [when I started as] a dishwasher, but at what level, I had no idea. I just knew I wanted to be a cook.

MAR: What attracted you to the work?

DB: It's a very exciting career, it's very satisfying. You get to use your imagination. There's action involved. You get to use physical skills. There's a sense of commitment and accomplishment every day. It's not boring. There are many people in the kitchen and they all have to perform together, so it's very theatrical and sportsmanlike.



Information:

The David Burke Fromagerie
26 Ridge Road, Rumson, NJ
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MAR: What made you want to go back and take over the Fromagerie in Rumson?

DB: After I graduated college, I went to Europe. And when I had a couple of months off, I came home and worked there again. The Peters [Hubert and Marcus Peters, the Fromagerie's former owners] have been great. I worked with Hubert in the kitchen. Sometimes I'd sleep at the restaurant, and I'd get up and be blowing sugar and baking bread. When you're young and you get an idea, you want to go after it right away. My parents lived in Middletown, so I always stayed close. And at one point in my career—I was young and it was early on, just when I started becoming well known—I said, "If you ever decide to sell the restaurant, you let me know. I'd certainly love to buy it."

MAR: What was it like to actually buy it after all those years?

DB: To buy it was great. I've done a lot of good stuff and accomplished a lot, but to me, that was a real good feeling. I felt very proud of that. I have a big respect for that property and I want to make sure that we renovate it the right way, maintain it and turn it into a busy restaurant that Rumson and Monmouth County can be proud of.

MAR: What's your vision for the David Burke Fromagerie?

DB: I want it to be the little jewel that it was—a very strong, reputable place that has a little touch of New York to it. I want the restaurant to be a little more relaxed than it was, which is a sign of the times, and festive and fun. Still, there are a lot of memories for a lot of people that grew up there, so we had to try to keep some of that and also build a new clientele.

MAR: Are you having fun with this?

DB: We're having a lot of fun down there. The bar scene is starting to kick. They've never had a bar scene before, so now we've opened up the whole bar, brightened it up and added music.

MAR: You know those reality shows like "Hell's Kitchen" and "Top Chef," where they depict all these crazy chefs? What's your style as a chef?

DB: I used to be crazy. Years ago, you were allowed to get yelled at or smacked or get a pot thrown at you. Back then, there was a lot of pressure on the chefs, as there still is now, but there was not a lot of recognition, so there was a lot more frustration. The chefs were the whipping boys, while the owners,

investors, and maitre d-s ran the show. But those days are over. Now you're getting a lot of restaurants that are run and owned by chefs, which makes a lot of sense because you're here to dine.

MAR: Tell us about some of your wilder-tempered days?

DB: When I was at River Cafe, I was very intense—loud, angry, and demanding. I was young and not as patient as I am now. I didn't have to be because we were very hot. I could fire a guy and have 10 more lined up in a minute because we were doing such groundbreaking things.

MAR: How have you changed over the years?

DB: Once you become an owner you look at things a little differently. It's about teamwork and listening to every side of the story. Turns out the chef's not always right. You also want to get to the solution quickly and peacefully so the show can go on. When you're only the chef, it's always you getting screwed. You always think you work the hardest—and the chefs do work the hardest. But that's the life you choose. It's a lifestyle, it's not a job. You don't count hours. You don't count days. You just go. ♡