



GUESS WHO'S SLICING YOUR STURGEON?

The cooks preparing NYC's ethnic delicacies know no borders. BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO

“There’s a lot to learn and the world is getting smaller,” says renowned chef David Bouley as he presides over an eight-course tasting menu at Brushstroke, his elegant Japanese restaurant in lower Manhattan. The chef who transformed French cuisine at his namesake Bouley restaurant has made an even greater leap by pursuing the culinary sensibilities of Japan.

“Hopefully we can indulge in the benefits and learn to share them,” he says. “And if we can find other cuisines that can help us without losing our own identity, then it’s all good stuff.”

The Connecticut-born, French-trained chef and restaurateur Bouley opened Brushstroke in 2011 in partnership with Japan’s Tsuji Culinary Institute. Featuring seasonal tasting menus known as *kaiseki*, Bouley and his chefs (he oversees Brushstroke but doesn’t cook there) employ classical Japanese techniques to devise food that’s healthy, flavorful and aesthetically pleasing. The autumn menu included a kabocha and butternut squash soup, Alaskan rock fish and smoked duck breast.

“I didn’t shift cuisines,” says Bouley. “I contribute

what I think Americans are interested in, so I’m sort of an editor. I work with them in terms of my indigenous ingredients and my techniques, and together we’ve been able to build almost a new cuisine.”

Bouley is just one of many restaurant owners and cooks inspired by the food of another culture. New York is a city of immigrants, so maybe it’s not surprising that the hands-on owners of the sturgeon shop on New York City’s Upper East Side are Chinese brothers from Hong Kong—and that the manager of a century-old smoked fish emporium on the Lower East Side is from the Dominican Republic.

Or that the restaurateur behind one of the city’s most highly acclaimed sushi restaurants comes from an Italian-American background. Or that the brother and sister cooking Southeast Asian-influenced Cajun food in lower Manhattan are Jewish.

New York, after all, is a melting pot when it comes to dining. But what’s remarkable about so many of those bringing another culture’s food to the city’s tables is how open-heartedly and passionately they’re embracing their adopted cuisines, what they’re learning from them and how they’re



NEW YORK, NEW YORK

EVAN SKLAR (2)



BROTHERLY LOVE
Brothers Kenny and Danny Sze opened Sable's on the Upper East Side.



SOMETHING'S FISHY
Slicing lox at
Russ & Daughters.

creating dishes that are refreshingly innovative.

From watching Japanese chefs at work, Bouley learned everything from the proper way to harvest fish to the health benefits of using fermented foods. "I've always been a French-trained chef who works from raw ingredients," Bouley says. "If I can enhance the raw ingredients, I can build a better experience for my customers."

Which is exactly what Julie and Will Horowitz, the brother and sister from White Plains (30 miles north of Manhattan), are doing at Ducks Eatery, a homey, brick-walled restaurant in a single-story building in the East Village.

They come from a family tradition of cooking: Their maternal grandfather was a fisherman on Long Island ("we source most of our seafood from out there"), and their maternal grandmother was a French-trained chef. Their paternal great-grandparents owned a delicatessen in Harlem.

"Just being here feels very powerful because we are reliving our family's legacy," says Julie, the GM and co-owner. The siblings still have their great-grandfather's pastrami/brisket knife, "so every time we cook a brisket or pastrami, [for a special event] we slice it with his knife."

What makes the Ducks menu special is rooted in what Will calls "heritage techniques"—drying, curing, fermenting, pickling, smoking and aging—used at delis for generations. They merge these approaches with the flavors of the places they've traveled, especially New Orleans and Southeast Asia.

There's spicy brisket jerky, Rocky Point oysters with jalapeno mignonette and Yakamein soup (brisket and clams with sora noodles), "which I believe is Creole for the ultimate hangover cure," Julie says. Every week in the summer there's a crawfish boil with Cajun spices. For dessert, how about a New Orleans favorite with an urban edge? Beignets with dark chocolate espresso sauce.

"People who have eaten here are taken aback by how we look and what our background is," says Julie, who's 28 but doesn't look old enough to drink. "Will [who's 32] and I enjoy the shock element."

