
A WARRIOR FOR MOTHER EARTH

CULINARY ZEN MASTER

MICHAEL STADTLÄNDER

BY DEB CRIPPS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARL HIEBERT AND DEB CRIPPS



Michael Stadtländer's intuitive approach to food is not unlike that of a Zen Master.

For him, each food moment – the growing, preparing and cooking – is an execution in creativity. The culinary wizard is an artist, a third-generation farmer, and the founder of Singhampton, Ontario's renowned Eigensinn Farm restaurant, rated ninth in the world by British Restaurant magazine. A stunning recognition.

As a chef with a heightened awareness of Canada's food culture, there is no food expert more qualified to ask about "death food." Death food is the very last taste you desire to have linger in your mouth when death darkens your door and you transcend this planet. As Michael leans back in his chair to ponder my macabre but intriguing question, he tips his head in serious thought and I confide my own plan: to inhale an extra-tall slice of homemade lemon pie piled high with meringue. After a few seconds his face dissolves into a wide aha! grin. "It is Scharz Sauer! It's a sweet-and-sour stew my mom used to make with a wonderful broth of pig snouts, knuckles, ears and tails. That, and a glass of good wine or beer."

As a self-declared "Warrior for Mother Earth," Michael is original. Guests at his restaurant near Collingwood experience something that goes beyond food. The options for fine dining in Ontario are considerable, but none comes close to satisfying adventurous palates and patrons of whimsy as Eigensinn. It begins with an eclectic welcoming committee: geese to the right and hogs mucking about on the left while roosters, chickens, and the family cat and dog all diddle for the middle. And just when you think you've taken stock, the menagerie disbands and takes cover behind your parked car to make room for a flock of territorial sheep.

But don't be deceived. Michael's barn-board eatery offers more than the folly of farm animals; it is the rural canvas of a master chef with the mind and heart of an artist. The artistic landscape surrounding Eigensinn reflects his desire to cultivate change. Strategically placed animal bones whisper his story and hundreds of wine bottles are piled high and caged as if they, too, have secrets to tell. A road-weary red-and-green bus proudly sports a three-foot carved-wood food Madonna on its front grill.

Walking trails lined with more empty wine bottles arouse your curiosity, leading you away from the restaurant into the woods, *and down the rabbit hole you go!* One path takes you to a life-sized sculpture of a Mother Earth oven whose womb offers freshly baked bread; another, to a gigantic stone carving of a chef surrounded by bistro tables and a

teepee covered in sea shells. Bones, deadwood and vine furniture, shells, mammoth-sized sculptures and recycled goods: These significant symbols that dot the 100-acre farm seem intent on engaging – and transforming – its visitors.

Before opening Eigensinn, Michael made his culinary mark in restaurants like British Columbia's Sooke Harbour House, Toronto's Nekah, and as co-founder of Knives and Forks, an organic growers market that integrates chefs and farmers. Michael's expertise in combining classic French stocks and sauces with unpretentious, high-quality food is a style of cooking that is spontaneous. He says, "I don't begin with a plan. For a particular meal I butcher my own animals, like lamb, and call my fish monger to see what's running in Georgian Bay. And I make use of whatever is available here on the farm, like the last carrots of the season."

It seems as though Michael was destined to become a chef. "I was raised in Lubeck, Germany on a 40-acre farm. My family hunted duck, wild boar, grew grain, chickens, and distributed milk. My uncles and grandmother were butchers, bakers and pastry chefs... food was always around me. I have memories of growing up in a community that integrated food, work, and family. Every year we would kill our own pigs and all of the relatives would come to help make sausage and ham and then, after the work, we would feast. My mother also ran a small store on the property where we sold our smoked meats [and] vegetables, and she would pump milk from the family van into cans brought in by the locals."

Michael's interest in food began at a young age. "When I was about twelve, I would go to my friend's house next door and we would cook and play with food. Food was beginning to capture me," he smiles. "But with the onset of supermarkets, the 1970s proved to be a difficult time for small farms. People stopped coming to our farm and my parents went bankrupt."

Michael was fortunate to be given the childhood gift of learning by doing on the playground of his family's farm. This early influence of agriculture, and an apprenticeship in classical cuisine, proved to be excellent training. In 1980, when he and his buddy Jamie Kennedy (whom he met when both were working in Switzerland) were offered jobs at Toronto's Scaramouche restaurant, Michael seized the opportunity. He was drawn to Canada's ruggedness and its expansive rural community of great lakes, abundant wildlife and an *undefined* food identity.

His journey into the art and culture of Canada's food industry eventually led him to meeting his wife and business partner, Nobuyo, and to buying the farm in Singhampton and opening Eigensinn. The couple's paying guests, at \$275 per person (excluding wine), are a privileged few who break bread in the Stadtländers' intimate farmhouse setting for twelve.

