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FEATURE

Feasting Famously with Chef Aaron McCloud

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Hungry Lobbyist

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The man behind the modern, country fare inspired Cedar talks about his passion for food

Upon walking through the street level door to Cedar located off a busy downtown intersection, you are met with stairs that lead you to the basement-style restaurant. As you descend, the street noise dissipates with every step you take leading you closer to the modern bar and dining area house in a speakeasy-like setting. Calmness and serenity take over as you sit comfortably and quietly in the warm, inviting atmosphere. The drink is cold and strong, which is perfect as your day was long and tiring. The smell of house made wild boar sausage being seared in a skillet makes your mouth water. You're hungry, and cozy, and Chef Aaron McCloud is doing tasty things with farm fresh food in the kitchen, and you want it all.

Okay, well, that's at least how I felt and you should feel similar. If not, I hear Russia is nice this time of year.

Starting his food career as a violinist, playing at local restaurants in Michigan in his early teens, he had to work his way up to dishwasher before ever handling any food. "I have always loved restaurants, hotels, and the hospitality industry in general," Chef Aaron says, and that's why he wanted to stay around and learn the industry as a young boy. Essentially pleading with the owner of a restaurant in Michigan to let him into the kitchen, washing dishes led to light food prep, then some assistance with the line cooks, then actually cooking himself, "and the rest is history" he adds.



Chef Aaron has worked all over the place, in Michigan, New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Florida where he was a Saucier at the world renowned AAA-Five Diamond Award winning *Victoria and Albert's*. He moved to this area after working at the glamorous Mackinac Island in Michigan vis a vis Middleburg, VA, where he simply responded to an advertisement he saw for a Chef. After a stint at the luxurious *Inn at Perry Cabin* in St. Michael's, Maryland (which might look familiar and if it doesn't you better **LOCK IT UP!**) he landed at Cedar's about a year and a half ago. "I really wanted to get back to really cooking in a small environment," he says, citing that it provides the quality control you can only truly have in a smaller setting. Chef Aaron

is the kind of chef who is making all his own sauces, sourcing fresh and local ingredients daily, and preparing his own house-made sausages, cured and smoked meats, etc; so for him, smaller is better. "One of the great things about Cedar is we have about 65 seats here. I could not do a lot of what we do here in a 250 seat restaurant – it just wouldn't be feasible, something would get missed. The larger your volume the more challenging and closer to impossible it becomes," he says.

Note to Cedar, don't add too many more seats. I'd be remiss if I didn't discuss the food

at least – it’s good, I mean painfully good. The kind of good you dream about weeks, months after the fact. As a hunter and someone who has cultivated my own game meats for most of my life, I know butchering, making your own sausages, and smoking your own meat takes time. A lot of time, and even more patience, but really it takes passion – you have to be passionate about it, and Chef Aaron is, and it shows. If you don’t believe me, just take one bite.

When he’s not playing with venison, he’s popping around DC like everyone else. Where does he like to eat? “Michel Richard of course, [Central](#) or [Citronelle](#), whenever they re-open,” he says (water damage from the hotel). “I like [Vidalia](#) a lot, but my favorite go to place is [Bistro du Coin](#).” Mine too I must confess. He continues, “I mean, the service sucks, it’s loud, it’s terrible, it’s obnoxious, but man, it’s the best steak tartare in the city. It’s one of those ‘chef’s day off kind of places.” He also likes the Inn at Easton (I didn’t have the heart to tell him it closed – sorry Chef). He likes [Komi](#), (who doesn’t?) but he confesses he really doesn’t have too much time to go out. Burdens of being a wildly successful Chef I imagine.

I wanted to get his thoughts on the DC food scene, as I think it’s interesting how Chefs view the food industry in this town, of which they are a part. “The Michelin Star thing is going to take some doing, simply because of our audience: it’s not to say our audience isn’t well educated foodies, but I think right now it’s a relatively young audience versus other cities,” he says. “Michelin Stars, unfortunately, require a high price tag – special china, etc, we have nice china here, but we couldn’t afford all that stuff, not with our current price tag.” A price that is very affordable given the quality and freshness of the product being prepared at Cedar. But he does have high hopes for the city and our food aspirations. “Michelins, yeah, maybe down the road. I’ve been in dc for about 8 years and I’ve seen it go from a steak on the plate to really having great restaurants. Places like, [2Amy’s](#) – you know, once upon a time that was one of few places like it in DC, serving really good, unique food. We had steak houses, that’s about it,” he adds.

Chef Aaron really is true to form. He doesn’t work in a game inspired restaurant and eat all salads at home. He’s not going to the market every day because that’s what sells, he’s doing it because that’s who he is as a Chef, and it’s what he believes in.

**I JUST GO TO THE MARKET
AND SEE WHAT'S GOING
ON.**

“When I cook at home, I cook similar to what you have here, I just go

to the market and see what’s going on, which is kind of what we do at Cedar,” says Chef Aaron. “We don’t keep much in the fridge; we eat what’s very fresh.”

What is something he can’t live without? “I don’t know, a Kitchen Aid mixer, a good chef knife, and really some pots and pans is all you need.”

For brunch, I ask if he’s ordering breakfast or lunch? “Blood Mary” is his first and immediate response. I like this guy. He adds, “probably something lunchy, but I really love benedicts and a good hollandaise is hard to beat. I guess it just depends on the day, maybe I do go more breakfast.” He’s a brunch flip-flopper, and that’s okay.

As far as desserts go, he’s a pie guy, then cookies, never cake. “Cherry pie in Northern Michigan in July,” is his pie of choice. Cookies? “Tagalongs, those Girl Scout ones,” he says. I add that only if they’re made from real girl scouts, and thankfully he got the Adams Family reference, and not the Hannibal one he could have inferred. That would have been awkward.

We end with the Feasting Famously Fast Five – rapid fire stream of consciousness word associations:

Bacon –chocolate

Bourbon – glass

Michigan state – boo

Congressional interns – sorry

Congressional members – even sorrier

He laughs, he’s normal, and he’s funny. A passionate guy who is passionate about food and cooking – the way all Chefs should be to be honest. And for those ladies who are Googling him...he’s married. Sorry.



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PREVIOUS FEATURE



Hungry Lobbyist

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A Southern-born, 2006 DC transplant, **Brian Johnson** has been lobbying ever since his arrival, and now he's hungry for more. Literally! He runs the popular DC food and lifestyle blog, **The Hungry Lobbyist** and is the appetite behind FamousDC's food-based interview column, "**Feasting Famously**." His two favorite things about the district: happy hours and the holiday party circuit.

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