



Image: Adrian Houston

# Under The Curtain

Marcus Samuelsson discusses a new home for Red Rooster, digging food and why diversity is the soul of a restaurant.

Words: Harry McKinley

There's a strangeness to frequenting restaurants out of hours. The boisterous diners, background music and cacophony of the open kitchens all on pause, and in their stay empty seats, creaking floorboards and harsh, functional lighting. I'm at Red Rooster at London's The Curtain, a new Shoreditch venue that blends guestrooms, F&B and a private members club.

Marcus Samuelsson is the man behind the restaurant and a globally recognised chef who – now in his late 40s – has built an empire that includes a myriad of restaurants, frequent television appearances a half-dozen bestselling books.

This isn't the first Red Rooster, of course. The original, in New York's Harlem, has long been regarded as Samuelsson's flagship and is a place where attitude, ambience and community spirit are arguably as important as the cuisine: elevated American comfort food that reflects the diversity of the once-gritty, now less so neighbourhood.

Here in Shoreditch that brand of American soul has been translated into an eclectic space where disparate art adorns the walls, clashing African fabrics line the seats and

where the bar is fashioned from planks of wood, and what looks like scaffolding poles. It's a suitably egalitarian space that works for the neighbourhood. After all, Shoreditch, like Harlem, has seen its own reinvention this generation; from shabby but cool to not so shabby and possibly not as cool.

When Samuelsson arrives he embodies the same character as the restaurant. His trousers are bright and patterned, and he carries himself with an ease that is neither overly confident nor overly meek.

In many ways it's understandable why his sartorial choices are so unique. He is a man that often defies characterisation by dull conventional standards. He is a man of multiple places and multiple cultures.

Born in Ethiopia, where he admits the struggle for food was "very real", he was adopted as a child by a Swedish couple in Gothenburg. As part of a middle class Scandinavian family, he would go fishing for mackerel and foraging for lingonberries. He's quick to point out, however, that whilst food was more plentiful than in Ethiopia, it didn't mean they, "came from money."

What these dual experiences did offer him

though, was a grounding in an economical way of cooking. "There were no leftovers," he says. "We ate really well, without thinking of luxury. You could start with a roasted chicken and then you had chicken soup, and then broth and dumplings. It's a smart way of dealing with food. That's something my grandmother taught me. When I went to work in three Michelin star kitchens, we didn't cook like that. I started to think that when I became a chef, I would bring these memories with me."

Having already worked odd jobs for years, at just 16 or 17 Samuelsson began to think his passion for food could translate into a career. He trained at Gothenburg's Culinary Institute and subsequently embarked on apprenticeships that would take him across Europe.

But whilst Samuelsson's success story would arguably begin when he arrived in America, the prod across the Atlantic was not sheer circumstance or even unbridled ambition; it was a much more insidious influence: racism.

"As a black man, you always have a different path. Not better, not worse, you're just given different cards," he says dispassionately. "At that point I was always told that my ambitions were too high and that no one would support



CC's deviled eggs  
Image: Jason Bailey

a black chef's restaurant, at least where I was in France. That was a very hard thing to understand or accept, because I was working next to the same guys and doing very well. But you can't drive based on just one engine, or as though you want to prove something to other people. That can be part of the story, but the narrative still has to be that you want people to dig your food. I did think that I needed to be in an environment that was more diverse, but I knew that if I pushed and pursued my cooking, it would happen; and it did."

That environment was New York, a city of immigrants where difference and diversity were par for the course and not a hurdle to achievement. He became an apprentice at Aquavit, the Scandinavian restaurant created by Håkan Swahn. By the time he was the ripe old age of 24, he was its executive chef and became the youngest person ever to receive a three-star review from The New York Times. In the years since he's also been named best chef in New York by the James Beard Foundation and his 2006 tome, *The Soul of a New Cuisine*, picked up the gong for Best International Cookbook.

When asked if these kinds of accolades are something that validates his journey he seems perplexed. Apparently for Samuelsson, awards are the not the obvious making of a good cook. "But it's not like it doesn't mean anything," he says. "You have this ambition and you really want to tell your stories through food and to bring people together. It's not easy. It costs money and requires passion. And so even though acknowledgment is important for the team - as it shows them that we're going in the right direction - for me these acknowledgments are not bus stops. There are plenty of restaurants with a lot of stars that closed, and the majority of restaurants are unknown but very successful."

