



# THE MENSCH

What's a nice  
Jewish boy  
like David  
Schwartz doing  
running a  
Chinese food  
mini-empire, and  
why risk  
everything to  
open a deli-  
inspired steak-  
house? It's all  
about honouring  
his mom, of  
course

BY

**DAVID SAX**

PORTRAIT

BY **DANIEL**

**EHRENWORTH**



**D**AVID SCHWARTZ slowly drives through Kensington Market to a parking garage a few blocks away from his house. “I do this once or twice a week,” he says, guiding his Audi Q3 on a steady spiral to the lot’s lowest level. From the din of the sunny street, there is suddenly quiet—just a few cars scattered among the dusty spaces. Schwartz puts his phone to his ear. “Sometimes they answer right away, sometimes I wait,” he tells me. Then, into the phone: “I’m here.”

A minute later, a door opens and two Chinese women in aprons approach, pushing a cart loaded with cardboard boxes. “Oh, business is good—new car!” one of them says. Schwartz laughs and puts the boxes in the back seat. Together, they cost \$580, and inside is the equivalent of culinary gold: 50 pounds of silver needles, a short, chewy rice-flour noodle pushed through a sieve and hand-rolled so its ends taper to a fine point. “They’re worth it,” Schwartz says. “They’re very laborious to make, but the texture is perfect. Nothing even comes close.”

Cargo secured, he reverses course to street level, makes a few turns and pulls up to Sunnys Chinese, his restaurant on Kensington Avenue. It’s located down a fluorescent-lit hallway, behind a vintage clothing store, a Tibetan boutique and a psychic. Two cooks emerge to grab the boxes. Later that evening, those cooks will stir-fry the noodles in blazing woks with soy, scallions and fragrant black mushrooms—a recipe inspired by the dishes of Guangdong.

What, exactly, does this nice Jewish boy from Toronto know about Chinese cuisine, not to mention the regional culinary inflections therein? Walk with Schwartz through Chinatown, and he’ll talk lovingly about the transcendent nature of the dried scallops he gets from a small store on Dundas or the Sichuan caiziyou oil he orders from Lucky Moose Supply, a block away. When he spots an elderly Chinese woman selling herbs on the sidewalk at Dundas and Spadina, he leans over to inspect each plant before picking up confetti cilantro. He makes a deal: \$5 for a bushel. Schwartz hates cilantro, but this stuff is different—it’s only briefly in season every year, and it’s the perfect garnish for the stir-fried lamb leg he’s serving this week at Mimi Chinese, his upscale Yorkville restaurant.

At 32, with Sunnys and Mimi to his name, Schwartz is a dominant force in Chinese dining in Toronto. Both his restaurants became popular and critical successes, and Michelin bestowed the Young Chef Award upon him last year. A second location of Mimi is set to open in Miami next summer, his first project outside Toronto. After an early career spent defying expectations, Schwartz is zagging again, launching his most ambitious project yet. Linny’s, on pricey Ossington, is a deli-inspired steakhouse where porterhouses share billing with hand-cut pastrami. The restaurant, named after Schwartz’s late mother, marks a return to his cultural roots and the dawn of a second brand. For a young chef who has known only success, what comes next is complicated. Linny’s is a gambit that’s as much about food as it is about culture: it’s wrapped up in Schwartz coming to grips with loss and his identity as a restaurateur.

**T**HOUGH SCHWARTZ GREW UP near Bathurst and Eglinton, his grandparents, Polish Holocaust survivors, settled downtown in the late 1940s. His father’s family had a convenience store and tailor shop at Bloor and Shaw, not far from the new steakhouse. His maternal grandfather, meanwhile, ran the P&K Poultry market in Kensington Market, slaughtering chickens until the 1970s. “There’s a story that my grandfather kept a pet chicken with him at the market,” Schwartz says. “One day, he grabbed his pet chicken by accident and beheaded it. When he realized his mistake, he just started wailing. He carried a lot of trauma.”

