

C'EST MALADE!

CELEBRATED FOOD NETWORK CANADA HOST, RESTAURATEUR, AND MEMBER OF THE CLUB SPORTIF MAA, CHUCK HUGHES SHARES HIS VIEWS ON MONTRÉAL'S CULTURAL REVIVAL, THE EVOLUTION OF FOOD TRENDS, AND HOW EVERYONE'S A CRITIC.

By Carolyn Patricia Grisold

In a professional kitchen, the garde-manger is the keeper of the food, responsible for everything in the larder. Usually a beginner's role, it offers training in the preparation of fish, meats, vegetables, sauces, desserts – the restaurant's entire menu. The garde-manger may never get the public credit that he deserves, but the chef knows his value. Especially when the chef began his own culinary career in the trenches, like Chuck Hughes did.

Best known as the owner and chef of Montréal hotspots Garde-Manger and Le Bremner, Hughes' credits his success to every member of his team, from the larder to the office.

"My next thing is gonna be dishwashers," Hughes says. "Those are the people that get no respect. It's not an easy job. But it's one of those things that, if you don't love it, then you're not gonna last."

And Hughes is proof-positive that passion pays off. Garde-Manger, the English translation of his French cookbook, hit bookstands in April. It's dedicated to anyone who's ever cooked on the line or washed dishes.

In Toronto to promote the new book with a schedule rammed full of public appearances, I meet Hughes at the offices of his

publisher, HarperCollins Canada. I ask him if he's had the chance to hit up any dining hotspots while he's here.

Hughes laughs. "I wanted to hang out with my friends," he says. "I had a coffee at Enoteca, and Robert [Gentile, head chef of Buca] has been texting me, 'Bro, when are you coming!?' and I'm scared to respond because I'm like, 'Never.' Every time I come to Toronto it's the same fiasco."

With press tours starting with 5 am appearances on breakfast television, Hughes continues non-stop through the night. The day before he was teaching kids to cook at The Stop Community Food Centre's Green Barn on Christie; that night, judging a cookie competition at The Drake. Following our interview, he hosted a live internet chat for Indigo Books; after that, a food and film event at TIFF Bell Lightbox.

"But look, I'm lucky," Hughes says. "You know, I get to do both. I have the best of both worlds. I get to work in a restaurant – really. I get to wash dishes. I get to prep stuff. I get to deep fry shit. You know, I get to have a good time. And I get to do this."

Besides working the line in his two popular restaurants in Old

Montréal, his television show, Chuck's Day Off, is now in its third season and airs in over 20 countries.

"I never thought I would be on TV," he insists. "I never thought I'd have my own book. I never dreamt of that stuff. People [say to] me all the time, you know, 'It must be your dream.' I'm like, 'No, I never dreamt this big!'"

Hughes' success has exploded since the launch of his first restaurant six years ago. He even beat Bobby Flay on Iron Chef America last March. At 34, he was the youngest Canadian chef to win the title. Known just as much for his tattooed, rock-and-roll attitude as his impressive culinary skills, he's also been named the next big celebrity chef by New York Magazine's Grub Street blog.

When asked if the rise of food blogs has helped or hindered his shooting star, Hughes says it's good and it's bad. "Nowadays everybody's a food blogger," he jokes. "Oh, you have a cameraphone? You're a food blogger."

"I think back to when I started cooking," he continues. "We didn't have Food Network, there was no internet. And now [on Twitter], how many times a week do I get 'Hey, check out my blog!' I'm like, okay, you have two followers. It's basically you and your aunt that go to a restaurant every Thursday and take a couple pics of a half-eaten dish, for which the chef for sure wants to stab you in the throat because it looks like garbage."

Bien sûr, I concur... secretly making a mental note to dismantle my blog tomorrow.

"Everybody's got something to say, and everybody knows this and knows that. You know, you go to the restaurant and literally the plate comes and [Hughes pretends to take photos with his iPhone]. It's like 'Dude, it's cold...' Yeah, no wonder it's cold, you've been taking pictures for five minutes! And I'm competing with that!"

He pauses, then adds, "Well, in the honest truth, it's not a competition."

It never could be. Because no matter how much we—erm, those food bloggers work on a dish at home, Hughes and his team knocks them out, day after day.

"The way I prepare for my night is not like the way you prepare for your night at home."

On the plus side? "It's been great," he says, "because it's brought people into the kitchen that wouldn't be. I'm loving that people are more knowledgeable about food and cooking more for themselves. So, you know, I'm part of the problem, I'm part of the solution."

This evolution of thinking about food and cooking has opened the kitchen up to the public, literally, as many restaurants now showcase their back of house to patrons. What was once hidden away is now part of the appeal.

"There's a whole elitism about food that's not there as much anymore because people have realized we all need to eat. Like the '80s and '90s were the worst for that [elitism]. And when I started cooking in the '90s it was all about that pretence. It was like, 'Ooh, you're a chef.' Dude, I'm a f--king rat. I work in the worst conditions, 15-16 hours a day, over hot ovens, with like knives everywhere, and in an environment that's just like..."

