

Angel of Harlem

Ethiopian-born Marcus Samuelsson tells Margaret O'Connor about plans to transform the Manhattan neighbourhood

Marcus Samuelsson was born in Ethiopia, but left aged three when his mother died of tuberculosis and a Swedish family adopted him. At the age of 24, he moved to New York to create Scandinavian cuisine at Aquavit restaurant. He has since earned a place on the Culinary Institute of America's "great chefs" roll of honour, has written various cookbooks and made the television series *Urban Cuisine*. Other ventures include the Street Food eatery in Stockholm and the C-House restaurant in Chicago. His new restaurant, the Red Rooster, is in Harlem, where he lives with his wife, the Dutch-Ethiopian model Maya Hailu. The couple return to Ethiopia regularly as UNicef goodwill ambassadors.

At the Red Rooster, a group of expat Swedes have come for a masterclass. Their aim? To learn how the chef has become a celebrity and community activist, as well as one of the most talked about restaurateurs in the US.

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This kind of outreach is typical of the man. Samuelsson uses his access to business and political leaders and his frequent television and radio appearances to promote issues close to his heart, such as the development of infrastructure to provide clean water throughout the country of his birth.

"You can't help but be affected by the experience of seeing women wake at 3am to walk three hours to fetch two buckets of water for the household," he says. "To have that in your own extended family [he has eight half-siblings in Ethiopia] means it's not an 'over-there' sort of situation."

But helping to restore Harlem to its former prominence as a desirable place to live and visit is his primary crusade at the moment. Exuding the "can-do" attitude of successful immigrants in New York, Samuelsson says he doesn't expect civil servants or politicians to solve the lack of service delivery that Harlem suffers until residents take decisive steps to improve their own neighbourhood.

"I hope to bring more 'normalcy' to an overlooked part of town. People wouldn't



think twice if I put this restaurant on 23rd Street in Chelsea, but here it's a big deal to create 100 jobs," he says.

Several of the people working in his kitchens are inner-city students who graduated from the Careers through Culinary Arts Program (C-CAP). He has also courted a range of visual and performing artists resident in Harlem to perform at the Red Rooster's underground lounge.

Samuelsson moved from midtown Manhattan to Harlem six years ago when he realised he could contribute to the transformation of the neighbourhood. He cites people's friendliness and their tendency to embrace street life as a welcome relief from the relative anonymity of his former neighbourhood.

Conducting part of this interview on the corner of 125th and Lenox Avenue to escape the noise of sandblasters finishing the woodwork, Samuelsson greets several locals who pass by. Returning inside the restaurant, he welcomes a stream of unscheduled visitors, including a former sous-chef interested in working with Samu-

elsson again, and an elegant middle-aged woman who says she is part of his local fan club. He views the visitors as a sign that locals are eager to participate in his experiment. "I think I have a lot to share with the people here."

Samuelsson feels fortunate that the owner of Aquavit came to Sweden to recruit him after he had completed his training at the Culinary Institute in Gothenburg and apprenticeships in Switzerland, Austria, France and Japan. "Back in Stockholm, I'd be a black man first, then a chef. No one in New York gives a damn about my race or accent; they care about what I can offer. The republic of New York City is the most progressive place I've ever lived. It has taught me – and the world – how to celebrate people's differences."

Despite this, Samuelsson has fond memories of growing up in Sweden. He especially appreciates the life skills and encouragement he received from his adoptive maternal grandmother, and he credits her with teaching him how to pluck the free-range chickens she raised in her garden, make

stock and dumplings from the leftovers, and extract a fish liver. "She had a poor woman's instincts. Like many rural Swedes, she endured years of deprivation between the first and second world wars. My grandmother showed me how to feed people well on a very tight budget."

Samuelsson recently spoke about food and the global economy at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where he appeared as a part of the Global Leadership Programme. He hopes to continue that conversation on a website he will launch later this year called Food Republic (www.foodrepublic.com). "Men interested in food, the economy, and the world around them are an under-served market that I intend to target," he says.

When asked about his own market savvy of buying in Harlem after the price of residential (and commercial) property started to climb, he says: "I never thought about it in terms of the investment cycle. It's where I'm living my dream."

Buying guide

Pros

- Natural light thanks to low-rise skyline
- Interesting mix of historic brownstone houses and new modern apartments
- Strong sense of community
- Excellent charter schools
- Good public transport

Cons

- Relative lack of amenities such as gyms, dry cleaners, and coffee shops
- Pockets of resentment about gentrification
- Underperforming public-sector schools
- Shortage of licensed taxis

What you can buy for . . .

- \$499,500 will buy a three-bedroom, two-bathroom, 1,450 sq ft apartment, a short walk from Central Park
- \$1.2m will buy a 6,350 sq ft shell of a building that could be renovated into a three-bedroom home

Agents

- Willie Kathryn Suggs**, www.williesuggsharlem.com
Harlem Homes Inc., www.harlemhomes.com
The Real Estate Group New York, www.tregny.com
Prudential Douglas Elliman Real Estate, www.elliman.com

Activist Marcus Samuelsson in his Harlem restaurant, the Red Rooster *Paul Brissman*