

 WORKING IN AMERICA

Spike Mendelsohn, a Proper World Citizen

BY BECKI L. YOUNG

Chef Spike Mendelsohn doesn't hesitate when I ask him about the contributions that immigrants have made to the U.S. restaurant industry. Acknowledging the "working fleet of immigrants [that] support all of America's palate," he applauds the way that immigrants are helping drive the way we value food in this country. In his opinion, "immigrant farmers are bringing a wealth of knowledge, helping us discover new ways of farming, and leading the way regarding the importance of food."

Chef Mendelsohn has been thinking a lot about sustainable agriculture these days.

Appointed by Mayor Muriel Bowser to the Food Policy Council, which supports sustainable agriculture in DC, Chef Mendelsohn is focused on issues like promoting food access, food sustainability, and a local food economy including non-mainstream producers, in the District.

He has been working with the international relief organization CARE to head up chef and advocacy learning tours, and has traveled to Peru and Mozambique to work on replenishing and protecting fisheries. As part of the US State Department's Culinary Diplomatic Corps (in which chefs from across the country cook for visiting dignitaries, and participate in public diplomacy programs that engage foreign audiences abroad as well as those traveling to the US) he has visited Saudi Arabia and Italy to share his unique culinary style.

He recently returned from Expo 2015 in Milan, where the theme is "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life" and the participant countries are involved in a lively discussion on shaping the world's food system. As Chef Mendelsohn described to me, the Expo is "like the Olympics" — a World Fair or Universal Exposition held every five years or so in a

different corner of the world.

Spike Mendelsohn's own first experience as an immigrant, in fact, was at the 1992 Expo in Seville, Spain. The theme that year was "Discovery" and the young Spike (then about 12-years-old) moved to Spain with his extended family (about 30 in all) from Montreal, to operate a number of foodservice venues at the Expo — including an Italian restaurant, a Baskin Robbins, a Colombo Yogurt, and a burger restaurant called Yankee Stadium. Spike and his sister attended an international school during the week, and worked with their family at the Expo on the weekends.

Expo 1992 was not the Mendelsohn family's first foray into the restaurant business; the "big Greek restaurant family" has been in the business in Canada for years and still operates many well-known restaurants in Montreal including one where Celine Dion is a partner with his cousin Chris Ann Nakis in Schwartz's Deli which serves the most famous deli sandwich in Montreal.

Spike's parents are first generation Canadians and according to him his great grandfather "jumped off a boat and swam to Montreal" where he began working in a creamery, laying the foundations for this future family of restaurateurs.

In Spain the outgoing Spike made new friends easily, learned the language fluently, and by the time the family left Spain for St. Petersburg, Fla. three years later, he had become "a proper Spaniard." Though he experienced a bit of culture shock in his new adopted homeland, Spike adjusted to American life without much trouble. The Mendelsohn family received their green cards through their investment in the US restaurant industry, and their creation of jobs for US workers.

Mendelsohn has lived and traveled in many countries (including France, Luxembourg and Vietnam) and his cooking today is

a mix of all of these influences. His first two US restaurants — Good Stuff Eatery and We, The Pizza — are unquestionably "American" while his latest venture, Capitol Hill's Béarnaise, draws upon his French Canadian roots.

When I spoke with Chef Mendelsohn he was in Miami, opening three new outlets in The Hall Hotel — the hotel's main restaurant Sunny's, a beer garden called Campton Yards, and a cocktail lounge called Holiday's. With Chef Mendelsohn's boundless energy these will surely not be the last additions to his restaurant empire — we can expect much more to come from this culinary citizen of the world!

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hotels and restaurants, and facilitated the sponsorship of foreign professionals, trainees, interns and individuals of "extraordinary ability." Ms. Young is an active member of the American Immigration Lawyers Association. She can be reached at 301-917-6900 or byoung@hyimmigration.com.



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