

PROFILE: OMRI AFLALO

BY JOSHUA LURIE



Citrus at Social is Chef Michel Richard's long-awaited return to Los Angeles, a yellow and lime-green showcase for his technical but playful French cuisine. When chef de cuisine Omri Aflalo assumed control of the kitchen in July, Citrus at Social was being positioned as a Hollywood hotspot, attracting young stars like Paris Hilton. "We were getting Madonna's hair stylist or Britney Spears' dog groomer. And Britney Spears," says Aflalo. "That's not really what Michel Richard's about. It wasn't focused on how fantastic the food was." Aflalo was determined to restore mentor Michel Richard's exacting standards and whimsical cooking style. It's working.

Aflalo was born in Valencia, California, and after his parents divorced in the mid '80s, he moved with his mother to San Francisco, the epicenter of West Coast food culture. "Growing up in San Francisco, you're exposed to [food], whether you'd like it or not...Even in those grocery stores, everything is fresh, everything is organic, nothing is chemically enhanced."

"I am Moroccan in heritage," says Aflalo. "If you know anything about Middle Eastern cuisine, I never grew up sitting around the table watching TV. It was always every aunt and uncle crammed into one room eating around couscous, just chatting about life. I was always raised around food."

Aflalo's mother was "not the best cook in the world," but she did make a concerted effort to expose her son to food. "When I was seven or eight years old, my first food experience was L'Orangerie," he says, referencing the defunct Los Angeles temple of haute cuisine. "I remember that it was presented so elegantly, I felt like royalty. It was the most amazing dinner."

Aflalo graduated high school in 1998 and immediately enrolled at San Francisco Art Institute with the intention of becoming a filmmaker. For two semesters, he worked in restaurants like Ondine in Sausalito, and was spending more time in the kitchen than behind the camera. "I started realizing the [movie] business is not as artsy or as hands-on as cooking is," says Aflalo. "At the same time, the restaurant I was working in at the time [Ondine], chef [C.J. Wakabayashi] was like, 'You really have a knack for cooking. You should pursue it'...I started looking at culinary schools and decided to go to the Culinary Institute [of America]."

Once Aflalo reached the East Coast, the produce disappointed him. "In San Francisco, a lot of chefs have their own farm, or go to a farm, or they grow it in their apartment or house...Up and down [the East Coast], every chef will tell you, of course the most important thing is the ingredients, but I can tell you on the East Coast, there's no comparison between the love of fresh produce on the West Coast."

"CIA teaches you French technique, and I kept hearing French this, French that, so I was like, I want to see what they really do in France, so I went over there. Instead of getting a culinary experience, I got more of a cultural experience. After awhile, I started realizing we do the same food in the United States, if not better. One thing that is a disadvantage to the French: produce. Over in France, a jalapeño doesn't exist, where we get a jalapeño at Ralph's...



same with a lot of Asian ingredients."

The chef at Escoffier - CIA's French restaurant - found work for Aflalo with friend Jean-Michel Bouvier, who has a Michelin two-star in Chambéry, France. "Every day, from my apartment, I'd look at the French Alps," says Aflalo. "Then I went to Antoine Westermann, in Strasbourg. It was a three Michelin restaurant...It was amazing. For me to get into a three-star Michelin, as an American, was very tough."

After two years in France, Aflalo returned to the States with a fiancée. She was from D.C., so that's where they moved. A friend suggested that he try to work at Citronelle, Michel Richard's highly regarded D.C. restaurant. "I went over there and did a stage and it was history from there," says Aflalo. He worked for Richard and chef de cuisine David Deshaies for three years, including two years as sous chef.

Aflalo considers Richard a mentor, saying, "What I learned from him was, one, the technique. I can't reiterate enough how hard his technique is...Even here, I have trouble doing recipes I've done 100 times...He's not a savory chef. He came up doing pastries. He was the executive pastry chef for Gaston LeNôtre, which is the hugest chocolate shop in Paris, so when he goes about his recipes, they're more methodical, rather than a dash of salt, a pinch of this. Let's adjust this. No, it's 50 grams of this, 100 grams of that.... He has taught me to be very, very precise. And again, the love. I can't tell you the love that Michel has. It's amazing."