Schwartz’s parents met in 1972, when they were 23. His mother, Linda Pach (a.k.a. Linny), was known for her bold shades of lipstick and surplus of chutzpah. She met Michael Schwartz, a film student, at York University, where she was taking night classes to become a paralegal. After they wed, Michael worked in film while Linda held various jobs in the legal field, including a stint as a parole officer. On the side, the couple launched a hot dog stand in Yorkville in 1980. Michael, a self-professed “hot dog freak,” imported a steaming cart from New York, sourced mustard in Buffalo and had a bakery make a custom challah bun with poppy seeds. In 1982, the *Toronto Star* deemed the Schwartzes’ dog the best in the city. But the cart did so well that it spurred violent competition. “Things got a bit tough on the street,” Michael says. One day, a competitor grabbed Linda’s hair from a moving car window and nearly dragged her down the block. She escaped unscathed, but the couple had no desire to die slinging sausages, so they sold the cart.

By the time Schwartz was born, in 1992, his parents already had three daughters, all at least a decade older than him. “Just to be clear, David was not an accident,” says Michael. Schwartz was so adored by his sisters that his feet barely touched the ground his first few years. Their home in Cedarvale was centred around the kitchen, where everyone congregated at the island, around the big harvest table or on the sofa by the window. Everyone was welcome and fed by Linda. Occasionally, she’d even bring a parolee home for dinner.

“We hosted constantly,” Schwartz recalls. “Big dinners were an important part of how we lived.” Friday night shabbat, Sunday brunches, Jewish holidays. There was Linda’s homemade chicken schnitzel and dense carrot cake but also takeout from China House or Yitz’s Deli. “My mother was really keen on tradition and family. She was the daughter of Holocaust survivors who were persecuted for their traditions,” says Schwartz. “A big reason why I gravitated to restaurants in general is because I like hosting and taking care of strangers.”

Chinese food was also an important custom in the Schwartz household, as it is for so many Jewish families. The Schwartzes would roll in on Sundays as a big loud pack, with aunts, uncles, cousins and friends in tow, to Lee Garden or Goldstone Noodle on Spadina, Pearl Harbourfront, or dim sum spots in Markham. By age three, Schwartz was delighting servers by devouring chicken feet, tripe and other dishes most kids wouldn’t normally touch. His interest in cooking began at six, after he made stir-fried red cabbage at day camp, served in a paper Dixie cup. At nine, he began experimenting with his cooking, scraping the filling out of a Pizza Pop and replacing it with a piece of fried fish from T&T.



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**1. Schwartz's grandfather, Sam Pach, was a survivor of Auschwitz. He later ran a butcher shop in Kensington Market, where his family found community**

**2. The Schwartzes' hot dog cart was one of the first in the city, serving only steamed dogs and buns**

**3. Linda Pach and Michael Schwartz met in their 20s at the York University library. They had been together for two decades when David was born**

Schwartz's culinary passion was also propelled by tragedy. He was 10 when his mother died of cancer in early 2003. "David was crushed," recalls his sister Amanda Lapidus, who had just moved away for university. Schwartz cried constantly in the weeks leading up to Linda's death. "And then she died, and he didn't cry at all," Amanda says. "We tried very hard to give David what he needed." Schwartz and his father remained at the house, and Amanda would return to Toronto each weekend to cook and eat with them. "I think the act of cooking and dining became therapeutic," she says.

At 16, Schwartz began cooking for his father and friends. "I loved that our home was always full of people because my mom would host people and cook for them," he says. "So I learned that I could also do that." But Schwartz wasn't cooking the food Linda made, let alone the Ashkenazi staples his grandparents had brought from Poland. He still recoils at the thought of a tinfoil-covered dish of p'tcha—an aspic made with boiled calf's feet and a heroic quantity of garlic, considered a Yiddish delicacy—that his father kept in the basement fridge. Schwartz instead cooked what he wanted: fried chicken, egg-drop soup, stir-fries or, for a Super Bowl party, hundreds of chicken wings.

