



Heat & Humility

Toronto is blessed with some of the country's best restaurants, and with them, some of Canada's best chefs. Many are readily accessible through Twitter or Instagram, while others, like the men and women featured here, generally let their dishes speak for themselves. Until now. Meet six of the city's top under-the-radar culinary talents.

BY RENÉE S. SUEN

BORALIA BRAISED WHEAT PHOTO BY NICK MERZETTI; LOS COLIBRIS PULPO A LA PARRILLA PHOTO BY LAUREN VANDENBROOK

CHEF PHOTOS BY RENÉE S. SUEN



Jay Carter Dandylion

Few Toronto chefs are as unsung as Jay Carter; fewer still, however, command the reverence he's earned from the culinary community.

"Jay is the most honest representation of a chef in the city," says Basilio Pesce, chef-owner of Parkdale restaurant Porzia, who cooked with Carter early in the chefs' respective kitchen careers.

"He puts all of himself in what he does. It's reflected in Dandylion. It makes his restaurant a very special place."

A trendy West Queen West storefront that Carter loved and passed by for more than a dozen years became, in 2014, his dream cooking and dining space. From the small, minimally equipped kitchen he creates light and approachable fare that leaves guests feeling soothed and refreshed.

Carter's discipline, work ethic, and ability to find uses for—and magically coax flavours from—the most obscure and subtle ingredients are all highly regarded among his peers. "There's no flash," says Pesce, but since Dandylion's opening, Carter's cooking has been the subject of consistent underground buzz.

At his restaurant Carter practices a distinct, impossible to classify culinary style, though it's influenced by traditional techniques of fermentation, preservation, and the "waste not, want not" philosophy of Chinese cooking—acquired over a career spent running some of Toronto's most influential kitchens, including a decade working within Susur Lee's demanding and celebrated dining empire. For Carter, vegetables are as prized as meat, if not more so: broccoli stem, florets and fibrous stalk, for example, are transformed into a symphony of textures (raw shaved, pickled, pureed, steamed, or fried into chips). Many products, including the bread, pickles, kombucha, yogurt, and carbonated juices are made in house. Dandylion's menu is small, but it changes to achieve peak flavour, whether that flavour is found in a just-ripe plum or a crudo made from the freshest line-caught fish.

"I try not to talk about the food too much or post the menu online because things change," explains Carter. "We have a small menu, [but our ingredients can] change every day, so sometimes the menu—and it could be just a small part—changes every day. We're changing it because it's what's best, and not for any other reason. You've just got to trust us."

Dandylion, 1198 Queen St. W., 647-464-9100; restaurantdandylion.com

Evelyn Wu Morris Boralia

Evelyn Wu Morris always wanted to be her own boss. The Toronto-born entrepreneur majored in marketing and management at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business before moving to Manhattan, on track to conquer Wall Street.

But her employment path took a sharp turn: she enrolled in weekend cooking classes while working at a leading marketing company, and soon left the field entirely to manage special events for renowned Washington, D.C. restaurateur Roberto Donna, performing a number of roles before settling in the kitchen.

Wu Morris's fledgling pursuit took her to the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, an externship at Campton Place with rising stars Christopher Kostow and Daniel Humm, and then to Coi under Daniel Patterson.

"It was a big thing for me," explains Wu Morris, "to make sure I worked at the top restaurants. You see how things are done properly."

Then came two years working for celebrated chef Heston Blumenthal in the U.K., where Wu Morris helped to develop desserts for then-unopened Dinner by Heston. That restaurant is known for its modernized takes on historical British food—a theme that has inspired Wu Morris and her husband, Wayne Morris, when they opened their own dining room, Boralia, on Toronto's busy Ossington strip.

The quaint and cozy 35-seat restaurant serves contemporary interpretations of pioneering Canadian dishes in a way that showcases the flavours of his Acadian and Métis backgrounds and her Chinese heritage, as well as Canada's diverse gastronomic history. The *éclade* is an exemplary offering: the traditional preparation—introduced to Canada's first European settlement by Samuel de Champlain—involved burying and smoking mussels under a pile of pine needles. At Boralia, the bivalves are gently steamed with white wine, shallots, and leeks in pine ash-infused butter, then presented covered in a glass cloche that's clouded by a puff of pine smoke.

