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For Itinerant Chefs, Home at the Range

Seeking remuneration with less perspiration

By Sylvie Bigar



Shopping at the Green Thumb.

“Hi, girls!” sings an elegant young man as he strolls in with the breezy confidence of a regular. Casually stylish, he has a slight British accent and a flashing smile that matches the sparkling stud in his ear.

“What do you need today, Karl?” asks Debbie Lehman, one of the owners of the Green Thumb farm stand in Water Mill. Within the next few minutes, he tastes, smells, and even presses his thumb on the fruits and vegetables while filling up two entire carts.

Karl McDermott, 35, is a private chef, one of many in the food business today who have gone through culinary school with dreams of toques and starred restaurants, but who, after a few sweaty years on the line, have opted for a different lifestyle; one with more remuneration and less perspiration. Over the next few months, the Press Arts & Living section will explore the often overlooked world of the private chef and meet more of the men and women who have chosen that path.

Chef Karl was born in Kingston, Jamaica, but he remembers most vividly the weekend trips to the family farm, close to the sugar cane fields near St. Thomas.

“The roads were so bad,” he said, “we would drive up to a point where we’d meet the caretaker waiting for us with the donkey.” Even though his father had his own insurance firm in town, once at the farm, Dad was the one picking and cooking. His son, the future chef, started cooking when he was 6.

“Usually, my Mom did the baking, my Dad the savory, and me, well, I started with a scrambled egg,” Mr. McDermott said. ““Take it out, take it out!” yelled my father after a few minutes too many on the stove.”

Then there was his first cornmeal cake, “hard as a rock.” But the young child persisted, delighting in the infinite choice of raw materials for Jamaican cuisine: ubiquitous plantains, Indian spices, African yams and bok choy introduced by Spanish buccaneers.

The would-be chef studied first to become an accountant. “Nine to five at a desk,” he said. “I hated it.” After that, he put in a few years at Air Jamaica. “The food sucked,” he said, laughing and rolling his eyes.

His parents emigrated to New York City, settling in Brooklyn. Soon after, his father became ill. His mother, a private nurse, quit her job to take care of her husband and money became tight. The son moved in with his parents and took the first work he could

find, his first restaurant job. It was at a place called Mobay—for Montego Bay—in Brooklyn.

“I started as a dishwasher,” he said, but, after three months, his boss needed an accountant, and promoted him to personal assistant. “Every possible occasion,” Mr. McDermott said, “I would slip into the kitchen and help out, until the chef finally said those famous words, ‘You’re good at this, you should go to cooking school.’” He enrolled at what was then Peter Kump’s New York Cooking School, now the Institute of Culinary Education in Manhattan.

“I quickly volunteered for what we called the family meals—the lunches for the students and the chef-instructors,” he said, noting that he became obsessed with cookbooks. A girlfriend from Rome is remembered fondly for her artichokes alla giudea and her osso buco recipes. “I ended up cooking for Julia Child and Lidia Bastianich!” he said. “It was nerve racking.”

After graduation he took the job of garde-manger at Tocqueville, a French/ Japanese restaurant on East 15th Street in Manhattan. “I was in charge of the salads—plating, prepping, and also the pastry department. I worked from 7 a.m. to 1 a.m., and then on my day off, I worked on the line at Union Square Café.” Months went by, “Long hours, no pay.” Quite a letdown from the sweet life he had imagined for himself.

“One day,” he said, “the maitre d’ at Tocqueville told me one of his friends, a private chef, was looking for a souschef.” Chef Karl jumped ship.

Today, he works full-time for Mr. and Mrs. Gregory Olsen in Water Mill. Once a week, he sits down with the lady of the house and proposes menus for seven days’ lunches and dinners. Then, armed with an ingredient road map he sets out to battle Montauk Highway in his shiny BMW. Shopping is a key part of the private chef’s work. “I regularly go to the Green Thumb,” he says. “They spoil me there. Sometimes, I can even pick my own vegetables from the fields, and feel I’m in Jamaica again.” For meat, he favors Cromer’s on Noyac Road, and for fish, the Seafood Shop in Wainscott.

Said Mrs. Olsen, “Karl is now a part of the family, and a pleasure to work with. He has a lot of charisma and is very accommodating. If we plan a party of eight and suddenly four more guests show up, he is totally unflappable, always cheerful ... and a great ping-pong player too.”

The food? “Artistic and innovative,” she added. In addition to food and wine, Mr. McDermott oversees the table settings and the wait staff. “You see,” he says, “as a private chef, you can cook new dishes all the time.” He enjoys introducing new ingredients as well; wild ramps from Montauk one night, mangosteen sorbet another.

On his days off or when the Olsens are away (they own homes in Manhattan and Delray Beach, Florida, where he travels regularly) Chef Karl freelances, either in private homes or for largescale events. This year, he cooked for Jerry Seinfeld and his family, and for Hillary Clinton. And when he can find a few hours, he teaches at Loaves & Fishes Cooking School at the Bridgehampton Inn.

“Yesterday,” he says, “I met a bank teller who told me, ‘I want to be a chef.’ I told her, ‘it’s a lot of work, it can be glamorous and you can make good money. But if you don’t know what you want, it can turn into your worst nightmare.’”

Happily, Chef Karl does not have that problem.