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Hot Chefs: Mike Steh at reds bistro

He's worked at Canoe, Biff's, 27 on Fourth, Susur, Splendido, and has been executive chef at reds bistro for the last two years; not to mention he wants to take over the Toronto food scene, and change the world, and did I mention this guy is only thirty? Dressed in a neon green Billabong T-shirt and shorts, with gelled hair, I'm reminded of all this in his restaurant, one weekday morning. Chef Mike Steh's star has been on a fast ascend over the last decade, strategically gathering industry know-how from some of the city's heaviest hitters. This driven young thing attributes his success to two things: consistency and ambition.

Humble beginnings inspire Steh's local, seasonal, and slow-cooking menu at reds. Raised on a farm in Oshawa, his immigrant parents lived off the land: curing their own meats, growing their own vegetables. Though graced with significant computer talents and a scholarship to a prestigious American university, Steh said screw it, and bummed around Australia for a year. When he returned, he started working at East Side Mario's; a job few would find inspiring. That is, if they didn't have the drive of this guy. With an offer to be kitchen manager, he decided it was time he took this more seriously, or picked another profession. Foodies everywhere are thrilled he decided to enroll at George Brown culinary school.

Steh counts Gordon Mackie, a constant in his professional career, as a source of guidance and inspiration who taught him about goal setting and focus. They worked together at Biff's and Canoe, Mackie is now the executive chef of Sircorp, the company that owns Far Niente, Petit Four, and reds. Steh credits both him, and the organization for letting him explore his creativity. In his twenties, Steh didn't mind moving around, "now I'm looking for stability in life, which this company offers." Likewise, Mackie has put a lot of faith in the chef; when he was hired at reds, Mackie was too busy to closely monitor the changes that Steh made, providing him significant freedom with both the space and the kitchen. Reds transitioned to a proper wine bar, comprised of Mike Berlanguet as general manager from Auberge de Pommier, and sommelier Taylor Thompson from Jamie Kennedy Kitchens, and introduced his philosophy of local and seasonal with full force.

Although his approach is very much a part of his upbringing, unlike many chefs Steh's motivation for a local menu is politically and economically informed. The idea of sourcing locally is thus not "another bandwagon to jump on." (Steh winces when I use the word trend.) With the rising cost of fuel, emerging first world nations, and increasing cost of foods to the unaffordable, it makes more and more sense to support the local economy- not to mention the added TLC of an Ontario farmer. Of the items on the menu, 50% of ingredients are from Ontario, or at least Canada. The restaurant hopes to start a chain of influence through its movers and shakers clientele. Such customers may soon be angered to find that the bistro will no longer serve bread at lunch. Daily, since 25% of it goes to waste, he believes it simply does not make sense to serve it, especially when the money spent on it can instead be used to offer better food. Steh thinks that if these changes are made, eventually guests will accept it. But his philosophy isn't just limited to the publicly traded company he works for; the chef is heavily involved in Green Barn farmer's market, and its transition to the Green Arts Barn, among other regionally responsible projects.

Steh has far and away achieved his original goal of reaching executive chef status by 30. So what's next? With the largest selection of wines by the glass in the country (125 and counting) as well as one of the most exclusive cheese collections (they get everything from the Cheese Boutique, carrying some wheels not found anywhere else in Canada), he has already significantly elevated reds' profile, but still wants to improve the condition of food in the country. "We have created a culture of convenience, even if it's expensive," Steh argues. "But we should be working harder to have better choices." Constantly striving to be the best, Steh is looking to make everything bigger- "but not American big," he insists. The big he's talking about is to make dining more of an experience with your companions by creating dishes which force people to share, and thus interact with those around them. An upcoming menu redo will have five consistent appetizers and entrees, with an additional five "Celebrations of the Season," changing weekly. A separate seafood menu will be introduced with Steh's desire to have the largest seafood tower in the city. Is it somewhat childlike to want everything bigger and better than the next guy? Maybe. But that's irrelevant when you are at the top of the game.

And what about the international scene? Does the chef and restaurant have a shot at competing elsewhere? With heavy hitters bringing in reputable establishments, such as Donald Trump and Gordon Ramsay, Toronto's profile is being elevated as a foodie city; though Steh believes it has further to go in terms of service to compete with cities like New York. "If I fart quietly in a restaurant in Toronto, they [the staff] make you feel bad. In New York you can do whatever you want," he so eloquently put it. Steh is right, fine dining establishments in Toronto do suffer from being overly precious; with near silent establishments, hovering staff, and their exclusively suited crowd. At reds, one can see the effort to go another route, and you can see Steh's casual approach throughout. Yes they do serve a highly exclusive range of cheeses, but the charcuterie platter is served on a wooden slab of a wine barrel the chef took apart himself.

Steh credits Toronto's increasing international recognition to the fact that our city's foodscape has stopped trying to copy others. Over the last 20 years, the hot pot culture of Toronto has made for a range of available cuisines, and thus an identity all in itself; "Toronto even has its own Napa Valley, - Niagara Falls," Steh suggests. And the rise of its international profile can only make those who are already in Toronto work harder to compete.

When I asked him what his favorite place to eat in the city was, he listed quite the range: King's Noodle in Chinatown, Cava for fine food, and Boom for breakfast. Why these places? Steh favors them for their consistency, a phrase which can no doubt be applied to this quickly rising chef. Doing new and exciting things, while inspiring those around him, he is influencing Toronto's food scene through cheese and wine, while changing the world, one bread basket at a time.