Vulgar?

"Yeah," he says. "Kitchens are rough. So our kitchen's wide open. Our guys need to be clean because we're working with food... what people know of a chef, and what they think of it in their heads, you know, it couldn't be further from the truth. Instead of hiding that for so many years, we're bringing it out into the open."

This trend of turning away from culinary elitism is growing fast in Canadian cities like Montréal, Vancouver and Toronto.

I tell him that food bloggers everywhere have been saying, IMHO, Toronto cuisine has become experimental in a way that remains really... basic.

"Yeah, totally," he chuffs. "And you know that's not what we used to hear of Toronto. We used to always hear the food's boring, it's dull – but it's not true. I feel like Toronto's had a major food revival."

I ask if Montréal, too, is experiencing a certain renaissance. "Big time," Hughes replies.

"The thing that happened with Montréal is that everybody's always thought we were so amazing and we [never had to live up



PHOTO BY MARTIN LAPRISE

“EVERYBODY'S GOT SOMETHING TO SAY, AND EVERYBODY KNOWS THIS AND KNOWS THAT. YOU KNOW, YOU GO TO THE RESTAURANT AND LITERALLY THE PLATE COMES AND [HUGHES PRETENDS TO TAKE PHOTOS WITH HIS IPHONE]. IT'S LIKE 'DUDE, IT'S COLD...' YEAH, NO WONDER IT'S COLD, YOU'VE BEEN TAKING PICTURES FOR FIVE MINUTES! AND I'M COMPETING WITH THAT!”

to that]. I think in the past 10 years, it's just been such a major, major change. We've stepped away from the classic French, and we've started thinking on our own."

And that thinking has led to a new wave of young chefs who are mixing tradition with new flavours to find their own identity. They're definitely at the top of their game, with many great restaurants opening up across Montréal. I ask what role Garde-Manger plays in this cultural revival – whether Hughes sees his first restaurant as a forbearer of the resurgence, or a result of it.

"I'm gonna put us in the forebearers category because our area, Old Montréal, used to be a tourist trap. You know like Inuit [clothing], stuffed polar bears... what a tourist thinks of Canada. All that stuff, that's everywhere. And slowly but surely that whole area has become more and more local. We're kinda taking back that part of the city. We have two restaurants in that area. Then Joe Beef is in an area that's called Little Burgundy, which was a real ghetto. And they've opened two restaurants on that street. And now people are coming down [there]. I think that we've contributed to gentrifying and making it more of a local scene."

Hughes was drawn to Old Montréal because that's where he grew up. Before he launched Garde-Manger, he and business partners Tim Rozon and Kyle Marshall-Nares lived on top of the then-derelict building. They had no clue what it was – or would become. That is until one day when the owner, a 82-year-old blind man, had his lawyer showing the place to somebody else.

"We peeked in and were like, 'Dude, this is the spot,' you know? And it was a real shithole. Nothing had been there for like the past 10 years so it was dusty, gross, the basement was filled with crap. The guy that was in there was like, 'There's no way that I'm taking this.' But it was exactly what the three friends needed. They were broke, and the property was a real fixer-upper."

"We took all the chairs and we refinished them, we took old iron fireplace doors and we made mirrors with them," says Hughes. "We were in *W Magazine*, in their architectural section. And they were asking us what our inspiration was, and I'm like, 'I ain't got no money!' You know? That's my inspiration."

That kind of makeshift mentality is evident in not only the décor but in Garde-Manger's cuisine too. Just as Old Montréal becomes gentrified, food trends are going back to that unpolished, rough beginning and turning dishes into something creative and unique that still maintains their simple essence – ultimately letting the ingredients speak for themselves.

Hughes agrees. "I was talking about that today... how the future of food is the past. And it makes sense, right? In the '50s and '60s food was [similar to] technology in the sense that everything needed to be premade and modern. Up until, I'd say, the '80s and even the '90s it was like if [there was] a black strawberry from Tibet, and 20 people died to get it, then we wanted it. And now it's... the complete opposite. So in that respect, food culture is going in such a good way... [although] we still have so much work to do in that direction."



PHOTO BY DOMINIQUE LAFOND

For Hughes, there is no doubt that his direction is up. He was in Asia for a month, in Europe for three weeks – and that's just in the past six months. I ask what's next.

"I have a new show coming out in September called Chuck's Week Off," he says. "It just doesn't stop."

Shooting took place in Mexico over two months, as Hughes spent a week in each of the country's eight regions.

"It was phenomenal. In Oaxaca I had chapulines, which are grasshoppers. I had a good time and I think it will be a fun show. It's cooking and travelling... it's basically like Anthony Bourdain, but a little bit more happy."

Bourdain is the perfect comparison for Hughes. He has that same rawness, that ability to be at once decadent yet crude. It comes from being good at what you do, remembering where you came from and not needing to pretend. There is no doubt in my mind that Chuck Hughes is the next big celebrity chef.

Who says bloggers don't know it all?