



BACK OF THE HOUSE JEFF CRUMP

Standing on the shoulders of giants
BY MARY LUZ MEJIA

For Jeff Crump, the future lies in the past. It's not that Crump isn't a forward-thinking chef; he definitely is. It's that he knows what Alice Waters, Odessa Piper and others have always known: that eating local, sustainably produced food isn't simply the best eating around; it's also the most sensible.

But Jeff Crump is not one to pontificate until he's gotten you convinced that he's right. He's not going to tell you to eat sustainably, seasonally or locally if you don't want to. He won't harp on the fact that he never serves farmed salmon at the Ancaster Old Mill because it's not healthy for our water systems. What he will do, however, is coax you into his corner by feeding you some of the freshest, sun-drenched and most beautifully prepared food you've ever tasted, sourced from farmers he knows and trusts. He'll do it with a smile on his face because, as he says, "We're just doing this to have fun." Then try telling yourself that you can't taste the difference. It's downright impossible.

Crump is a man who "loves food to death." And perhaps the root of his commitment comes from his being a culinary late bloomer. Growing up in London, Ontario, Crump thought he'd become an accountant or lawyer after completing his political science degree at the University of Western Ontario. But a back-packing expedition through Europe exposed him to people who were doing what they loved, even if it didn't conform to most people's idea of a good career move. "I met this guy from Germany who was a busker," says Crump, "He busked to live day to day. I liked that this guy was doing what he wanted to do and not what people expected him to do."

This opened Crump's mind to the possibility of becoming a chef, despite the reservations of his police officer father. At the age of fourteen, he'd duplicated a TV chef's dish of mussels and realized he had an innate talent for cooking. It was only after his trek through Europe, however, that he would take his skills from home cook to restaurant

professional. "Back then being a chef was considered whacky. My dad was pretty upset when I chose to become a chef, because it was weird to him," says Crump.

Undeterred, Crump researched great chefs and realized that most Michelin-starred pros began cooking in restaurant kitchens in their teens. He was behind and wanted to catch up. This led to his enrolling at the Stratford Chefs School. "I had zero restaurant experience when I enrolled at Stratford and you needed some experience to be admitted, so I said I had some. I lied. I was getting it done, that's how I looked at it. If I want to do something I just do it, however it works. I attacked cooking school with a certain level of maturity as I hadn't [previously] attacked anything else," explains Crump.

That maturity caught the eye of former Chez Panisse chef Peggy Smith, who was then the Stratford school's chef-in-residence. Crump convinced her to let him take part in an externship (a "longer stage, or internship, without pay," as he calls it) at Alice Waters's fabled restaurant, and within months he found himself in Berkeley, California. That was in 1997 and he stayed on for three months. "I saw that farmers do come to the back door and every chef there is really head and shoulders above their position. The guy in sauté could be a head chef in most any restaurant, but he's willing to be a line cook at Chez Panisse because he wants to be part of something great," says Crump.

After a month of peeling onions, the young chef was allowed to make the eatery's famed corn soup. "I thought, 'Oh my God! I just made the soup that customers who book three months in advance are going to eat!' And I realized there was no secret. It's the corn, not the cook! That was inspiring because I thought: 'Yeah, I can do this!' And now that recipe is in the book," Crump relates.

The "book" is a beautiful seasonal exploration of the sweat and vision that Crump, along with his pastry chef, Bettina Schormann, and

their kitchen crew all share. Due out in the spring of 2009, *Earth to Table: A Year's Relationship Between Restaurant and Farm* offers readers an inside glimpse into how Crump and his team have aligned themselves with ManoRun Organic Farm (an article about which begins on the following page) and forged a bond between the kitchen, the land and the diner. Earth to table cuisine – both the book and the philosophy – is about getting food from the source, preparing it well, making new friends, and ultimately feeling good about the process. There's real hands-on involvement on everyone's part.

For the kitchen staff at the Ancaster Old Mill near Hamilton, that involvement includes working on Chris Krucker's ManoRun Farm, in nearby Copetown, which operates on a community supported agriculture (CSA) model. Customers, including the restaurant, buy a "share" of produce and get a weekly box filled with seasonal pickings. Some of that might include the six thousand onions Crump himself planted last season. On the flipside, "The farmhands also come here [to the restaurant] to hull strawberries and knead bread," says Crump. While his cooks help out at ManoRun so as to appreciate where their food comes from, the farmhands want to witness the result that started with their labours. Many would call this synergy. Crump prefers to call it community.

When I congratulate Crump on these strides and the restaurant's transformation over his five-year tenure at the eatery, he says, "We didn't make this up. Bettina and I feel like we're just standing on the shoulders of giants. We're continuing this legacy, that's all." In their new book, some of the giants that are profiled include chefs Thomas Keller, Dan Barber and most surprisingly, England's guru of molecular gastronomy, Heston Blumenthal. Although Blumenthal is devoted to the science of cooking, he recognizes that it starts with superlative ingredients.

Crump even completed a *stage* at Blumenthal's Michelin-starred Fat Duck in the U.K., saying "I'm really curious. It has everything to do with knowledge and learning. That's what drew me to the Fat Duck. Heston is the same. Everyone that cooks there is as inquisitive." So now some of the *sous-vide* techniques he learned at the Fat Duck are also used in his kitchen.

Part of Crump's deep appreciation for food comes from walking the talk. Our conversation turns to the time he and his chefs slaughtered some animals themselves. "It was devastating, I didn't think it was going to be so hard," he relates, shaking his head. But he explained that it's better than the alternative – not knowing or caring about how food is raised and gets to the table. He reads a passage from his book that best sums it up: "Ignoring the whole problem by looking for meat that comes in tidy cellophane packages not only leaves your own question unanswered but probably leaves the animal worse off. If you have any concerns about the ethics of eating meat, ignoring them only makes things worse. You can be a vegetarian or do something about it." When I ask Crump what the state of our food systems is today, he replies without hesitating, "It's a giant Sysco truck driving straight towards a cliff, and it's pretty bad."

And so Crump has chosen to "do something about it" by linking his food with farmers and connecting to diners on either a pure sensory level or an ethical one. As if to demonstrate the point, a perfect plate of miso-and-maple-syrup-glazed roasted black cod appears with a side of ManoRun bok choy and colcannon. It's sensational and highlights Crump's culinary prowess in adapting former boss Rob Feenie's version of Nobu Matsuhisa's original into something that better reflects him. Even if you don't care about where this food is from, you can't deny that it's incredibly good.

On the subject of good food, Crump observes, "Everyone wants cheap food these days, but people shouldn't hesitate to pay for good food. I say convenience food is ten times more expensive than natural food. I recently spent 40 bucks on food for five days. The woman in front of me at the cash bought pre-packaged food and her bill was \$197! If you buy potatoes it will cost you 80 cents, but if you buy packaged mashed potatoes with scallions, that's \$5.75!"

Crump firmly believes his team's message is not an all or nothing proposition. So before the burden of too much knowledge begins to take the fun out of dinner, Crump suggests you pick one thing that means something to you – whether it's fair trade coffee or organic, free-range chicken – and commit to it. Most of all, Crump wants us to enjoy good food because life shouldn't have to be about sacrifices. □

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