

bon appétit

RESTAURANTS

Marcus Samuelsson Comes Home

At Marcus Addis, atop Ethiopia's tallest building, one of the world's most successful chefs is securing his legacy by preparing the next generation of talent.

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As we step into the elevator of an Addis Ababa skyscraper en route to Marcus Samuelsson's restaurant on top of the tallest building in East Africa, he's reminded of a moment from a year earlier when the most personal project of his career opened to the world.

Samuelsson's relatives traveled from their remote village for the christening of Marcus Addis. But there was a hurdle: the elevator. The children among them were thrilled, even if they didn't know what to expect stepping into a machine that cruises up 46 flights, opening to panoramic views that sprawl to the distant mountains of Ethiopia. "They were like, 'Oh, we love it.' But the older generation, they've never been in an elevator," he said. "Going vertical is really something different."

It's early January, days before Ethiopian Christmas, and Samuelsson, along with his wife, Maya Haile Samuelsson, want to show the groundwork they've laid for the future of hospitality in Ethiopia. They are in the middle of a multiyear process of training staff, finding reliable purveyors, and creating a level of kitchen and dining room consistency that is on par with the kind of execution we take for granted at Samuelsson's restaurants.

The moment symbolizes the empire Samuelsson has built, but also what he wants to leave the next generation of chefs, as well his kids, eight-year-old Zion and three-year-old Grace, as he continues to publicly explore his complex relationship with the country where he was born and spent a lifetime trying to learn. He's paying tribute the way he knows how, through food.

Samuelsson was torn from Ethiopia in 1974, a two-year-old boy in the center of a civil war, sickened by a tuberculosis epidemic. After his mother died, he and his older sister were adopted by a nurturing Swedish family. He returned 25 years ago as one of the world's most acclaimed chefs, but still a young man in search of his identity, armed with his greatest asset, a deep understanding of flavor to guide his search for a new cuisine that would include Africa, especially Ethiopia. "When you're an adopted kid, you are ripped away from an identity.... It's almost like swimming upward," he says.

At 54 years old, Samuelsson is at the height of his career, no longer in search of identity. He's carved his own path of what it means to be Ethiopian when you were raised in Sweden, trained in Europe, cooked across the world, and for most of your adult life called New York home. He's constructed a new cuisine and in the process given a generation of Black chefs opportunities to explore their complex multicultural identities through their own food.

On that first trip, a local spice merchant told Samuelsson that Ethiopians use berbere in "everything." Today it's a workhorse on his menus. It adds heat to cocktails. It anchors the cure for one of his signature dishes, the Swedini, a take on gravlax that appears on nearly all of his menus.

Doro wat, the spicy slow-cooked stew regarded as Ethiopia's national dish, is reinterpreted in exciting ways. In Addis, its layers are deconstructed: The chicken leg is fried, the egg is deviled, both served alongside a "doro wat lasagna" wrapped in puff pastry that mimics a Wellington. At Marcus DC, slated to open in April, it's folded into a playful handheld empanada.

Teff, the Ethiopian-grown grain used to make injera, is the source of Samuelsson's current obsession, teff pasta. In New York and DC, teff is part of the mixture for fluffy gnocchi. At Marcus Addis, he and chef Odi Omotto spent hours perfecting ratios for a teff noodle—hand-cut tagliatelle tossed with roasted tomato Bolognese, spinach, lemon zest, and Parmesan.

Similar in popularity of super grains like South American quinoa and West African fonio, Samuelsson is focused on how teff can have global influence. He's working with brewmaster Garrett Oliver on a teff beer, similar to the one Oliver brewed using fonio. He gets excited at the possibilities: "You have no understanding of the impact, what it would do for this place."

The Past

What Samuelsson has accomplished in a generation since his Ethiopian homecoming exceeds even his wildest dreams. Accolades include eight James Beard Awards, a *Top Chef Masters* championship, and more than a dozen restaurants across the globe.

Along the way, one word—*soul*—has guided that journey. "I think it was the word *soul*... soul-searching and learning about myself. Going from boy to man," he says. The last 25 years have been about "being a man," and understanding the complex identity—New York, Sweden, and Ethiopia—and "knowing how to navigate them."

It pushed him to travel Africa in search of the *Soul of a New Cuisine*, the seminal book about flavors from the continent, and pen his critically acclaimed memoir, *Yes, Chef*, in which he talks candidly about his journey as a Black chef navigating the mostly white world of fine dining.

Soul drove him to find his father, a man he was long told had died but was very much alive, remarried and living in a farming village a few hours outside Addis Ababa with eight unknown half sisters and brothers. "In 25 years," since returning to Ethiopia he says, "what I remember the most is meeting my biological father, being introduced to his new family, my siblings, and how much Maya and now Zion and Grace have been part of that journey."

The quest led him in 2010 to leave the safety of Aquavit, the Scandinavian fine dining restaurant where he was the youngest chef to earn a three-star review in *The New York Times* and embrace a new cuisine that added African and African American flavors to his range.

