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CULTURE

Memoir of a Flavor-Chasing Top Chef

Marcus Samuelsson Recalls His Eclectic Roots and Inspirations in the Kitchen

By *Jessie Pascoe*

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Marcus Samuelsson's sold-out book dinner on Thursday night marked the end of a busy week for the star chef, whose new memoir, "Yes, Chef," had him hosting community events, cocktail parties and book signings all around town.



Marcus Samuelsson, pictured here, hosted a dinner and a Q&A session for his book, 'Yes, Chef,' at Ginny's. DANIELLA ZALCMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Held at Ginny's, the supper club underneath his Harlem restaurant Red Rooster, Thursday's dinner featured a three-course meal, entertainment from the Nate Lucas All-Stars, with guests Sweet Georgie Brown, Bobbi Humphrey and the Decadence Dance Group, plus a Q&A with his longtime friend, Thelma Golden, director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem.

"Many years ago when we met, I was living on a diet of sushi and Cosmos," said Ms. Golden. He was "a young chef [who] taught me how not to eat like a girl and to trust the chef in the kitchen."

Divided into three parts (Boy, Chef, Man), Mr. Samuelsson's memoir recalls his life as an adopted Ethiopian in Sweden, his famed career "chasing flavors" and his eventual reunion with his biological father and Ethiopian family.

Drawing on his eclectic background, the menu for the 120-plus guests—which included Mr. Samuelsson's wife, Ethiopian model Maya Haile—included Swedish, Ethiopian and Harlem inspirations, such as smoked salmon with fennel purée; rib-eye with berbere-crusting onion rings; and sweet-potato doughnuts. Popular cocktails included the Yes Chef (mint-infused Skyy Vodka, berbere spice) and the Smokey Apple (mescal, lime, baked apple bitters).

In 2010, Mr. Samuelsson's impressive résumé—three stars at Aquavit; winner of a James Beard Award and season two of Top Chef Masters—expanded to include owning Harlem's Red Rooster and, as of this March, Ginny's.



Ginny's, the supper club underneath his Red Rooster restaurant in Harlem. DANIELLA ZALCMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"It is very challenging to have two spaces, but it has also been what's the most fun," he said.

Having fun seemed to be what the night was all about for Mr. Samuelsson, who chatted with guests, captured the evening's entertainment on his cellphone and gave out signed copies of his memoir.

"There are two reasons I wanted to title the memoir, 'Yes, Chef,'" he said. "First of all, it's the call out in the kitchen that cooks have been saying forever, 'Oui, Chef, Yes, Chef.'"

"The second reason was because of what happened when I cooked the State Dinner for the Obamas. One of my chefs, Michael Garrett, was so nervous, that when he met the President he just addressed him as 'Yes, Chef!' It was such a great moment and I'll remember that forever."

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