Posted at 04:15 PM ET, 08/10/2012

**Marcus Samuelsson on cooking and controversy**

By [Tim Carman](http://www.washingtonpost.com/tim-carman/2011/05/12/AFbgMy0G_page.html)


Marcus Samuelsson and his wife, Gate Maya Haile, raved about the umami-rich cooking at Makoto during our two-hour lunch. (Tim Carman/The Washington Post)

There I was sitting at a two top at [Makoto](http://www.washingtonpost.com/gog/restaurants/makoto%2C792022.html), waiting for **Marcus Samuelsson** to show up for our Saturday afternoon interview at the pristine Japanese restaurant in the Palisades. He was running late, and I was using the time to further investigate Samuelsson’s new memoir, “Yes, Chef,” while stealing glances at the noren curtains at the restaurant entrance.

At one point, I looked up and saw this strikingly tall woman with skin the color of toasted almonds poke her head through the curtains. My first thought was, “Oh, no!” which wouldn’t typically be my reaction upon seeing [**Gate Maya Haile**](http://www.gourmet.com/food/gourmetlive/2012/020812/meet-marcus-samuelssons-valentine). But unbeknownst to me, Samuelsson had invited his wife to join us for lunch, and there was no place for all three of us to sit, other than the counter.

So we lined up, three in a row, like lonely singles at the diner. Do you how awkward it is to essentially ignore an international model on the oppose side of your interview subject for two hours?

But once we settled into the conversation, it flowed easily. We ended up talking about all sorts of topics during our lunch, some related to the book, some not.

The first of two edited transcripts of our conversation is after the jump.


Samuelsson’s memoir was four years in the making.

Among the pantheon of chef memoirs, Samuelsson’s effort stands out, if mostly because his journey from Ethi­o­pia to Sweden to New York is so extraordinary. The opening chapter of “Yes, Chef,” in which Samuelsson describes his mother’s grueling 75-mile journey to Addis Ababa to save her children from the tuberculosis epidemic, may be the most moving thing I’ve read in a chef memoir, period.

I relate this to Samuelsson, who politely thanks me, and moves into a more formal discussion about what he hoped to accomplish with his book, which he says was four years in the making.

**Marcus Samuelsson**: For me, it was a [few] things I wanted to offer: a conversation about race in the working place, without polarizing anyone, without blaming anyone. But here it is, it’s a fact. I [also] wanted to talk about the young cook — that you got to have drive. If you’re confused and you want to enter [cooking] just to become a TV chef, I don’t know if that’s your field. But if you have deep passion for cooking, then welcome to the field.

I’m from a small place in Gothenburg [Sweden]. If you ever would guess that I would end up in New York, in Harlem, I would say, ‘You’re crazy.’ I wanted to talk about family. My family was ahead and behind and next to me on my journey. To become a good cook is to know yourself, and I, at this point, know myself. I know myself, and I know the cook I want to be and the cook I am striving to be.

**Tim Carman**; You seem meticulous by nature. Can you trace where that comes from?

**MS**: I think it comes from having a window into three cultures. I mean, I’m a little bit opposite of what society is today. We want quick answers. There are no quick answers. But there are carefully crafted nuances, ones we can’t pick out. I can pick them out, because of my background. I’ve been exposed and put myself in situations. I know the difference if I see a person of color. I just don’t say to some black person, ‘I know the difference between a Senegalese and a Jamaican and an African-American and a Swedish black.’ We all have one thing in common. We also have many differences, because there are nuances. I know we’re living in this time where everything has to be ‘Bam!’ Cooking is about being sensitive to those nuances. That’s what we love about a Japanese meal is the nuances. There are textures. I can connect to that.

**TC**: This seems like an appropriate time to mention **Eddie Huang**’s [essay for the New York Observer](http://observer.com/2012/06/marcus-samuelssons-overcooked-memoir-prompts-a-new-look-at-his-pricey-harlem-discomfort-food/?show=all), which essentially argued that your perceptions of Harlem were patronizing. [Note: Samuelsson opened his restaurant, [Red Rooster Harlem](http://redroosterharlem.com/), in late 2010.]

**MS**: That’s also giving it a lot of thought. The other quick answer is that maybe he wanted to punch up.

**TC**: Punch up?

**MS**: Are you kidding me? It’s a joke. You’re dealing with a guy who doesn’t want to enter a conversation. Even discussing it is a waste of time. I trust the New York Times. I trust The Washington Post. I trust the New York Herald. I trust the Tribune. I trust the journalists that I’ve read and that have carefully thought about what to [say], and then render their judgment. I also trust my own work. I have zero interest to get into people who want to get famous. There’s two ways to get famous. There used to be one way: You worked really hard, and you were really good. That was the only way to get known. I still believe in that one. So if I poured a beer on you and we put that on YouTube, maybe we’ll get 4 million hits. I have zero interest in that.