Aflalo left Citronelle in February 2006 and moved to Atlanta to work at The Ritz-Carlton, Buckhead, a special occasion restaurant in a ritzy neighborhood. "I ended up not really liking working for the corporation there," says Aflalo. "They have a very strict mandate."

In 2007, Aflalo returned home to San Francisco and signed on at Restaurant Gary Danko, a highly rated fine-dining establishment near Fisherman's Wharf. A year into his stint, Aflalo joined Danko at the 2008 Pebble Beach Food & Wine Festival, which hosted dozens of leading chefs. This weekend allowed him to reconnect with Michel Richard, who was there to cook at the same event. Richard told Aflalo about his Hollywood restaurant, and that he needed to install an executive chef de cuisine in L.A. who was familiar with his food. Aflalo jumped at the opportunity to work with his mentor.

Richard brought Aflalo to Citrus at Social to mirror his style of cooking. "Every day I tell Michel I'm not here to make personal gains, I'm here to make you look good," says Aflalo. Even so, he still has a say in the menu, saying, "[Richard] is very accepting of my thoughts...When he comes out here, we go back and forth about ideas."

"I do want to push more Moroccan or more North African style dishes," says Aflalo. "Some people think of Morocco, they think of couscous, they think of tagine, they think of lemon chicken, and that's one specific area of Morocco...It is my dream to maybe, hopefully, open a restaurant where I can display that in a fine dining atmosphere."

"I'm lucky in this position to have the chef title," says Aflalo. "I'm still very young and learning a lot...Michel has given me an opportunity." He also considers himself "lucky" to work with New York based restaurateur Jeffrey Chodorow, who co-owns the restaurant with Richard and local boutique owner Melissa Richardson. "What other 28-year-old cook gets to have this gorgeous restaurant, plus this property, and have the financial support behind it in doing a fine dining restaurant?"

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THE HotCORNER

HOLLYWOOD & CAHUENGA

The Sunset Strip is ten years past its heyday, a stretch of West Hollywood that's only still popular with Euros carrying frayed guidebooks. The action has moved east to Hollywood. Earlier this decade, Cahuenga was the flashpoint, and thanks to a new batch of entrepreneurs, the corridor is beginning its second wave.

Designer Kristofer Keith of Spacecraft positioned himself at the center of the action. He was nominated for an AIA/LA Restaurant Design Award for his work on Kitchen 24, a sleek 24/7 diner. He's working on a burgers-and-beer concept down Cahuenga called Stout, with a wraparound patio and beer bottle chandeliers. Now he's become a restaurateur, partnering with Adolfo Suaya (Gaucho Grill, the upcoming Osaka Hollywood) on **Delux**. Keith adorned the Art

Deco restaurant and lounge with a green marble bar and a 45-foot-wide stained-glass mural inspired by "Metropolis" that depicts blimps, skyscrapers and mountains. Eric Greenspen, chef-owner of The Foundry on Melrose and Suaya's long-time friend, infused his entire small plates menu with alcohol. Think crispy mac and cheese with whiskey barbecue sauce, seared scallops with champagne beurre blanc and whiskey chocolate truffles with walnuts and caramel.

David Stratton used to have a club around the corner called Club Lingerie. For Cahuenga 2.0, Stratton partnered with Danny B on **Ecco Ultra Lounge**, occupying the former Tokio space.

Designer Beau Robb's eco-friendly facelift utilized recycled aluminum siding, LED bubble lighting from Europe that changes color and a state-of-the-art sound system designed by Advanced Audio. "All the DJs from around the world want to come in and play here," says Stratton. "It's a dream spot." The power is harvested from the sun and wind, and even the straws were recycled.

Two doors down, Stratton and Danny B are launching a pizzeria with Andrew Belchic (the original owner of Citizen Smith) and Nicky Nahas in the former home of Blest Boutique. Belchic's design includes patio seating and a 100-year-old wood door. The working title is **Lucca**, though the name may change before January's opening. Whatever the name, expect pizzas and pastas made with organic ingredients, 24-hour service and DJs.

Delux, 1624 N. Cahuenga Blvd., Hollywood, (323) 461-6800

Ecco Ultra Lounge, 1640 N. Cahuenga Blvd., Hollywood, (323) 464-2065, www.eccohollywood.com

Lucca (name for now), 1634 N. Cahuenga Blvd., Hollywood