Samuelsson describes himself as sometimes living in the '10% wrong' space, meaning that however successful a service is, he's always trying to analyse what could be done better and what wasn't done right.

One could say such constant unpicking is the curse of the perfectionist, but since his early days in Aquavit, Samuelsson has opened numerous restaurants, served as the guest chef for the first state dinner of the Barack Obama presidency and fronted his own television shows. By all accounts he is now a household name. And then, of course, there's Red Rooster Harlem. Opened in 2010 it is now a mainstay of

the neighbourhood and, because presidents get around, Obama has also been for supper.

"Red Rooster comes from a magical place," he says, slipping into tones reserved for a prized child. "It was an old bar in Harlem in the 30s. The kind of place where the maid was welcome and so was the local politician. That story of diversity is what we want to tell. I feel like I'm more like the conductor, the cooks are the musicians and the guests are the audience. It's something very deep."

Then again story is something that can't be faked and so for this brand, that resonates on such a personal level with Samuelsson, opening a second venue was never going to be something to approach flippantly. The winds would have to be right.

Asked 'every week' to open a Red Rooster in a different city around the world, it was a friendship with Michael Achenbaum - the man behind *The Curtain*, so to speak - that spurred the collaboration. London felt right.

"It's the only city in the world that matches New York in terms of a certain energy and diversity," he says. "Being in the east of the city reminds me a lot of Harlem, because there are storytellers, there are writers, there is a community that is changing rapidly. Four years ago when we started this journey I knew, right away, that this was where we needed to be. There's some beautiful imperfection here. It speaks to me."

Shoreditch, of course, is not Harlem. And so whilst they both reflect diverse, evolving areas with a vibrant core, there was never a question of dropping the Harlem iteration of Red Rooster into the neighbourhood and expecting it to fly.

"The community creates something that is very different and yet the roots are recognisable," Samuelsson explains. "I knew the attitude would be very different. There might be other types of restaurants where you can cookie-cut, but not something so delicate." But what of the hotel above and around, how does Red Rooster sit within *The Curtain*? "The hurdle of hotels has shifted in general. Look at what Soho House and Ace Hotel started. These are work, play and eating places. That wasn't part of the conversation before. So we're fortunate enough to not have to think too much about the other side of F&B at the hotel. We can focus on Red Rooster and the chef at *The Curtain* can focus on coordinating the whole house."

While Red Rooster may be thought of as separate to the rooms upstairs, filled with

overnighters, Samuelsson does have his fingers in the more traditional hotel F&B pie. He was responsible for developing the Kitchen & Table concept for Clarion Hotels, and the brand has been rolled out across the Nordics since 2012.

With a focus on seasonal, sustainable dishes, the restaurants are a response to the all-day-dining needs of a large hotel group and a very different bird from the rooster. "Clarion is a great hotel company that does a lot of conferences and the audience puts a lot of trust in the rooms. In the F&B we wanted to create a brand that the audience would recognise in every place. It's become very successful," he says. "Where Rooster is very standalone, the Kitchen & Table restaurants are all-day. So as a chef in today's environment you have to be able to drill down and decide what type of dialogue you want to have."

So to what does Samuelsson credit his success? "One of my most successful years was when I was 19 years old and working in Japan. I made zero money. I was the only black person in the kitchen. If you think about the 25 years I've cooked, people come and go. It's a lot of noise. But I'm deeply in love with my trade. I know I'm not the youngest person anymore. I'm not the only person of colour in the space, and have never been, but I dig food."

As our conversation draws to a close and the scattered voices of staff arriving for the evening's service begin to reverberate around the room, it strikes me that Red Rooster is, for Samuelsson, a labour of love. That 1930s Harlem bar that celebrated diversity and a sense of community is as necessary today as it was then, and in some small way he is trying to keep that spirit alive.

Packing up our things, Samuelsson touches upon the social elephant in the room when it comes to modern day London and the UK at large. "I've been several different things. I've been an immigrant several times and that drives you. It does make me think about Brexit," he says, with a tinge of something verging on melancholy. "Immigrants work very hard. Think about hospitality without immigrants. So whether it's in Europe or in America, or anywhere, we still struggle with the issue of identities. It's why it's so important to have diverse narratives - whether they're about spirituality, race or sexual orientation. We're just people. We want to work and we want to show that we have worth." ●