



Standard Fare Gets a Splash of Starpower

With a Booming Burger Business Under His Belt, Chef Spike Sets His Sights on Slices

Story by Melissa A. Howsam

Often reputed to be the maker of the “best burger ever,” Good Stuff Eatery Chef Spike Mendelsohn’s stardom doesn’t sit solely between two buns. This crafty culinarian is parlaying his prowess in American beefy eats to pizza—and, he’s paying it forward.

While the 29-year-old chef may seem green for icon status, this big-deal dough puncher’s been around the chopping block. Immersed in the restaurant business since pre-pubescence, his first master stroke came at 13 in his family’s St. Petersburg Pepin Restaurant. He worked there mostly as a dish/busboy, and when a sauté-cook failed to show for a shift, Spike was put on the line. “That day is still vivid to me,” he recalls. “They threw me in the weeds, and I just went at it. It was an early glimpse.”

But the sneak career peek wasn’t immediately appealing to Spike; having been raised in the family food business, he wanted to be anything but a foodie himself. “At that age, I wanted to do everything but be in the kitchen or the family business,” he recalls. “I was fighting for my own voice. My friends were on the beach, and I was washing dishes — not a glorious thing.” But at 19, when his parents sojourned to Canada for a year to tend to an ailing granddad, Spike took the restaurant’s reins, and it all started to jell.

Since then, Culinary Institute of America-schooled Chef Spike has garnered quite the résumé, including a student externship in France under Chef Gerard Boyer in Michelin Three-Star restaurant, Les Crayères. He also traveled on a Vietnam tour with Chefs Michael



PHOTOS BY JOE SHYMANSKI

Pardus and Michael Bao Huynh — which led to a partnership with the latter to open Vietnamese-French fusion Mai House in Manhattan. Coupled with his mess-hall and menu moxie has been a seemingly speedy shot to celebrity, from his oft-cited spot on Bravo’s “Top Chef” [2008] to his new gig on Food Network Food2’s “Kelsey & Spike Cook” (www.food2.com).

And busting out of the reality-

fame box, he’s now buttressing his boob-tube berth with his Good Stuff Cookbook, available for pre-sale now at Amazon.com.

But perhaps the most defining dollop of wisdom that hailed from these experiences started with that first stop-off in Reims, where he fostered his fascination with how people eat. “In France [the ingredients for] a simple dinner all comes from within 25 miles of

each other,” he says. “Cheese from next door, wine from the winery down the road — there’s a real appreciation for getting the local to the table that really affected my appreciation for ingredients.”

For starters, that inspiration arguably resulted in the best burger joint DC’s ever seen — but it’s not a journey he undertook alone, nor one for which he’ll take sole credit. From the star-studded kitchen — Good Stuff is also headed by Chefs Michael Colletti and Brian Lacayo and Food/Beverage Director Nic Georgeades — to sister Micheline’s PR-prowess and cousin Bess Pappas’ mod design, not to mention the 70+ combined years of know-how his parents Harvey and Cathy bring to the table as GSE owners — Spike’s giving credit to just about everyone but himself. “I’m not a one-man show by any means. With my family and Brian, Nic and Mike — they’re the driving force behind me. It’s a collaborative effort.” Whatever it is, it works. But what’s more fascinating? What Spike has in the works.

Beyond the burger brouhaha is the reality of what’s happening in the kitchen — and outside of it. There’s always been a sort of moral (and culinary) bankruptcy attached to burgers and pizzas — like if they’re good enough for the Hamburglar and sloppy kiosks at sporting events, they can’t possibly be posh, much less healthy. But for Spike, it’s really simple: “A burger’s not bad for you unless it’s fast food. We’re not really getting away with anything by selling people burgers. We’re bringing farm-fresh food to the table, with no preservatives or additives whatsoever. And that’s good for you.”

And what’s good for you isn’t just the food. Spike’s ability to



transcend the blubber barrier and sell burgers (and soon pizza) to a weight-conscious nation is worth noting. It may just be his legacy — around far longer than the crumbs on the kitchen floor and the snippets from his “Top Chef” rise to reality-TV fame.

Active with DC Central Kitchen and Horton’s Kids, Spike’s latest venture is in the school cafeteria. He is working with Anacostia’s Kipp Charter School in an effort to advance Michelle Obama’s recently launched Let’s Move initiative (www.letsmove.gov). The program aims to reform school lunches and reduce childhood obesity. From the ground up — or the roof down, since there have even been talks of a rooftop garden — Spike hopes to educate kids on everything from packing a healthy lunch to making menus on food stamps. “Not everyone can afford organics at Whole Foods, and we have to show them how they can eat right. I really want to reach out to parents and let them know how kids can eat healthier, which will stream down to the kids, and so on.” Talk about a revolution — then again, for this self-proclaimed rebel, maybe it’s apropos.

But believe it or not, beyond all the crafty cookery and gracious giving, he is really a charming, humble guy. When I asked him if he considered himself a celebrity he, of course, said no. “I want to have a lot more under my belt and contribute to many more charities before I could even begin to think

of myself as a celebrity. I’m a guy who’s been on ‘Top Chef’ that’s running a kick-ass restaurant in DC. That’s hardly worth being called celebrity, but (laughing) I’ll take it.” And so will we.

So, for the chef du jour, who’s even been approached to open bi-continental Good Stuffs, what’s stopping him from riding the hype? The biz-savvy bon vivant intends to make sure he makes all the right moves, the next of which is the long-awaited We, The Pizza. Opening next door to Good Stuff with Spike and Mike at the helm, the bangin’ burger boys will be dishing thick (and healthy) slices as early as the end of March.

And why pizza? “Because pizza is the number-one selling thing in the U.S., and because there’s something really hip about pizza, and because... It’s we, the peeps, you know. We, the pizza. We’re speaking out as a new generation to make food better and healthier for you.” And as people who eat food, we thank him.

To learn more about Chef Spike, visit his website at www.spikethechef.com and watch him March 7 at 9 p.m. on Iron Chef America on the Food Network.

Good Stuff Eatery: 303 Pennsylvania Ave., SE, DC; 202-543-8222; www.goodstuffeatery.com.

We, The Pizza: Opening in April 2010, next door at 305 Pennsylvania Ave., SE, DC.



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