Lee-Tal Hatuka, a contemporary abstract painter with a day job in hospitality, remembers going to the Schwartz house for a party he hosted in high school but never actually speaking to him. "Instead of being in the thick of socializing, he'd be making grilled cheese in the kitchen," she says. "He'd cook and just hide." (Schwartz admits that he was a bit shy.) Years later, after seeing her dressed as Garth from *Wayne's World* at a Halloween party, he worked up the courage to invite Hatuka over for dinner. "I thought, *I'm a broke student. I'd love for someone to cook me dinner*," she says. "So I brought him a steak." Schwartz was surprised that his guest came with ingredients, and he spent much of the date trying to get his smoke alarm to stop shrieking, but something clearly clicked between them. They've been together ever since. At their wedding, this past August, they served steak.

Schwartz briefly studied political science at Western University, aiming for a career in law. But, the more he cooked, the more he fantasized about a future with food. The summer before university, he was a food runner at the casual fine-dining

franchise Joey in Don Mills. When the manager asked Schwartz about his long-term goals, he told him, "I want to open a restaurant." The manager laughed. In his spare time, Schwartz kept experimenting, watching YouTube videos on wok techniques, trying different ingredients. While backpacking through Southeast Asia, he carried around Harold McGee's *On Food and Cooking*, a technical bible for serious cooks; it took up a third of his backpack. On earlier eating trips with his father to Chicago and New Orleans, he read up on fermentation. "I mean, what 15-year-old sits on a plane reading about fermentation?" asks Michael with a laugh. Schwartz's fermentation obsession later became so extensive that he stacked two mini-fridges in his apartment and reserved them for experiments—pig's heads, sauces, fishy pickles—which, he says, "smelled like burp." After a hellish summer internship at a bank ("All I thought of was what I was going to cook for dinner"), he left Western in the middle of his second year and enrolled in Fanshawe College's food and beverage management program.

Schwartz first worked in kitchens while he was in college, including a brief stint catering private events out of Amanda's basement. His first gig as a chef, in 2012, was at Rose and Sons, Anthony Rose's diner on Dupont, which served patty melts, matzo ball soup and fried rice. Schwartz approached Rose one day about some complicated technique he'd read about in McGee. Rose looked at him like he was an alien and said that his restaurant was all about serving "simple shit" cooked in pans and ovens.

Soon afterward, a new restaurant by chef Nick Liu called DaiLo, which paired Asian flavours with modern French techniques, opened on College Street. The DaiLo kitchen was filled with talented young chefs eager to make their mark. Among them was Schwartz, who insisted to anyone who would listen that he intended to open his own Chinese restaurant.





**1. Linda Pach cherished tradition and loved hosting large dinner parties at the Schwartz household**



**2. Schwartz and Hatuka served steak, appropriately, at their wedding in August**

**F**OR SCHWARTZ, the motivation came from a deep place. His growing obsession with the endless layers of Chinese cooking was as much about the cuisine as it was about his grief. “After my mother passed away, Chinese food represented comfort and family even more,” he says. “My earliest memories of dining with my family were at a round table in a Chinese restaurant.” Those tables suddenly seemed much larger without his mother, but it was important to maintain the tradition. “Those were the meals that brought our family together.”

Upon learning of Schwartz’s plan to open a Chinese restaurant, Braden Chong, a chef who befriended him at DaiLo (and whose brother is an editor at *Toronto Life*), was initially dumbfounded. “I said, ‘David, you’re crazy,’” he recalls. “‘Who do you think you are? Why do you want to open a Chinese restaurant? You’re a Jewish white guy! You don’t just open a Chinese restaurant!’” Still, Schwartz badgered him about the restaurant for years. When Chong was working in Japan, he would wake up to texts from Schwartz with blueprints, design inspiration, mock menus and insistent offers to join him.

In late 2019, as he was further developing the concept for Mimi, Schwartz took two months to eat his way around China. His dad and Amanda joined him for the first 10 days, landing in Hong Kong, where Schwartz immediately took them to eat barbecued goose sitting on upturned water buckets. “It was a comedy of errors,” Amanda says. She remembers being dragged thousands of kilometres across cities and provinces to chase the perfect dish on some street corner before the three of them collapsed in happy exhaustion in their hotel room. Schwartz ate everything in sight and took copious notes and photos.