I can tell you my reality: I moved myself from Midtown 10 years ago. I looked at Harlem, at 22 percent unemployment. I look at that block where [Red] Rooster is today, where there’s zero unemployment. I look at the 110 employees that I have, where 80 of them come from Harlem. I’m not here to defend garbage; I trust my work. It takes an incredible amount of effort, an incredible amount of skill to do that. To even answer garbage, why should I lower myself to that level? I, as a mentor, as a mentee, as an employee, as a chef, I have a responsibility, and it’s not to go bottom fishing and enter garbage. It is to rise above and be the person that I set out to [be]. So I hold myself to that standard. Garbage will come.

Criticism is part of the creative man’s journey, and I appreciate it. Garbage is not part [of it]. I see the game. The game is about punching up today. The game is about ‘Here’s somebody that does something great. Well, rather than applaud it, I can now punch up and be part of that conversation.’ What’s fascinating today is that . . . before, there was not an outlet for that garbage, and today, real platforms are actually writing about that. That’s what’s fascinating to me; the real platforms are lowering their guard.

**TC**: One of your points is that it takes a lot of hard work to reach your position in the culinary world. Are you finding with the chefs you’re hiring these days that they want to take shortcuts? That they want to become executive sous-chefs right out of school?

**MS**: Not the people that we hire, but I interact with a lot of them, probably the ones I *don’t* hire. The people that I normally attract are beyond that. They’re committed. But they have doubts. Young people have doubts. You have doubts. It’s part of your journey.

**TC**: It seems to me that there’s more pressure on young cooks out of school because of loans, because of money. They can’t spend the time to build up skills at various stations. Is this something that needs to be rethought about the industry: So there’s lesser financial pressures on these students?

**MS**: It’s a great conversation piece. I still think it’s a balance between going to cooking school and then hawking yourself on the weekends or summer breaks with the best in your community. If you want to learn about Japanese [cooking], you would come here and intern; or you want to learn about X, Y and Z, you go there. You have to be fierce in terms of decision making. All of which is very hard to hit right each one. Being black offered me more sets of challenges, but I also took those challenges more as, ‘I have to narrow in and be more focused. I have to be knife sharp, because I don’t get as many options. I might get only one chance — if even.’

**TC**: You’ve been very successful on TV shows and competitions [Samuelsson [won Season 2](http://www.bravotv.com/top-chef-masters/season-2/top-chef-master) of “Top Chef Masters,” for example]. Do you think such shows contribute to a mentality that some young chefs can get famous quickly?

**MS**: It could have. But it could also inspire. I tell you, in one of my cooking classes in Harlem, I did a local one today. This kid came up to me. I was doing chicken salad and couscous, and then I put in fresh cheese. And he said, ‘Stop! Chef, is that ricotta or burrata?’ A 13-year-old kid. I said, ‘It’s ricotta.’ And I said, ‘Excuse me, how do you know the difference between ricotta and burrata?’ He said, ‘Food Network.’

I thought long and hard about those challenges, but also felt it was part of what I wanted to do, because I want to inspire/aspire. As an African-American chef, as a black chef, my journey is a little different. You have to do it a little bit different. I stand behind everything I’ve done. But I also know that if I want people to come into our field, I have to have a larger conversation beyond the 200 seats in my restaurant. The TV is part of the narrative. Rooster is part of that narrative. And the book is part of the narrative, too.

**TC**: Despite the three different worlds you’ve lived in — briefly in Ethi­o­pia, your formative years in Sweden and many years in New York — I get the sense that you identify most as an African-American chef. . .

**MS**: I’m an American chef. I’m American. I live here. I love being here. But, of course, it is different. A black man’s journey is different.

**TC**: My sense is that your black man’s journey is different from most black men’s journeys because of your time and your childhood in Sweden. In some ways, your journey has been a more difficult experience because you’ve had to justify yourself to the black community as much as to the white community.

**MS**: I wouldn’t say difficult. In many ways, I’ve been exposed to more things than the average person, too. I’m not rating it or judging it. I’m just saying this is a journey that I took, and it was very, very complex. When I wrote to the 33 restaurants and got ‘no,’ they didn’t say no because I was black. They just said no because I was a Swede. When I got the first ‘yes’ and took the job and walked in, they said, ‘No, because I see a black man.’ That’s hard. That’s hard for any 21-year-old or 18-year-old kid. You feel ashamed. How are you going to explain it to your parents? You wonder if you said something wrong. But again, I didn’t get stuck. I was challenged very early on, but I’ve taken each challenge, something I’m very proud of. I’m appreciative of everything, because it made me. I am a better chef because of all those experiences.

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