Recently a customer from Memphis who said he smoked his own meat ordered the hickory-smoked St. Louis ribs. "There's always the fear of, 'This isn't authentic, what are you thinking, Yankee?'" Julie says. But the customer was happy, and "for the most part, we have really great feedback."

Enthusiastic praise also greeted Alessandro Borgognone when he opened Sushi Nakazawa in the West Village in 2013. An Italian-American, Borgognone had spent years working at Patricia's, his family's Italian restaurant in the Bronx. Then he saw the 2011 documentary, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, about Jiro Ono, an exacting Tokyo sushi chef in his eighties who earned three Michelin stars. He knew he wanted to open a sushi restaurant.

Borgognone emailed Ono's former apprentice, Daisuke Nakazawa, and two weeks later got a call back. Nakazawa was interested in opening a restaurant in New York, "but first he had to get to know me as a person," Borgognone says.

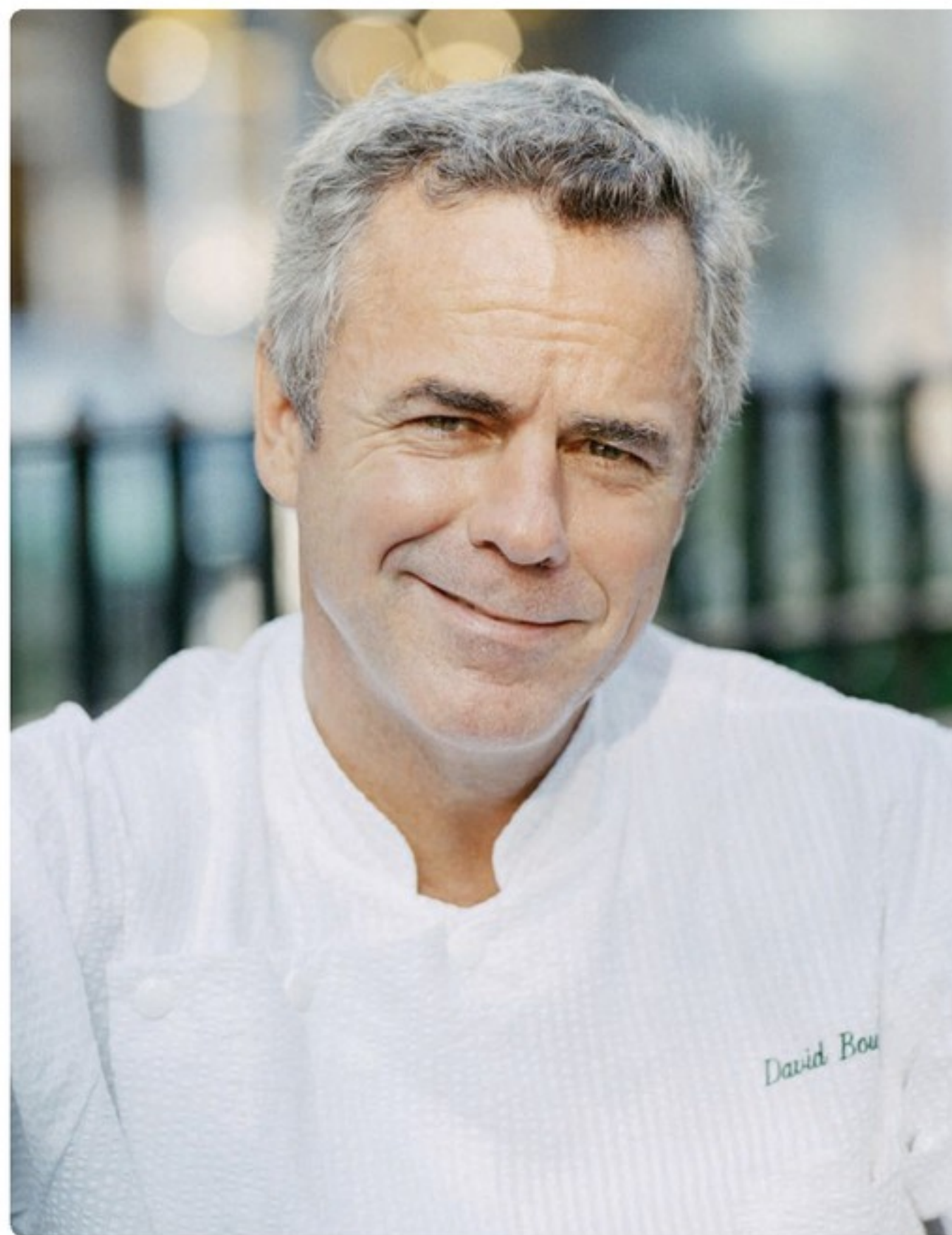
"My background is: If you have a great idea, I'd say, 'Come on, let's do it.' He wanted to know how many kids I have, the kids' ages, where they went to school, what they like to do for fun and what I did for fun. He had to get to know me as a person before he would entertain the idea of going into business with me."

