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FEATURES

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One On 1: Marc Murphy Knows How To Plate Success

By: Budd Mishkin

Restaurateur Marc Murphy got accustomed to transitions as a kid, with his family frequently moving throughout Europe. But he also got accustomed to eating really good food. NY1's Budd Mishkin filed the following "One On 1" report.

So what is the mystery behind making food that New Yorkers will love? There has to be a mystery, right?

Marc Murphy is the owner of the Landmarc restaurants in TriBeCa and the Time Warner Center, as well as Ditch Plains in the West Village. The dexterity he needs now to succeed as an owner he first learned as a cook.

"A duck in this oven, the reducer sauce over here, you have a chateaubriand, you know, a couple of racks of lamb cooking over here and you have to know every piece of fish, every piece of meat, every vegetable you are cooking," says Murphy. "Running a restaurant business, running a company like this is almost the same thing. I'm learning new things every day. I almost feel like every year, I get a Ph.D in restaurants."

Murphy has taken the platform provided him by the popularity of his restaurants and his appearances on the Food Network show "Chopped," and used it to speak out about issues that matter to him.

He's on the board of City Harvest, and is a vice president of the local chapter of the New York State Restaurant Association, promoting its free discount prescription drug card program, and coming out against the city Health Department's letter grading system.

"You are a regular customer, you are walking by and you see 'A,' 'B,' or 'C,' you have no idea

"ONE ON 1" EXTRAS

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what that means. You just know that when you went to school you got a 'C,' it wasn't as good as you got an 'A,'" says Murphy. "In the old days it was just you were open or you were closed. And we still feel like that's the way it should be."

Murphy lives in TriBeCa with his wife and two children. The out of townner who comes here to make a life is an age old New York story, but it's especially poignant for Murphy, because it's the only permanent home he's ever had. As the son of an American diplomat, he spent his childhood moving around Europe and his teenage years in boarding school.

"My wife for example has a friend from when she was three years old. I don't know anybody from when I was three years old. I know my parents and my brother and that's it," says Murphy. "Every two or three years we used to move and you'd make these friends and then it was like...I could just see myself sort of crying, looking out the back window waving going, 'Alright who are the next ones going to be?'"

Among New York dining aficionados, Murphy's Landmarc restaurants are known for the relative affordability of a bottle of wine, an area where restaurants traditionally make their money as a middleman between wine seller and customer.

"All we are doing is pulling the cork out and pouring it out," says Murphy. "Other restaurants probably make the same amount of profit selling one than I will with selling three but what am I doing? I'm making the customer happier, I'm making the vintners really happy because I'm actually getting their juice on the table and people are drinking them instead of just sticking them in a cellar somewhere. And where are you going to come back to eat?"

Ditch Plains is named for his favorite surfing spot on Long Island. Its signature dish, the "Ditch Dog," was the result of a happy misunderstanding.

"I kinda said to the kitchen, 'Make a hot dog, put some cheese on it.' And the guy didn't quite understand me, so he sent out a hotdog with macaroni and cheese on it," recalls Murphy. "And we both looked at it and said, 'What in the world?' And we both tasted it and were like, 'Oh my gosh. This is the best thing ever!'"

The idea of a "hot" restaurant is an intangible but powerful part of the New York food world. There are places that start out strong and remain popular. But Murphy seems to fear the old Yogi Berra saying, "No one goes there anymore...it's too crowded."

"I have never wanted our restaurants to be hot," says Murphy. "Some of these restaurants that are really, really hot you can't get into them for the first six months. The next six months they are empty. I open restaurants for the people around us those are the people who are going to come for 15, 20 years."

Marc Murphy's restaurants feed hundreds of New Yorkers and tourists every night. A word to his friends: he's happy to come to your place, too.

"People get intimidated when they invite you over. I'm like, invite me over. I don't have to cook, I don't have to clean, I'll be there. No problem!" says Murphy.

Murphy's early years read like a European travelogue. Born in Milan, then lived in Paris, the

south of France, Rome, Genoa, Spoleto, fed by a French mom and grandparents.

"I grew up with a palate that got to eat really good food. And was very well trained in a sense without even knowing it," recalls Murphy. "So I grew up with great flavors in my mouth, basically is how I sort of put it and that is a huge advantage to me."

The disadvantage though was the disorientation brought on by constant moving, even when his father was posted stateside in Virginia.

"I came to America, and everybody's like, 'Here's this American kid who doesn't know anything about America.' No idea about peanut butter or cartoons and things like that. I didn't understand any of it. Culturally, I was way behind at that time," says Murphy.

His teenage years featured one boarding school experience after another, all of which were unpleasant.

"My parents were living in Rome at the time, I got on a plane at Christmas, the headmaster called my father while I was on the plane, saying, 'Don't send him back. He's kicked out,'" says Murphy. "I'm very dyslexic, as well, so I never did very well in school. I'm basically...school was a bit of a jail sentence for me."

After high school, he came to New York to be with his brother, made some money as a handyman building, fixing and painting things, and eventually told his parents: college, no; cooking school, yes.

"I was not very close with my parents when I went to boarding school when I was 13," recalls Murphy. "When I told my father I was going to be going to cooking school, I think if I remember correctly, he might've hung up on me. He was like, 'Whaddaya mean? You have to go to college.' And I was like, 'Okay, no.' I can't read and write, basically. Why would I go to college?"

After a three month cooking course, he went back to Italy to live with his brother, then on to London with a girlfriend before returning to New York, where he got a job cooking at the old prix fixe restaurant on 18th Street.

"I loved it. I loved the camaraderie of the whole thing. We would sit on the line and cook all night, from five o'clock to midnight, screaming, yelling, cursing at each other, 'You do this!' And at the end of the night, everybody'd get changed, and it was like, 'Let's go and have a beer together,'" recalls Murphy.

Murphy's challenge now is to try to create that type of camaraderie with more than 500 employees. His focus is on his current restaurants and future projects, though occasionally his past -- in the form of former classmates from one of his boarding schools -- reappears.

"I actually had dinner with a few of them. They sent me an email. 'Oh! We saw you on TV, we found your email, we're eating at your restaurant tonight! come by!' And the minute I sat down with these guys, it was like, 'Oh my gosh. You were the guy, we had no idea what was ever gonna happen to you,'" says Murphy.

Murphy is an eclectic type, who'll attend a Jay-Z/Eminem concert one night and a Wagner opera the next. Where once he struggled mightily as a student, now he sits on the board at his kids' school. And you don't get a sense that Murphy harbors much resentment, at least outwardly, toward those who years ago told him no.

"I think the one good thing about me as a cook, growing up, I never really had any expectations that anything was gonna happen," says Murphy. "And maybe that was just by virtue of being a terrible student and being dyslexic, where people always tell you you'll never succeed to anything. So I was like, "Eh, you know what? It kinda worked out...great!"

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