Nobuyo, who is in charge of the restaurant's public relations as well as hosting, was born in Okinawa, Japan, in an environment where families tended their own vegetable gardens and survived by catching and gathering things like squid and sardines from the sea. She is a dark-haired beauty with bright eyes, a big smile, and one of the most enthusiastic handshakes you'll ever receive.

She met Michael while taking a break from studying law. "When I was introduced to Michael, everyone kept telling me what a famous chef he was, but things like that don't matter to me. I'm not interested

in what people think. I was, and still am, a very independent person. But after a while when things started to happen, I realized, 'I want to have a child with this guy!' So we decided to get married. That decision cost me a \$500 phone call to my parents back home in Okinawa," she laughs.

Nobuyo describes Michael as an artist whose mind is consumed with new ideas, while she is the practical one. The result is the equilibrium of Yin and Yang. "Our son came home from school one day with a Father's Day card. In it he had written a note to his dad: 'You are a wonderful father, but the best advice you ever gave me was, 'Go ask your mother!'" Michael and Nobuyo have one son together, Hermann,



Michael and Nobuyo Stadtländer

and Michael has two older sons, Jonas and Christoph – both chefs, as well – from a previous marriage.

Michael's vision is not lacking, as he has no shortage of ideas. But what drives a man to continually push professional boundaries and work outside of the box? He will tell you that part of his drive comes from dissatisfaction. "I guess I'm not happy with the general culture and the way things are in the food industry. I keep looking for ways to make things better. Many nights I don't sleep well so I sit here by the fire, sipping wine and thoughts come to me. I know if an idea sticks around, it's worthwhile. It's something that will create change."

One idea that stuck was his Heaven on Earth project. In 2005, Michael closed Eigensinn for three months and, with the help of twenty apprentices from Japan, Germany, Mexico and Canada, they built ten monumental sculptures on the farm. During the entire month of August, the group served a series of ten-course meals, one at each sculpture. He describes this unusual form of feasting as "a heavenly golf course....You could go from hole to hole... from sculpture to sculpture... and be served. It was heaven on Earth – we were eating the land."

Michael is interested in food that has a story to tell. In 2006, he loaded a solar- and biodiesel-powered bus (the Liberator) with family members, a troop of culinary apprentices, and a camera crew, to create The Islands Project. He describes this food adventure, and the filming of its accompanying movie, as "glorifying the land." After driving from Ontario to British Columbia, the group travelled across the province where they met with like-minded chefs, artists and farmers. Together, they cooked on beaches and in forests, utilizing food sources they found along the way. Everything was made from scratch, including the serving vessels, tables and chairs; they ate dishes like manila clam with sautéed sea asparagus from plates made of rock and seaweed. This movie is a fascinating documentary of Michael and Nobuyo's love affair with nature.

More recently, Michael and Nobuyo hosted five hundred of Canada's finest chefs at Eigensinn Farm to create another first: the Canadian Chefs' Congress. This biennial event's mission is to connect chefs to the land, in solidarity with farmers, fishers, gardeners and foragers.



The three-day extravaganza, held last September, showcased chefs from each province and territory preparing foods from their homelands. Dishes from east to west, like pickled herring, cod cheeks and sturgeon caviar, B.C. buffalo and Nunavut whale, were paired with select Canadian wines and beer. It was a culinary love-in that Michael speaks about with pride. "People arrived from all over Canada and set up tents in our fields, [which] were filled with wooden tables, hay roofs, and outdoor ovens. We had bagpipers, keynote speakers, bands and fireworks. It was like one big theatre centered around food, where people hung out until four and five in the morning. There was a cult-like feeling."

What sets this warrior for Mother Earth apart is much more than his excellence as a chef, as there are many talented Canadian cooks: it is his passion to communicate through food and to use Mother Nature's abundance with great reverence. He is an intuitive and gentle spirit. "Today I went into the herb garden and found myself drawn to the wild oregano plant... I am drawn to its smell. I picked the twigs not knowing what I would do with them, but then it came to me. I knew they are meant to be used as skewers for the little bits of duck liver and goose heart that I will serve tomorrow."

A typical evening meal with Michael and Nobuyo might include Jerusalem artichoke soup, seared foie gras on bacon-roasted potatoes, oxtail ravioli and dandelion salad. An imaginative meal created by a thoughtful man. "You have to give cooking enough time. Like a jealous bride, it doesn't tolerate other passions. Little ideas, little inspirations, come only when you have enough time.

"Cooking is like meditation. The dining room is important to my family. It is medicine. I visualize people travelling from the city to come here and I know when they eat, they will be energized and happier."

Michael Stadtländer feeds our spirits. □

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