By getting to know one another, as people and through food, the two men found that in cultural and culinary ways they weren't far apart.

"The main goal is very similar," Borgognone says, "creating something that's going to be perfect." Sushi is "very different from a plate of spaghetti, garlic and oil, but again it's very similar. Italian cuisine is very simple and minimalistic, and the simpler you are the better."

Which echoes Borgognone and Nakazawa's approach to sushi: "The fish is really the highlight, and the rice. It's buying the best ingredients that we could find in order to make it perfect."

While Nakazawa strives for perfection in his



IT'S A SMALL WORLD

(Left) Caviar at Sable's. (Right) French-trained David Bouley opened the Japanese restaurant Brushstroke.

EVAN SKLAR (LEFT), COURTESY CHEF BOULEY/NICOLE BARTELME

sushi creations, Borgognone has the same goal for the restaurant's service and ambiance. "I paint every three months," he says in his strong New York accent. "We keep it crisp; we keep it clean."

Brash and confident, Borgognone, 34, says running a Japanese restaurant is shaping him not just as a businessman but as a person. "As a restaurant owner, I've learned you get more bees with honey," he says.

Borgognone says he feels a strong kinship with the Japanese way of relentlessly seeking to be the best. "They're not content with just being good," he says. "They are looking for perfection. And I think it's rubbing off on me, not settling. Never settle."

A similar attitude has made Sable's the place to go for smoked salmon, sturgeon and pickled herring on the Upper East Side. Brothers Kenny and Danny Sze came from Hong Kong to New York City as teenagers and went right to work at the legendary Zabar's on Manhattan's Upper West Side, where they learned how to select, trim and slice smoked fish.

"At Zabar's, we started at the bottom," Kenny

says, but soon he became manager of the appetizer department, a post he held for 12 years. "Zabar's was like college for us. All the old-timers from Eastern Europe were there; now they're all gone or retired. They taught us how to make pickled herring, whitefish salad, chopped liver, chicken soup with matzo balls."

The brothers felt the Upper East Side lacked a great place for the kind of smoked fish and caviar beloved by the city's Jewish community. "I knew I was good, and that if I opened my own place it would be a success," Kenny says. The Sze brothers have endeared themselves to their customers by giving out tastes and peppering conversation with the occasional Yiddish phrase, such as *Chag Sameach* (Happy Holiday).

Sable's has now been open for a quarter-century. "We've got to be good," Danny says. "All our customers here are *mavens*; we have probably 80 to 90 percent Jewish customers. If we're not good, forget it."

Photos of celebrity customers paper the walls. "Rodney Dangerfield would come in here and say, 'Hey, how come no taste for me? I don't get

no respect.' He would stay and *schmooze* for a while," Danny says. "Mayor [Ed] Koch was a regular customer, too."

On the Lower East Side, where so many Jewish immigrants landed a century or more ago, a similar story has unfolded at Russ & Daughters. Opened in 1914, the smoked fish counter on Houston Street has been owned by the Russ family for more than a century.

Yet the man whom fourth-generation owners Niki Russ Federman and John Russ Tupper call "the soul of Russ & Daughters" is Herman Vargas, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic. In 1980, when he was 18, Vargas started there by washing dishes and peeling onions. He didn't expect to stay too long—he'd come to the U.S. to get an engineering degree—but found the family atmosphere akin to the communal feeling he enjoyed in the Dominican Republic.