By the time Mimi Chinese was scheduled to open, in April of 2020, Toronto’s restaurants were in Covid lockdown. Schwartz subsisted by picking up work with catering giant Food Dudes and on film productions while his own restaurant kitchen sat empty. In early 2021, Schwartz and Chong, along with front-of-house staffer Mica White and sous-chef Keith Siu, started selling meals out of the back of Mimi’s kitchen under the name Sunnys Chinese. (The restaurant’s namesake is a beloved manager at Chinatown’s House of Gourmet.) Like most pandemic pop-up founders, the trio began posting photos on Instagram and fielding orders by text and phone. Soon, they were featuring different regions of China, with dishes that highlighted the various cooking styles; Schwartz wrote cards explaining the cultural significance of each plate. Early hits included tender and smoky cumin-scented lamb ribs, which were cured and charcoal-roasted in the style of Shaanxi, as well as sticky Hong Kong-style char siu pork with soybeans. But the fan favourite was a Sichuan-style belt noodle, a handmade four-foot-long ribbon flecked with braised beef, black beans and tongue-numbing chili oil. (The dish would go on to become one of Mimi’s camera-ready signatures, pulled above diner’s heads by servers before being cut into pieces with a pair of gold-plated scissors.)

“We set up a mailing list one night, woke up the next morning and had 300 subscribers,” says Schwartz. “I thought, *Holy shit!*” Two months later, they had 12,000 subscribers. “We’d sell out of 200 meals in three minutes. We were making and packing seven to 11 meals, consisting of six plates each, every half-hour.”

Mimi Chinese opened in the fall of 2021 to critical acclaim. And the Sunnys pop-up proved so popular that Schwartz decided to open it as a stand-alone restaurant in August of 2022, in Kensington Market. While both spots focus on regional Chinese cuisine, the atmosphere and vibe differ greatly. Mimi is an elegant, darkly lit dining experience with elevated, luxurious dishes: sea scallops in chili oil, a one-bite amuse bouche of silken tofu with sweet corn, a delicate little shrimp toast that tastes like an ocean-flavoured churro. Sunnys is pink, loud and inspired by street food—spicier, fattier and downright playful. There’s the popular orange chicken, a crispy, sticky ode to Panda Express, and the eye-watering Sichuan beef jerky. Sunnys’ servers wear T-shirts; Mimi’s wear starched shirts. But both take the time to explain the origins of each dish, demystifying China’s richly layered cuisines.

The inevitable blowback came as fast as the success. Most of it emanated from keyboard warriors on social media, who were suspicious of a non-Chinese chef cooking Chinese food. But occasionally Schwartz’s detractors materialized in person. His vegetable suppliers at Lucky Moose burst out laughing when he told them he was the chef who actually cooked the food. A week into the Sunnys pop-up, a well-known restaurant owner, who is white (Schwartz won’t name him), walked into his kitchen, looked at Schwartz and said, “You can’t cook this food! You’re not Chinese!” Schwartz later realized that the guy was making a joke, but the sting of it took a while to wear off. As an outsider cooking Chinese food, Schwartz expected friction from the get go. “People come in guns blazing,” Schwartz says. “They want to discredit it. But Braden is the executive chef. He’s third-generation Chinese Canadian, and it’s not fair to discount the work he and our team do just because I’m a part of it.”

Chong laughs off these knee-jerk accusations of cultural appropriation (“He has a Chinese guy working for him!”) and credits Schwartz with pushing him to dive deeper into his own culture, even introducing him to Chinese dishes and ingredients he’d never heard of. “Anyone should be able to cook anything if there are three fundamentals,” says food writer Suresh Doss. “Acknowledge what you’re doing. Respect the cuisine. Don’t fuck it up.” The exchange flows both ways: many of the best Jewish spots around the city are owned by non-Jewish people. Bangladeshi bakers sell bagels; Chinese families sling matzo balls. Doss cites SumiLicious, the Scarborough deli regarded as the best in the city. It’s run by a Tamil Muslim family who learned the art of smoked meat working in Montreal; they use Halal briskets. “Food is alive,” says Doss. Blurring cultural borders is what makes Toronto’s restaurants unique. “We’re seeing a vast array of cuisine that no one in the world has. You’re not going to find mutton curry pizza in Houston or LA.”

