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Iron Chef Kingston: Samir Hrichi is keeping it real at Ship to Shore (**video, recipe**)

Published: Wednesday, February 16, 2011

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IT'S HARD to believe Samir Hrichi doesn't have his own cooking show on The Food Network.

The guy takes the craft to a whole new level, pouring every fiber of his soul into it.

He's fluid, chatty, and he likes to keep it real.

When you turn the Flip video camera on him, the charisma explodes in his kitchen at Ship to Shore American Bistro at the Rondout.

Hrichi moves about as if he were doing the Electric Slide to some hip music playing in his head.

He rhythmically waves his green spatula like a wand that whips up superlative creations.

There would be plenty to eat the day the Freeman came by. Hrichi would make sure of that.

He had four dishes planned, and he'd make sure his guests fully understood both his methods and cooking philosophies before they sat down to the mid-day feast.

“My food is very, very simple, very rustic,” Hrichi said, moving three slides to the left and stirring some prosciutto into a risotto mixture on the stove.

It popped and sizzled under the roaring flame. Hrichi expertly lifted the pan and tossed the rice mixture into the air.

“We’re searing, we’re grilling, we’re poaching, we’re butchering. The details are important,” he said.

While the risotto was sautéing, Hrichi turned to the raw 14-ounce New York sirloin on the cutting board.

It is one of Ship to Shore’s most popular menu items, he explained.

With a pinch of cracked, black pepper and a dash of kosher salt, the slab of meat was ready for the hot broiler.

“We like to sear our meats, primarily to keep it nice and juicy inside,” Hrichi said.

No doubt, watching him in the kitchen is an educational experience as he explains the science behind certain cooking methods.

It is also an art form, a sort of poetry, in which a man's work is measured by his passion, new ideas and keen eye for physical beauty.

Witness the tuna stack he just put together.

It looks like a Napoleon-style dessert, only it is made with crispy won-ton, fresh avocado and yellow-fin tuna.

"See how pretty that looks in that bright red color. It's just beautiful," he said, adding a garnish of julienne green onions.

Hrichi, a 1992 graduate of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, could give the personalities on the popular "Iron Chef" a run for their money.

Not only is he bold, imaginative and generous, but his predilection for quality shows in the dishes he serves to his guests.

"My food is not complicated," he said, turning on his heel to give his attention to the asparagus he would serve with the sirloin.

"There's a lot of gimmicks out there, and we're not one of them. We're not selling music, bands, jingles, hats and plastic boats. People who want to eat good food come here," he said.

"We also use very expensive products. I choose to buy the good stuff."

That includes the fresh produce he buys from local farmers, the Atlantic farm-raised salmon from Canada or the hearty steaks he orders from the award-winning Iowa Beef Products.

The four separate dishes were now ready and presented at one of the booths in the 1,500-square-foot restaurant that's housed in an 1870 storefront.

Hrichi took his place across from the Freeman reporter and photographer.

He's been in and around the restaurant business for 28 years, he explained, passing around the plates. Hrichi got his start washing dishes at the age of 13.

His father is from Morocco and his mother is from Latvia, so he was exposed to exotic cuisine at an early age.

After he graduated from the CIA, he did stints as a chef in New York City, including one at the high-end steakhouse known as Cite.

But it wasn't enough. Hrichi had always wanted to have his own restaurant.

He began with Sami's Pizzeria on Broadway, and when the owner of Ship to Shore wanted to sell, Hrichi jumped at the opportunity.

“At that time, (former Mayor) T.R. Gallo believed in young people building businesses,” Hrichi said.

So he borrowed \$15,000, took the plunge and has been operating Ship to Shore for 12 years.

He now has 14 people—10 of whom are full-time—working for him.

Although Hrichi loves what he does and his location, he knows he could take his talent anywhere and be successful.

“It crosses my mind that I could go to Westchester and make three times the money, but this is where I am, and I believe in this area,” Hrichi said.

But like most in the field, Hrichi has seen business drop because of the economy.

“Kingston has been a tough struggle for the past two years,” he said. “Before that, we were very busy all the time. The recession did affect us, but I stood my ground.

“I’m not a gimmick guy. Here, it’s all about good food, good wine and good service. Anyone who’s been here knows that. I go out of my way, and people who appreciate good food know that.”

As he and his guests continued to share the hearty food and good discussion, Hrichi also wanted to make the point that he’s proud to be a local bistro owner.

“It’s a true bistro, and everyone says it’s a great restaurant,” he said.

A recent Zagat review bears witness to that.

“Excellent technique. The food is always superb,” is how it described Ship to Shore.

In fact, the restaurant continues to be called “the Hudson Valley’s highest-rated American bistro.”

No doubt, Ship to Shore feels upscale, and its contemporary cooking trends, with an emphasis on fresh, local ingredients separate it from other city establishments.

“When it comes to sustainable foods, you need to know where the trends are. Food hasn’t changed, but we have options now, and we’re just trying to educate people,” he said.

A big part of Hrichi’s sustainable-food philosophy is his belief in the Hudson Valley.

He has invested a lot in his community, and he believes in its future. This is where he has chosen to raise his family and lay down his roots.

At 41, Hrichi is the proud father of two children, with another one on the way in May.

His wife, Sarah, handles the social networking and marketing ends of the business.

They're committed to their employees, who are part of the Hudson Valley's fabric.

It all goes back to believing in the community in which they live, he said.

"I want people to know that my belief in Ship to Shore in the city of Kingston is keeping it local," Hrichi said.

"We have some of the best products and food, and we're contributing to a beautiful waterfront district."

The plates were just about cleaned off by now, and the Freeman reporter had to run off to another assignment.

Before the luncheon ended, the question just had to be asked.

Has he ever considered doing a cooking show? After all, he is such a natural.

Even if the thought had occurred to him, Hrichi announced that the Freeman video gig was his first.

But you could almost see his brain at work. Talent is a hard thing to hide, even if you're not reaching for the stars or the national accolades.

"Things just happen in the kitchen," he said matter of factly.

"They just happen when you're curious about making something new."

RECIPE: Ship to Shore Tuna Stack

INGREDIENTS:

4 oz. high quality yellow fin tuna

1 oz. black and white sesame seeds

Kosher salt to taste

Fresh cracked black pepper to taste

1/2 ripe avocado

3 wonton skins (shallow fried)

Chili sauce (to taste)

Soy sauce (to taste)

PREPARATION:

Heat saute pan

Add a touch of sesame oil

Season tuna with salt and pepper

Dredge in sesame seeds both sides

Sear tuna three seconds on each side

Slice thin, served sushi style

Layer with avocado and wontons

Drizzle soy sauce

Paint plate with chili sauce

Serve stack and garnish with julienne green onions

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