Samuelsson's Ethiopian experiences inform every restaurant he has opened since: Merkato 55, the short-lived Manhattan spot that was ultimately ahead of its time. The wildly successful Red Rooster, his homage to African American cuisine, Africa's contributions to it, and Harlem, where he calls home. Hav & Mar, which opened in 2022, is a marrying of Swedish and Ethiopian flavors with dishes like a pan-seared hake served with shiro and gomen, Ethiopian greens similar to collards.

In 2023 came Metropolis, across from the 9/11 Memorial. He had cooked in the towers a week before they fell. Marcus DC, the upcoming seafood-focused restaurant that will soon open in the nation's capital, home to the largest population of Ethiopians outside of Ethiopia. Marcus Addis is part of that journey.

The Present

Samuelsson has met a number of Ethiopians over the years who have guided his search. None are more important than Maya Haile Samuelsson, an Ethiopian-born fashion model who also took a circuitous route to New York where the two met. He credits her with helping him to see that "there are many ways to be Ethiopian."

"That's what Maya added over the 16-plus years we've been together...deep, deep understanding and knowledge of what it means to be Ethiopian, not just being born in Ethiopia," Samuelsson says.

Over the years, the two have passed on many offers to open a restaurant in Ethiopia, but being on the top floor of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia building was an opportunity to be part of the future—a "spaceship" as Samuelsson calls it—to give staff the training to launch upwardly mobile careers in hospitality, to guide students who'll fashion the city's next generation of restaurants and bars, to excite diners about the unrealized potential of what Ethiopian food can be.

He could be "anywhere," but chose Ethiopia, Haile Samuelsson says. "Going into our culture is not easy. We don't live there and Marcus doesn't speak the language, but he speaks a love language, which is food, and they trusted him."

In the US, Samuelsson's celebrity status is present everywhere. To Ethiopians, who may not have encountered his work, he is the chef who looks like them, even if he doesn't talk like them, who cooked inside the White House at President Barack Obama's first state dinner for then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Shortly after the elevator ride on our first morning in Addis, 12 local culinary school students the couple met a year ago are at the restaurant, part of a partnership where Ethiopian students receive hospitality training that helps them stand out on the local and global stage. "The restaurant is important," Samuelsson says, "but also important is the pipeline and the relationship with the school."

Four students, handpicked by school instructors, receive a three-month internship at Marcus Addis. The first group has just wrapped, and the entire class has come to the restaurant. For most, it's their first visit to the kitchen and dining room. Some students, like Samuelsson's relatives a year ago, have never been in an elevator. "You're on top of Addis right now!" he says, as he welcomes them.

The Future

Asked to share their dreams, a young chef says hers is to open a bakery called Beyond Sweets. Samuelsson tells her that he and his wife will be there for ribbon-cutting.

"Hold on to the dream because any industry, anywhere, is going to go through ups and downs, and there's going to be times where you're going to doubt," he says. He shares his own: "My dream was to be able one day to come back to Africa, to open a restaurant, and to be able to be in Ethiopia and work with the present and the future. I am lucky enough to work with the present, and that you guys are the future."

The next day we drive three hours to a new eco-lodge in the mountains of Wenchi, a crater lake on the country's highest volcano. Samuelsson has never been here, but immediately sees the untapped potential as he experiences parts of Ethiopia he has yet to discover.

On a boat ride, he is taken by the untouched water, clear of pollutants. He starts to imagine a future where fish at his restaurant might come from the lake. Later that week, he aspirationally adds Wenchi to the menu—Lake Wenchi Crispy Fish Salad, a dish with crispy rice, avocado, pickles, tomato-coconut sauce, and lemon vinaigrette.

As we hike through the mountains, he stops to study a field of enset, a drought-resistant plant related to bananas that is a key source of food for Ethiopians. The leaves are used to wrap fish, as well as to hatch homes. Its nutrient-rich bulbs anchor Ethiopian diet staples, including kocho, a fermented flatbread, and bulla, a porridge.

That night Marcus joins the chefs to cook a special meal for local officials and guests. A fresh goat has been slaughtered. It's custom for a major celebration. As the sun sets over the crater lake, Marcus cooks a simple dish that he says was served at his wedding, but adds his own spin, seasoning it with berbere, soy sauce, rosemary, and garlic.

"This dish is 'guramyle,'" he tells the crowd as the popular song by Ethiopian artist Gigi streams from a smartphone. The word loosely translates to "what is mine is mine" but touches on themes of cultural identity, language, and nationality. It defines Samuelsson and Maya, and they turn to it throughout the trip.

Translated to cuisine, guramyle is traditional Ethiopian ingredients, including teff, berbere, and shiro, reimaged through new techniques and methods that pay respect to the past. "It's not steeped in tradition," Samuelsson says. "It's really of Ethiopia and the West."

At Marcus Addis, "guramyle" graces the top of the menu to guide diners, local and foreign, on a journey through a meal that defines an evolving Ethiopia and Samuelsson himself.