Schwartz’s customers aren’t bound by DNA—and they include many Chinese locals. “Sunnys is so famous and the food is so good,” says Jade Leung, whose family owns the Chinatown staple King’s Noodle and who counts herself as a Sunnys and Mimi regular. Schwartz’s success may have to do with an outsider’s ability to approach Chinese food in his own way, but it also owes a lot to painstaking research and near-religious reverence for the cuisine. And that has earned him the respect of his harshest critics. Last December, the owners of Lucky Moose, whose staff had initially laughed in his face, held their Christmas party at Mimi.

**H**AVING WON OVER critics and diners alike, Schwartz is now preparing to do an about-face, from proving himself as a cultural outsider to returning to his roots. Along with Linny’s, the new Ossington steakhouse, his exploration of Ashkenazi cooking is culminating in a cookbook with Penguin Random House Canada in 2026. In the proposal for the book, Schwartz admitted that he’d turned away from Jewish traditions after his mother died and had only recently grown interested in Jewish food. He spent half his life diving into the richness and variety of Chinese food and made a name for himself cooking it. Now he hopes to do the same with the food his parents and grandparents ate.

In truth, Schwartz says he’d dreamed about opening a delicatessen for as long as he’d wanted to open a Chinese restaurant. But delis are a difficult business, serving low-margin sandwiches that customers expect to be cheap. A steakhouse, on the other hand, is a destination for lavish celebration. Schwartz had also fallen in love with old-school steakhouses like Barberian’s, Hy’s, Morton’s and Peter Luger in New York: they serve simple, high-quality ingredients (a piece of meat or fish, a salad or vegetable side) prepared with care, but they also offer a kind of theatre, warm hospitality and elegance Schwartz pines for. No fuss, yet all fuss.

“We don’t want Linny’s to be just another steakhouse,” says Brandon Marek, a partner in Schwartz’s restaurant management company, Big Hug Hospitality. “This is an authentic way to tie it all together with our backgrounds, our culture and what we love.” Marek visited two dozen steakhouses across North America with Schwartz for research, which informed the overall vibe of Linny’s—from the decor to the overfired broiler that

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will cook the steaks at 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit, searing them with a caramelized crust.

The room, a former Home Hardware on Ossington, has been renovated at a seven-figure cost to evoke a feeling of warm nostalgia. There are white tablecloths and burled wood paneling, leopard-print fabrics inspired by the pillowcases and runners his mom would pepper around their home. Schwartz’s childhood friend Jack Lipson is Linny’s interior designer, and he’s framing Linda’s handwritten recipes as decor, including her blueberry muffins and the honey cake she’d serve at Rosh Hashanah. The atmosphere is somewhere between the original Moishes in Montreal (as famous for its coleslaw and chopped liver as for its rib steaks) and the former Primrose Club, a Jewish social club on St. Clair.

While Linny’s will serve dinner, Schwartz also plans to open a takeout counter selling pastrami sandwiches in an adjacent space. “Delis are about family,” he says. “Old-school steakhouses are about family.... This is [my parents’] culture and heritage more than it is mine. Something got lost between their generation and mine, and I’m trying to claw some of that back.”

**O**NE NIGHT AT THE END OF JUNE, Schwartz is cooking at home with Ethan Rogers, the head chef of Linny’s. Rogers, who grew up in Hamilton, previously worked at Barberian’s Steak House and is similarly obsessed with deli food. The two are moving around Schwartz’s small kitchen, preparing their first tasting of the Linny’s menu.

Schwartz and Hatuka live in a ground-level condo in Kensington Market. Mandarin-language cookbooks are nestled between Jewish staples like *Second Helpings* on their bookshelf, along with the vintage radios Schwartz collects. Hatuka’s abstract paintings are scattered around the place. A second bedroom is piled with boxes of decor and serving dishes for Linny’s, including a wood-encased 1960s phone Schwartz picked up in Palm Springs—his visual cue for the restaurant. A hard bop jazz mix plays over the TV.

