

Q&A

This month **Research Chefs in Canada** speaks with chef Jonathan McDonough, co-founder of Toronto's Shasha Bread Co., and owner of Chef Jono Catering & Fine Foods. He recently launched a line of gourmet salad dressings featuring a new Pomegranate Balsamic dressing.



Q: WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST INDUSTRY JOB?

A: I walked into Michael Carlevale's first 35-seat restaurant in Toronto in 1979 to be a waiter. Instead I was offered an apron and a dishwashing/assistant chef job, and within one year I was the chef. I got my red seal papers at Fenton's and worked at all the expensive restaurants ending in "o" like Centro, Cibo, Prego, etc., and so was trained on the job that way.

Q: WHO HAS BEEN YOUR MENTOR?

A: I heard a great expression once, "have many mentors." I was in at the beginning with Shasha Navazesh of Shasha Bread, proselytizing to consumers about the wonders of bacteria culture sourdough. I also worked with Robert McMillan of Private Stock Sauces, in his early days when he morphed from a caterer to a manufacturer, as I have done. Then in January I met Greg Brooks from Peppercorn Hot Sauces in the CBC studios for Test the Nation. He has been instrumental in R&D and production and now we are working together on export opportunities for our Canadian products.

Q: WHAT WAS IT ABOUT FOOD RESEARCH THAT DREW YOU INTO THIS AREA OF THE PROFESSION?

A: I guess as a kid I always read the ingredient list on the cereal boxes and wondered how you go about making it. In early 2008 my catering customers insisted that I bottle and sell a ginger-lychee dip. That led to the launch of Chef Jono Pomegranate Balsamic. I was lucky to utilize the fantastic resource of the Toronto Food Business Incubator at exactly the right moment, testing first at four stores, and then selling to 70 locations in just a few weeks' growth.

Q: HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR CULINARY PHILOSOPHY?

A: Bold, simple flavours. Direct, very intense and opinionated, like me. The tricky part is in the balance, so that it includes and embraces people. Then you should know what to expect price wise. Commercial salad dressings are made with a few pennies of food cost; I realized my dress-

ing would have to retail for \$9. So far I have encountered zero push back on pricing as the ingredient list reads like a menu, with items such as Canadian organic honey and VQA Baco Noir vinegar."

Q: WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT YOUR JOB?

A: Flavour profile combinations. In other words, food daydreaming. I spent an afternoon with a highly experienced food scientist and we enthusiastically painted flavour concepts all day with our words. No actual food in front of us, but with our different backgrounds we could both imagine and taste exactly what we were creating.

Q: HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR MANAGEMENT STYLE?

A: As an entrepreneur, you have to be as eager to learn as any apprentice cook is. Chefs know they always have to be learning, no matter how many years you've been at it. However, as a small business owner the missteps cost you dearly. Plenty of cooks have great recipes, but making a go in the food business means facing harsh realities.

Q: WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE FOOD?

A: A chicken sandwich with homemade mayo on challah toast with a real ice cream milkshake. But variations on Italian, Thai and French Classics have probably filled my professional days. My specialty? Whatever's in the fridge and cupboard, turned into a quick snack!

Q: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES FACING RESEARCH CHEFS TODAY, AND THE AREAS OF CULINARY R&D IN GENERAL?

A: Chefs are taught from the beginning, "fat equals flavour," but this causes a bias against the essential health and wellness model that has to be our future. Instead, chefs should be leading the way with innovative and natural offerings, not following the flawed approach used by some food scientists who try to use reduced fat concepts that compensate with extra calories or artificial ingredients. The other big challenge is the push for food safety, often

over common sense. It's OK if after some time has elapsed, mould grows to like your food; if bacteria won't eat it why should you?

Q: WHAT OPPORTUNITIES DO YOU SEE FOR YOUR SECTOR OF THE INDUSTRY?

A: Food industry companies are furiously trying to re-invent the wheel with "natural preservatives" in R&D, but really our great-grandmothers knew a lot about "putting up" the bounty of the summer, so maybe we should start there. We will be seeing many more ancient resources labelled as breakthroughs, from almonds to spices and plant extracts. There's a big rush of research into this field.

Q: WHAT ELSE CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE WORK YOU'RE CURRENTLY DOING?

A: Educating the public is the most satisfying challenge. A great thing about the dressings sector is that most of the ingredients are already natural preservatives. Natural antioxidants can also help keep food stable for months and years. The next project is Super Omega Salad Oil that uses the benefits of Sacha Inchi. It's a fair trade tree nut from the rain forest that's 50 per cent omega-3, -6 and -9 by weight, more than any other substance.

product spotlight

Why can't a salad dressing be made with few simple ingredients, each of which is in itself a preservative? I saw a gap in the marketplace in between the low-end commercial dressings and the high-end imported balsamic and flavoured vinegars and oils. Once I started talking to the customers who like this kind of product, I found that lots of people never buy pre-mixed dressings but are happy to make it from scratch. Hence one of my taglines – dressings for people who love to make their own. Another revelation about marketing is how much people love to discover a new brand.

The ginger lychee idea actually started two years ago when I took a recipe for apricot jam with fresh squeezed ginger juice (from Bob Blumer, the Surreal Gourmet) changed it around to use a lychee fruit purée and used it with shrimp at my catered parties. That and the peanut sauce I made myself were so popular that my customers insisted that I bottle it and get it in the stores. So I fooled around with a number of flavour combinations, then got some bottles and tested some labels. It turns out the ginger lychee is very difficult to make, the PH is all wrong and it tends to ferment and turn into soda pop (and blow up the bottle!).

So I concentrated on the pomegranate, and it turned out to be very easy to make, low in PH, high in sugar, low in available water. The hardest part, and what a chef can help contribute, is the exact balance of sweet and tart. Each of the new dressings will have an intense concentrated impact and a unique marketing profile. The key is the "bright fresh balance" of the product, combined with a new yet familiar taste.

