

Trading Foie Gras for Chickpea Burgers

Chef Merida of Rockin' Roots changes how he cooks, and eats

WRITTEN BY ESTHER DAVIDOWITZ

Chef Michael Merida was dying. Lying on a gurney in a hospital hallway in February 2018, the River Vale resident was hemorrhaging after what was supposed to be a routine appendectomy. Doctors were able to save him, but Merida ended up having 30 inches of his intestines removed and his stomach reconstructed, and believing that he would never cook again.

"I physically didn't think that I could do it," recalls the 48-year-old father of two, a Culinary Institute of America alum who once cooked at the most vaunted kitchens in the world — Fat Duck in England, El Bulli in Spain, Joel Robuchon in France, RyuGin in Japan, and Le Bernardin and Vong in New York City, as well as respected restaurants in New Jersey including Cravings in Ridgewood, Mezza in Westwood and the Montclair Social Club in Montclair.

Fast forward two years. Today, Merida not only cooks six days a week at Rockin' Roots, his primarily plant-based, seasonal BYOB in Hillsdale, but he has changed how and what he cooks — as well as what he himself eats. He opened Rockin' Roots in October, 2019.

"When I opened Rockin' Roots, I wanted people to see what food can be," he says. "It's not an ordinary juice shop. It's a chef-driven restaurant that uses seasonal products and professional cooking techniques" to create healthy delicious dishes.

From once searing fatty foie gras, whisking butter-heavy Hollandaise sauce and deep-frying chicken, Merida today prefers to work with (and eat) vegetables, fruits and grains. Instead of using refined sugar, he uses agave nectar. Instead of milk, he uses yogurt. Instead of ice cream, he uses...banana.

"You freeze bananas, put it through a fruit processor, and then add nuts on top," he says. "It has the texture of ice cream and it's sweet. It's perfect."

Bananas play a role in one of his favorite breakfasts too, dubbed the BAT: mashed bananas (the B), diced apples (the A), and a bit of tahini (T). "It's an easy little dish," he says. "Great as a snack."



CHEF MICHAEL MERIDA

ANNE-MARIE CARUSO

He uses apple stems and peels to make caramel (you'll find the caramel on top of his homemade apple tarts). He substitutes gelatin with seaweed in baking for vegan customers. He adds charcoal powder to cocoa powder in biscotti for added health reasons (it allegedly absorbs organic toxins). And he barely uses butter, cream or fats in any of his dishes. And of course no red meat, but some fish.

Merida says he began to offer vegetarian dishes soon after he began working at the Montclair Social Club, which opened in June 2018 and has since closed its doors. One night during that period, he went to Nix, a Michelin-starred vegetarian restaurant in New York City (now permanently closed due to the pandemic), and was blown away. "It opened my eyes," he says. "I knew then that vegetarianism was a movement, not just a trend."

He began to delve into vegetarian cooking at MSC. "I didn't want to serve the usual steamed vegetables," he says.

He offered such creative dishes as cauliflower five-ways, using the entire vegetable to make cauliflower couscous, puree, chips and more, as well as chickpea cavatelli dressed with foraged mushrooms and tomato sauce made with dehydrated tomatoes and caramelized onions. "And if it was ramp season, I'd drizzle ramp pesto on top," he says.

He loves the challenge, and accommodating a growing segment of the dining-out population. "You hear chefs complain, 'A vegan? I've got to cook for a vegan?' You never hear a chef say, 'I've got to cook for a carnivore.'"

Merida isn't complaining. He's thrilled for the opportunity — and for his customers. "They dictate what I cook," he says. "The restaurant is like a canvas. I talk to the customers to see what they like, what they want. I learn from them." He says one customer, a cancer patient, told him that cilantro removes mercury from tuna and other fish. "I looked it up," he says. "It's true."

But, he admits, diners still love fatty, not-particularly healthy foods, even those who frequent his shop. When he first offered fish and chips — beer-battered cod, crispy frites, caper tartar sauce and cole slaw — "We had a line out the door," he says. But, he says, "once in a while eating fries" isn't going to do great harm to one's health.

He himself is no fanatic. He eats chicken, "organic, and not fried," he says, though adds that his wife is a strict vegetarian and a big influence on him. And fish. "I can't live without fish," he says. And he loves pizza. But, for the most part, he eats a lot more fruits, vegetables and grains, exercises regularly and no longer works around the clock. "I am feeling a lot better," he says. "I'm not sluggish anymore. It's a complete change." ■

HOT COCOA BOMBS IN BERGEN COUNTY

A hot cocoa bomb is a smooth chocolate sphere filled with hot chocolate mix, marshmallows, crushed candies and other mix-ins. This sweet treat had a quick rise to fame thanks to TikTok, where millions of videos tagged #hotchocolatebombs have been posted since November.

Chocolate shops and bakers quickly began making — and selling out of — cocoa bombs, which can be decorated simply with chocolate swirls and sprinkles or topped with chopped candy bars and cookies. Place one in a mug, pour hot milk over the top, and voila! Hot cocoa.

Here are four places to find them in Bergen County:

COCO JOLIE, ENGLEWOOD

Hot chocolate bombs may have just recently become trendy, but Coco Jolie has been making them for years. These dark chocolate delights come in sets of six; it's recommended you use two bombs per serving. Everything at Coco Jolie is vegan and certified Kosher and the chocolate is organic and fair trade. The bombs are made with rich dark 65% cacao chocolate, extra dark organic cocoa powder, organic coconut milk powder and organic cane sugar. Packages start at \$12. • 12 N. Dean St., Englewood; (201) 771-1414, cocojolie.com



KARA KAKES, FRANKLIN LAKES

"People are going nuts over our hot cocoa bombs," says Kara Schnaidt, owner of Kara Kakes. She made several batches before Thanksgiving and each sold out in minutes. Now, Schnaidt plans to sell them in-store on a regular basis. Each bomb has hot chocolate mix inside and marshmallows, as well as something extra depending on the flavor. For example, the cookies and cream bomb has Oreo pieces mixed in. Flavors include classic hot chocolate, s'mores and unicorn (filled with unicorn marshmallows), though the flavors will change every week. Each bomb costs \$5.50. • 799 Franklin Ave., Franklin Lakes; (201) 485-8889, kara-kakes.com



MEYER'S HOUSE OF SWEETS, WYCKOFF

Old-school chocolate and candy shop Meyer's House of Sweets is embracing a new trend with its hot cocoa bombs. The original is made with real milk chocolate with marshmallows and homemade hot cocoa mix inside (\$5.99). You won't find any of that waxy melting "chocolate" in these bombs. If you're looking for something a bit more festive, try the Candy Cane bomb with crushed candy cane inside, or the Bunker Bomb, which has a sea salt caramel bomb within the original bomb (\$6.99). All flavors come wrapped in vibrantly colored foils of green, red, yellow and blue. • 637 Wyckoff Ave., Wyckoff; (201) 848-8200, meyershosnj.com

TRINA'S TREATS, LYNDBURST

The most popular hot chocolate bomb at the darling Trina's Treats is the Grinch bomb — a green white chocolate shell that's filled with marshmallows and topped with a red heart sprinkle (\$4). When it melts, you'll have a Grinchy green cup of hot cocoa. The "Trina" bomb, made with hot pink white chocolate, filled with marshmallows and edible glitter and topped with rainbow heart sprinkles, will transform your drink into something pink, glittery and magical. • 296B Stuyvesant Ave., Lyndhurst; trinas.treats@yahoo.com, trinastreatsxo.com

—REBECCA KING >