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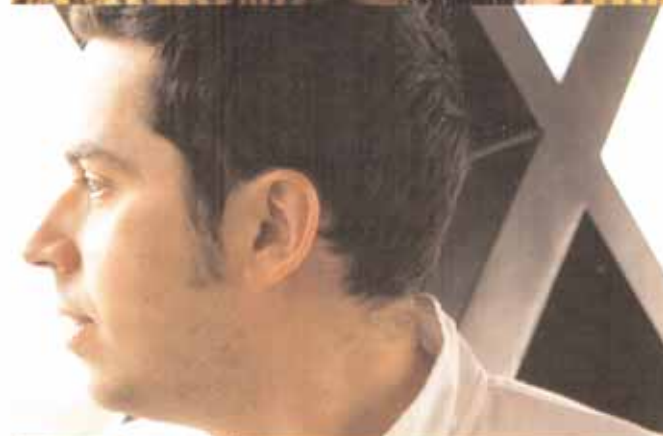
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cover story

YOUTH *IS* SERVED

Canada's hospitality industry is growing at a brisk pace, with new bistros, bôites and brasseries opening each day in regions across the country. For every restaurant that closes, it seems like three new ones pop up, making competition for customers, and great chefs, tougher than ever. But it's also created a wealth of opportunities for young culinarians to realize their dreams. In our annual chefs' issue, *F&H* profiles five young chefs whose cuisine is mature beyond their years. Collectively, they're working hard to ensure Generation X is synonymous with culinary success.



THE BUTCHER

Any way you slice it, butcher cum chef's nose-to-tail, farm-to-plate cuisine is a hit

By SIGNE LANGFORD // Photography by MARGARET MULLIGAN

Down in the bright cellar kitchen at Cowbell on Toronto's west side, the intoxicating aroma of butter wafts from trays of freshly baked croissants, and legs of gauze-wrapped house-cured prosciutto hang from the ceiling. Only one year old, Cowbell has enjoyed a generous helping of good press, and at 37, chef/owner Mark Cutrara seems principled and mellow beyond his years. Together with his wife and business partner, Karin Culliton, they're helping revitalize a downtrodden part of town with their popular 30-seat bistro-style boîte, while raising two young children.

For Cutrara, these are long days, but he finds the energy not in some ego-driven run at culinary stardom, but rather in his desire to succeed in this business. His ego comes into play in his unwillingness to compromise. "We bake our own bread, do our own smoking and curing, and churn our own butter. We're maintaining the ideal of what real hospitality is," he says. "Someone is there, really taking care of you."

Like many of his contem-

poraries, Cutrara has a vision and a mission to define Toronto cuisine — something that's a work in progress — by working with the seasons and local producers. But in creating his culinary identity, Cutrara retrained himself and his team in how they think about food and eating, how they approach the plate, the ingredients, and how they sell the menu. In essence, he has gone back in time to look to the future.

When it comes to meat, most cooks know how to pick up the phone, call a supplier, and ask for seven strip loins, says Cutrara, an experienced butcher. "We don't know how to deal with the whole animal." Before Cowbell, Cutrara was a chef at Globe Bistro, but he also staged at The Healthy Butcher in Toronto's west end. "I cut beef until my hands were claws." It was here that he became a believer in naturally raised meat, and in bringing in a whole pig or cow, not just prime cuts. "In buying the whole animal,

I'm supporting my farmer 100 per cent. I'm making a commitment to him, leaving less of a carbon footprint and reconnecting with the spirituality of food."

If good karma equals good business, Cowbell is successful on every level. "The numbers look good, and this is the bistro of my dreams," says Cutrara proudly. "It's not just about good food, but about good ethics, too. My other goal was to make my children, (Max, 9, and Sloane, 5), proud of what I do, to balance the time I'm not going to be able to be with them."

But love is only part of the story, the other is hard work, dedication — his core staff has been with him since opening day — creativity, and wowing 'em with a new concept in restaurant eating, that Cutrara calls "Nose to tail, farm to plate." "We use 100 per cent of the animal, right down to rendering the fat, and using the bones for marrow and stock. And during the summer and fall, we preserve produce



at the height of its ripeness and abundance for use in the winter. It's a resourceful way to run a kitchen."

Resourceful, and risky. "That's the nature of our restaurant. We take risks every day," says Cutrara. "We don't think like a normal restaurant." Free-range, pastured meat and organic produce come at a premium — he's paid up to \$15 per pound for heirloom carrots — but judging by the customers

who fill this charming, Parisian-style dining room night after night, that's a price they're willing to pay.

The challenging part is finding delicious uses for all the lesser cuts of meat, but that's where the creativity of his team shines. As a leader, his style is described as "democratic" by front of house manager, Neal Murphy. Cutrara agrees, "I don't get mad very often, I treat things professionally. We have management meetings to sort

things out." He also brings his ideal of sustainability to his work force. "I treat them well. I pay them a living wage and we take time off. I shut down for three weeks in the first year!" But Cutrara readily acknowledges that he asks quite a bit of his staff; "I don't have a printed menu — it changes every day — so I demand a lot from my service team."

Cutrara cites Toronto's godfather of local and sustainable dining, Jamie Kennedy,

as his biggest influence. "I draw on his ideals of food and working with local and seasonal ingredients. I also got my management style from him. He's very fair, calm." Cutrara says he learned about the business of food from his mentor as well. "Everything was well thought-out and organized. Every leaf of parsley was documented. That's the mark of a true chef, *mise en place*. That's what makes a superior chef, being organized." □