“Okay, sit, sit!” Schwartz says, commanding Lipson, Hatuka and me to the table like a *zayde* at a Passover seder. He places a small, round challah that Rogers baked next to a silver dish

with fresh farmer's cheese topped with strawberry jam. "I think we're going to tell people to rip the challah at the table," he says. "I think you gotta rip it." The combo—warm, crusty challah with sweet cheese—brings him right back to snacks his mother would make after school. Next comes chicken liver mousse on sourdough toast with cured egg yolk shaved on top. "Needs more crunch," Rogers says before presenting a cabbage roll-inspired beef tartare with rice, roasted tomato and fermented cabbage leaves. Then there's raw fluke with fennel oil and watercress and a simple plate of beet-cured lox. But the homey Ashkenazi dish kasha varnishkes is the show-stopper of the first round, luxurious with handmade farfalle pasta, sautéed shiitake mushrooms and nutty buckwheat grains pulled together in a rich onion gravy that makes you long for a cold night.

Over the course of three hours, Schwartz and Rogers keep turning out dishes: caesar salad with challah croutons and gribenes (fried chicken skins) that shatter like the most satisfyingly fatty potato chips. A simple salad with baby half-cucumbers and quick-pickled onions. A bowl of smoked herring and boiled potatoes dressed with dill and olive oil. A porterhouse steak basted with "pastrami butter" (the fatty drippings from the oven) served with gravy, one of Schwartz's great loves ("It should be legal to drink"). Rogers makes a creamy horseradish sauce with roasted beets, a nod to gefilte fish's necessary accompaniment, which cuts the steak's fat with a sweet sharpness. To finish, there is a beautiful chocolate babka and a golden upside-down apple cake with crème anglaise that reminds Schwartz of the one his bubbe would make.

Despite Schwartz's love for Yiddish food, Linny's isn't a Jewish restaurant. The word does not appear anywhere on the menu. On the tasting menu I tried in June, there were countless hints and winks at Eastern European cuisine: a cocktail made with "Concord Grape Aperitif" (a.k.a. Manischewitz), another based on the beet borscht his father used to eat, and innumerable references to "deli-style" and "deli-inspired" dishes. But nothing explicitly Jewish, Yiddish or Ashkenazi. Schwartz calls Linny's a "steakhouse first, with deli inspiration."

"I don't want to have to explain to people, especially not now, that I'm trying to represent the culture of a nomadic people," he says. "To me, it's not really about Judaism. It's about the fact that my grandparents are Eastern European and deli culture was born out of Jewish Eastern European emigration."

For decades, Jewish restaurateurs used similarly guarded language to describe their food, sometimes deploying the

geographical marker of *New York* or *Montreal* as a stand-in for *Ashkenazi*. It's the same logic that has Palestinian and Syrian entrepreneurs branding their restaurants "Mediterranean" or Cambodians marketing their food as "Asian." Antisemitism is on the rise since the war began in Israel and Gaza last fall. In January, a Jewish-owned deli in North York was set on fire. A week later, Gryfe's Bagel Bakery had its window smashed in. Jewish-owned restaurants in Montreal have been placed on boycott lists because their owners "recognize the Zionist state."

Ashkenazi fine dining is also a hard sell. People will line up for challah from Harbord Bakery and corned beef from Pancer's Deli, but previous attempts to elevate this humble, inexpensive cuisine have fallen flat. Essen on Dundas, Arthur's on St. Clair, People's Eatery on Spadina and the shockingly brief reincarnation of the Lakeview last year as a purveyor of bagel platters with sides of caviar failed to connect. Even Montreal's Moishes dropped its signature Jewish Romanian menu items—chopped liver and grilled karnatzlach—after it relocated under new ownership last year.

"The fine dining aspect is what makes it tricky," says Michael Solomonov, the Philadelphia chef behind numerous Israeli restaurants who recently closed Abe Fisher, his Ashkenazi-focused restaurant, after nine years. "People don't view Ashkenazi food as good. With the exception of deli, they view it as bland, brown and under-seasoned." Prewar Europe boasted a rich variety of cuisines rooted in seasonal ingredients, with variations of flavours and cooking styles across different communities, as complex as the Chinese ones Schwartz cooks. But most of that was lost when poor Jewish immigrants relocated to North America and reconstructed what they could of the Old World.