Soon Vargas moved up to work the counter, selling everything from pickled herring to whitefish to caviar. A regular customer came in, saw Vargas and asked to speak to the manager. "Now



EAT UP

(Above) Sandwich from Sable's. (Below) Fish at Russ & Daughters.



you have Puerto Ricans working here? What does a Puerto Rican know about schmaltz herring and smoked salmon?" the man asked. In the '80s, Vargas says, "anyone in New York who spoke Spanish was considered Puerto Rican."

That customer "turned to me and says, 'Wait on me? Not in a million years,'" Vargas recalls. "I was like, wow, how will I break the barrier to let people know that I really want to serve them? I made a conscious decision not to allow rejection to be a hindrance."

Vargas noticed that the manager greeted customers by saying: "*Vos makht ir, yid?*" ("How are you doing?" literally, "How is a Jew doing?"). Vargas would take a little pad and phonetically write down, *Vos makht ir, yid*.

"So when a customer would come in, I'd say, '*Vos makht ir, yid?*' And the guy just cracked up laughing. He says, 'What is this, a Puerto Rican speaking Yiddish?' And he would say, 'Can you cut lox?' And I would say, 'Well, if I can speak Yiddish, I can certainly cut lox.'"

Vargas practiced the art of cutting smoked salmon very thin because, "I knew it was important for people who wanted the maximum amount of slices out of every pound, and also some people believe that the thinner you cut it the better it tastes."

Word on the street was Vargas was so skilled that you could read *The New York Times* through his smoked salmon slices. Calvin Trillin, who wrote about Russ & Daughters for *The New Yorker*, has a character in his novel, *Tepper Isn't Going Out*, called "Herman the Artistic Slicer."

And there are so many more stories: Italian-Brazilian restaurateur Marco Moreira became a celebrated sushi chef in the 1980s when just about every sushi chef was Japanese. He opened the sushi restaurant 15 East and also runs Tocqueville.

Moreira has just returned to his roots, having opened a sleek Brazilian eatery called Botequim at the Hyatt Union Square last September. "I am a Brazilian, non-Brazilian guy learning to make Brazilian cuisine," Moreira says. "Now that I'm opening a Brazilian restaurant, I feel like a foreigner."

Leonardo Vasquez left Guatemala 20 years ago and landed in Queens at a deli called Pastrami Queen that has since moved to Manhattan's Upper East Side. A Puerto Rican manager taught Vasquez how to cook pastrami, corned beef and other Jewish delicacies, Vasquez says. "He could tell us in Spanish how to make matzo ball soup."

Vasquez, 38, has spent more than half his life working at Pastrami Queen and makes some of the best pastrami and knishes in New York. "So famous the knishes ... we sell them every day, so many," he says. "The pastrami, same thing." But don't ask for the recipe. "We don't give it away," he says with a smile. "No way."

And then there's Marcus Samuelsson, the Ethi-



COMING TOGETHER
Alessandro Borgognone and Daisuke Nakazawa of Sushi Nakazawa.

opian-born, Swedish-raised chef whose Harlem restaurant, Red Rooster, serves African-American comfort food and has helped reinvigorate the neighborhood. Like many great chefs and immigrants, Samuelsson's ambitions seem boundless.

After tremendous success at New York's Aquavit, Samuelsson moved to Harlem and spent three years learning about the neighborhood, its culture and culinary traditions. He won a *Top Chef Masters* competition in 2010 and that year opened Red Rooster, which has brought countless people from other parts of the city and beyond to Harlem.

"You have to have a deeper interaction with the city," Samuelsson said on NPR's *Fresh Air*. "If you can connect the city, you can really change the footprint of dining."

And maybe even the way people see the world.

Michael Shapiro writes about travel and food for magazines including National Geographic Traveler. Raised in New York, he discovered smoked salmon when he was 3 years old on the first day of a family vacation in Florida and ordered "pink fish" every morning for the rest of that trip.

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Paige Wunderlich's picks

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WALK: A stroll along the **Highline**, an elevated park running through Chelsea, offers stellar views and a maze of gardens in spring bloom.

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SHOP: From **Saks Fifth Avenue** to funky boutiques in SoHo, New York is a shopper's paradise. Stop into the **Housing Works Bookstore Café** in SoHo, a

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ART: Within blocks of each other sits the highest concentration of art in the U.S., anchored by **The Met**, the largest museum in the U.S., the **Museum of Modern Art**, the **Frick Museum** and the **Guggenheim**.

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