

A REAL WILD ONE

MONICA PITRELLI catches up with celebrity chef Chuck Hughes to talk food tattoos, besting Bobby Flay and eating Mickey D's in Singapore.

Fast Facts:

Name: Chuck Hughes

From: Montreal

Host of: *Chuck's Day Off* on The Asian Food Channel

You just whipped up a fabulous jerk Atlantic lobster here in the AFC studio, but I see a few McDonald's wrappers on the back table. Busted?

No, no (*laughs*). I love food so much, but I'm not going to come to Singapore and have McDonald's. I've had it before – I'm not holier than thou. I just choose not to if I can avoid it.

This is your first time in Asia, and I hear you tried *balut* in Manila. Did you like it?

Yeah, the way people explain it – it's a day-old duck embryo, and there's juice and you've got to suck the juice first – and it's like, "Oh my god, this sounds horrible! How could I even put that in my mouth?" But the honest truth is that when you actually get down to it, it's really not that bad. It's warm, so it's semi-cooked in a sense; I thought it was raw. And, you put salt, chilli and vinegar on it. I could eat this table with salt, chilli and vinegar.

Whoa. Then durian must have been no big deal for you?

I realised that durian smelled so good, that it's bad. I broke the smell down – it's so intense, it's so overpowering. It's like when too much of a good thing becomes bad. It's so sweet; it's so pungent; it's so citrusy. It's like really, *really* too much. If you can diffuse it a bit, oh my god, it's such a unique and amazing flavour. I loved it.

C'mon, really?

I enjoyed it. If I tried durian in Texas, I probably wouldn't like it as much. There is a lot to be said for time and place. But there's something to the fact that I had it here, where it's from, with people that know about it. They take it seriously. What else do we have in life? Family, food and love. The rest is unimportant. That's the honest truth.

That's a great philosophy. What started your passion for cooking?

My mom. She is not the best of cooks, but she's very passionate. At a young age, my mom pushed me to go into cooking. She knew I was going to be a chef. Twenty-five years ago when I was ten, if you looked at a chef, I was like – *that guy?* An alcoholic, overworked,

grey, unhappy, yelling, French guy? I was like, really Mom? I never saw it. So I studied marketing and business, and I wanted to run the world and have a big company. But I was that cheesy guy who would have brunches and invite all my friends over. I took my first cooking class when I was in Grade 6. It was an extracurricular class. I took hockey and cooking. I was just starting to like girls, and I walked into the class, and it was eight girls and me. So, I was like, "Cooking is actually pretty cool."

When did you realise that this could become a career?

I went to cooking school, and the first day I chopped an onion, it was like (*raises hands to the heavens*) "Awwwww". I say cooking saved my life. It gave me something that I actually loved doing and had the passion and interest to stick with. I'm pretty ADD, so cooking was great for me because it's ever-changing, you're on your feet, there's action. It was something that I truly loved from the beginning.

What was your first job in the business?

I was a busboy in a place called the Banff Springs Hotel in Banff, Alberta, which is a huge Fairmont Hotel. I used to see the guys in the kitchen and think, "Man, these guys are bad ass. These guys don't take sh*t from anybody, even the general manager!" I remember being so scared to talk to them. After work, we'd be out in the bars, and all the girls would be saying, "Oh, he's the chef, he's the chef", and I was like "Wow, who are these pirates?"

So that must have affected your vision of the old, pathetic chef?

Yeah, that was slowly changing. What people see in a chef has changed a lot these days. I didn't fit with that white hat, stiff, starchy look. It's not me – it's not what I love about cooking. I love everything else. And, I love breaking the rules.



Left: Putting the final touches onto his famous Jerk Atlantic Lobster
Right: answering his "shell phone"

Photos by Kevin F. Cox



Speaking of rule breaking – I understand you have tattoos of lobsters, arugula and even lemon meringue pie. How do you decide that a food warrants space on your skin?

It's weird – even before I even went into cooking, I was getting food tattoos. The real thing for me is that it's permanent, so you need to make sure you're going to love it forever. Shrimp, lobster, oysters, lemon meringue pie – they're no-brainers for me. People look at me like, "Wow, how could you do that?" And I'll say, "Well, you have a scorpion tattoo. What does that mean?"

Good point. Tattoos are pretty common in the back of the house, right?

Forget the French chef who comes to have a glass of wine with you at the end of the night. All the guys that are *really* working, they all look like me. And now, slowly but surely, the world is seeing that.