The menu is a collaboration between the married chefs, though these days Wu Morris spends less time in the kitchen. Her business acumen and well-rounded knowledge of restaurant operations at all levels has brought her to the front-of-house, where she's fostered an ambience that's celebrated by all those who've passed through Boralia's upscale-casual dining room.

"Working in the places that I have, you learn how to do things right," she says. "Being methodical and doing things right the first time. That's ingrained in you and I pride myself on those details."

Boralia, 59 Ossington Ave., 647-351-5100; boraliato.com



Patrick Kriss *Alo*

“It’s all for the guests,” chef Patrick Kriss says as he describes the modern dining experience at Alo. The restaurant’s name comes from the Latin phrase *alui Aluum*—to nourish, cherish, support, and to keep. “To make sure,” in Kriss’s words, “diners are happy every time they come through the door.”

The tasting menu—only Alo is one of the city’s newest and most stunning restaurants; it’s also shaking up the refined dining scene. Beautiful French cuisine is delivered with finesse, in a pretense- and tablecloth-free environment. Guests are warmly welcomed from the moment they step out of the elevator doors and into the third-floor space. Past the sleek, sophisticated front-of-house Bar Alo lies a central open kitchen with guests enjoying an extended tasting experience at kitchen-counter seats. The elevated dining room follows, and boasts a 180-degree view of the street-level bustle below.

Those who know Kriss know that Alo is the culmination of the hard-working chef’s drive, meticulousness, and a focus on deliciousness that’s highly praised by the culinary community.

“He’s a force to be reckoned with,” says Victor Barry, chef and owner of Splendido, where Kriss once worked as chef de cuisine. “His pedigree is great, but I really think it’s Patrick’s quest for greatness that will make Alo one of the best in the city, guaranteed.”

Excelling seems to come naturally to Kriss, who was a York University history graduate, Taekwondo competitor, and hockey coach before he embraced the heat and intensity of the professional kitchen. Patrick’s ability to handle pressure saw him rise quickly through the ranks: in 2006 he represented Canada in the San Pellegrino Young Chef Competition, and then spent three years cooking under the legendary Daniel Boulud at his flagship New York restaurant.

Kriss’s homecoming tenure has included stints not only at Splendido, but also at now-shuttered Acadia, where critics praised his polished takes on East Coast and South Carolina Lowcountry flavours.

The prospects for Alo, the chef’s own space, appear equally bright. To quote Splendido’s Barry: “Patrick’s [restaurant] is going to be the best.”

Alo, 163 Spadina Ave., 3rd floor, 416-260-2222; alorestaurant.com



Frank Parhizgar *Frank’s Kitchen*

Frank Parhizgar’s entry into the kitchen was non-traditional: at 17, the Iran-born chef was competing for Canada in the 400-metre hurdles on the European track circuit. He would often fly home between his training sessions overseas, but one summer decided to stay on the continent and find work. Equipped with zero kitchen skills but unwavering persistence, Parhizgar sought a job at a majestic two Michelin star restaurant in Lyon, France. Initially it was the property’s rolling hills that attracted him (they were good for running, of course), but the soon-to-be cook quickly discovered that his prowess at performing with speed and precision under stress was a valued quality in the intense kitchen.

“Frank is the most ambitious person I’ve met,” says Shawn Cooper, Parhizar’s wife and front-of-house manager at his Toronto restaurant, Frank’s Kitchen, “I’ve never seen somebody so driven; and that’s just his background and who he is—somebody who’s an athlete is going to be that way. It’s all about excellence.”

Parhizgar’s move to a kitchen brigade was a natural transition: his unfamiliarity with its hierarchical structure, his drive, and his ability to conquer even the most laborious task by turning it into an exercise (large sacks of potatoes became the load for his weighted squats), made him a valuable team member upon his return to North America, where, among other things, he worked as executive chef for Marc Thuet’s Toronto properties. Now the proprietor of his own 50-seat restaurant, the chef has transformed a casual corner of Little Italy into a fine-dining destination.