A lot of online comments about your show don't relate to your cooking. For example, the first comment on your spicy pork sandwiches video says, "I'm a man, and I'm completely comfortable with my sexuality, and I think he's sexy." Are you surprised by these reactions?

Yeah, big time. The whole sexiness of food thing, I don't really get it. Professional cooking is not like at home with your significant other, drinking a glass of wine and feeding each other chocolate. It's pretty unsexy. It's long hours, it's hard work, it's sweaty, it's gross. It's anything but sexy.

It's funny, because with my look and the way I cook, everybody said, "Guys are going to dig this. Guys are going to be all over it." And guys *are* all over it, and they really love it. But a lot of the show's fans are women. I'm not complaining.

QUICK QUIPS FROM CHUCK

On his background: My dad's a lawyer; my uncle's an investment banker. I come from a long line of real business-y type people.

On his favourite tool to use in the kitchen: The spoonula – it's half spoon, half spatula. It's great for risotto, mashed potatoes and anything you want to scoop up. It's good for plating. I am actually a green belt in spoonula, so watch out.

On beating the venerable Bobby Flay on *Iron Chef America*: It was the best day and worst day of my life. That show defined me, even though I'd been chopping carrots for 18 years. Imagine – you go to the Food Network studio for the first time in your life, you meet Bobby Flay for the first time in your life. Then you beat him. You're like, "Oh, nooo! What have I done?"

On competing on *Iron Chef America* for the second time: I got booted off in the fourth week by tofu. So don't bring up tofu. *(laughs)*

On publishing his first cookbook in French: "My family is French and I'm from Montreal, which is a French-speaking city. My agent wanted to shoot me because obviously books in French don't sell compared to books in English. But I really wanted to get a book in French out first. My grandmother is 93, and I just wanted her to see it. When I show her I'm on TV, she says, "It looks so much like you!" I'm like "Grandma, it is me." She's like "Oh, stop!" Literally, I'm not even joking.

On the state of food television: The "how-to" cooking show is not that popular. People want to see travel. People want to see competitions.

On being special: I'm not special. I'm just lucky.

On his favourite dish in Singapore: Black pepper crab at East Coast Lagoon Food Village. I almost ate it in KL, but everybody said "No, no, no, don't have it here, you have to wait until you get to Singapore."

CHOCOLATE TAPIOCA ARANCINI

Courtesy of Chuck Hughes

Ingredients: Chocolate Centre

- 2 cups or 500ml of chopped chocolate
- 1 cup or 250ml of cream

Ingredients: Pearl Tapioca

- 2 cups or 500ml of cold water
- ½ cup or 125ml of small pearl tapioca
- 1 cup or 250ml of milk
- 1 cup or 250ml of 35% cream
- 1 cup or 250ml of sugar
- zest of 1 orange
- 1 vanilla bean, sliced and seeds scraped

Ingredients: Crumb Coating

- 2 cups or 500ml of Panko breadcrumbs, reduced to a fine powder
- 1 cup or 250ml of flour
- 4 eggs

Method: Chocolate Centre

- Heat cream in a saucepan. Add chocolate and stir until chocolate melts and combines with cream.
- Transfer to a bowl. Cover with plastic wrap, pressing plastic to the chocolate to prevent a skin from forming.
- Refrigerate for one hour or until firm.

Method: Pearl Tapioca

- Soak tapioca in cold water for 30 minutes. Drain the water.
- In a saucepan over medium heat, add milk, cream, sugar, orange zest and vanilla bean.
- Add the tapioca pearls and bring to the boil.
- Reduce heat and let simmer for 25 minutes.
- Transfer to a bowl and let cool.
- Refrigerate for 30 minutes, or until mixture sets.
- Using wet hands (to prevent mixture from sticking to them), shape mixture into golf ball sizes.
- Flatten ball and insert a small spoonful of chocolate into the centre. Reshape into ball.
- Place balls on a baking tray lined with parchment paper.
- Preheat oil in fryer to 180° C (350° F).
- Sprinkle each ball with flour. Dip into whisked egg mixture and roll in Panko breadcrumbs.
- Drop each ball into the oil. Fry for one or two minutes until golden brown.
- Drain and transfer to a plate lined with paper towel. 🍴



Catch Chuck's Day Off on the Asian Food channel on Wednesdays at 9pm.