Five years on, Parhizgar is still impressing guests and critics alike with his attention to the smallest of details. He serves his dynamic and evolving dishes—influenced by the from-the-ground-up cooking styles typical of classic France and Italy—against an approachable neighbourhood backdrop complete with warm and attentive service, complimentary house-made bread, amuse bouche, and petit fours. His value-driven, 22-course tasting menu (available Sunday to Thursday only) is a must for all food lovers seeking a marriage of Old World charm and contemporary finesse.

Frank’s Kitchen, 588 College St., 416-516-5861



Elia Herrera *Los Colibris*

You can take the girl out of Mexico, but you can’t take its flavours from her. For Elia Herrera, a deep connection to her native cuisine defines her cooking style, and not so long ago secured her role as the executive chef of a pair of modern Mexican restaurants, upscale Los Colibris and its tequila bar sibling, El Caballito.

“Elia was always very true to her heritage, and always wanted to display that in her food,” says former boss John Horne, executive chef at Canoe. “She’s super imaginative and did a lot of spins on flavours, like pairing sticky toffee pudding with passion fruit sorbet, and coconut pudding. It was amazing. The acidity and brightness just popped.”

That knack for understanding flavours—and bridging the gap between spicy, sweet and savoury—was something Herrera mastered during her time at Barcelona’s EspaiSucre, a revolutionary restaurant-slash-cooking school where desserts take centre stage for all courses of a meal. But it was the influence of the strong and progressive women in her life that helped Herrera carve her own path, first excelling in the pastry arts at some of the city’s finest dining rooms (Canoe and Mistura among them), and then helping to open her present pair of restaurants. The gig, as it happens, was offered by owner Andreas Antoniou, after Herrera cooked a surprise staff meal of *najas poblanas* at Little Anthony’s, another of Antoniou’s establishments.

“I grew up in Veracruz, in my mother and grandmother’s kitchen; they ran the largest catering and events businesses in the country,” says the third-generation cook. “I learned how to make fresh tortillas, peel chilies, and cook traditional home-style Mexican food.” At her restaurants, Herrera continues those traditions by serving interpretations of her forebearers’ recipes—including *najas poblanas*, now a signature offering at Los Colibris—using flavour notes to build plates that are winning over the pickiest palates.

Los Colibris, 220 King St. W., 416-979-7717; loscolibris.ca



Jesse Vallins *The Saint Tavern*

Creative and driven are two words that barely begin to describe chef Jesse Vallins, according to friend and restaurateur Zane Caplansky.

He elaborates: “I almost never use the word ingenious, but that’s what Jesse is. He’s the hardest working man in culinary that I know. He really pours his heart and soul—and sense of humour—into his food. He combines impeccable technique with personality, the way the great ones do.”

Indeed, Vallins is not your average chef: he’s also a certified cicerone (beer expert) and sommelier, a beverage columnist, and an educator to the next generation of hospitality students at George Brown College.

“Some people are happy as human beings; I’m not happy unless I’m a human doing,” he quips.

Vallins has made many contributions to Toronto’s food scene, including dominating Hogtown’s popular “Sausage League” restaurant tournament, but the Scarborough-raised chef’s first passion was music. A serious bass guitarist for local rock and metal bands, Vallins realized after graduating high school that a career in the culinary arts was a better (and at least slightly more stable) outlet for his creativity.

An interest in the complete guest experience (buffered by knowledgeable and professional service) emerged during stints in the early 2000s at Toronto institutions Splendido and Mistura. The latter in particular inspired Vallins to become a well-rounded chef, versed in great tasting food and drinks, but also customer-focused fun. A further, lengthy tenure at Trevor Kitchen & Bar gave him the freedom to start spreading his wings and exploring his vision for contemporary North American fare cooked with panache.

For the self-described flavour geek, food is far more than just fuel. At The Saint Tavern, Vallins prides himself on cooking refined, toothsome, yet also whimsical plates from scratch: a cheeseburger that’s topped with house-made processed-style cheddar and ketchup; duck nuggets formed from fresh duck sausage; his signature Reuben sausage.

“He represents the very best of what our industry can be: approachable, honest, and authentic,” says Caplansky. “As far as I’m concerned, he’s the king, and without an ounce of snobbery.”

The Saint Tavern, 227 Ossington Ave., 647-350-2100; thesainttavern.com