Yet there are promising signs. Dreyfus, on Harbord, and its sister spots Taverne Bernhardt's and Vilda's offer touches of inventive Yiddish cooking. New York's Sadelle's, Montreal's Arthurs Nosh Bar, Mendl in Mexico City and Mishiguene in Buenos Aires have all succeeded in taking Ashkenazi cooking upmarket. Anthony Rose, Schwartz's former boss, says he will be "going hard" toward Ashkenazi cooking later this year, with a plan to offer "blue-hair special" shabbat dinners at Schmaltz Appetizing (his temple of bagels and lox), complete with Manischewitz martinis. "I think it's high time for that kind of food," Rose says.

**E**VEN AFTER ALL THIS, Schwartz prefers not to call himself a chef. He has no desire to cook each night for the rest of his life. Instead, his title at Big Hug Hospitality is creative and culinary director. He is a restaurateur: he wants to dream up new experiences and dishes, obsess over an idea, research and test recipes, hunt down the perfect bowl or martini glass, then step back and let his team execute. "I've built a team of incredibly talented people around me," he says.

"David had certain skill sets that a lot of young chefs didn't have," says Adam Minster, one of the partners at Food Dudes, who hired Schwartz at the Harbord fusion joint Rasa in 2015 because he saw something special. Schwartz had excellent technical skills and a finely tuned palate, but he also held a clear understanding of restaurants as complex businesses that required more than just tasty food to succeed. "David could understand the bigger picture," says Minster.

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**A Schwartz family dinner would always include a packed house and a table full of sauces, condiments and pickles**

In 2018, Schwartz pitched friend and Food Dudes founder Adrian Niman on his idea for Mimi. Niman came on as an investor when Mimi was still in development. In turn, he introduced Schwartz to Harlo Entertainment, the hospitality-focused private investment fund of Michael Kimel, whose family turned their Fabricland wealth into one of the city's larger fortunes—the group's assets under management are worth more than \$250 million. Harlo is Schwartz's operating and equity partner in Big Hug Hospitality (Niman retains a stake), and he handles all business operations at Big Hug, leaving the culinary direction to Schwartz. Brandon Marek, who is Harlo's managing partner, works closely with Schwartz on everything from strategic decisions on new concepts to menu design to glassware choices, in what they both describe as a true creative partnership.

Schwartz's philosophy of restaurants, which underpins the business model of Big Hug, is something he calls "the culture of kindness," inspired by Danny Meyer, the founder of New York's Union Square Hospitality Group (home to Daily Provisions and Gramercy Tavern). "The PR version is that hospitality is as much about the guest experience as it is about the employee experience. But the business still needs to be commercially successful to deliver both," Schwartz says. The industry is infamous for its toxic workplaces and swollen egos: chefs obsessed with vanity, rampant substance abuse and sexual harassment, rigid hierarchies and other awful traits are glorified in kitchen memoirs and series like *The Bear*. Generosity, by contrast, defines Big Hug's policies. Schwartz says he has fired technically proficient chefs on more than one occasion because the way they interacted with staff was inconsistent with his philosophy. "If you're a kind person, you'll do well," he says. "If you're a jerk, you're out."

It took Schwartz time to find his way amid the machismo of kitchen culture. "I was extremely naïve about how things worked," he says. "I remember thinking, *This is weird. Everyone's scared all the time.*" Schwartz would emerge from 15-hour shifts physically and emotionally depleted. "There has to be a way where it's not just fear and aggression," he'd thought.

All Big Hug employees, as a result, work a four-day week. Big Hug does not offer unpaid internships to young cooks; every hour is compensated. The kitchen team receives a monthly R&D dining budget of \$500 to eat together in different Chinese restaurants. "We are really trying to encourage everyone who works with us here to experience life outside the kitchen," Schwartz says. "This is not just about a work-life balance but about having a life outside the walls of our space and bringing things back into it."

The upside has been greater staff retention and better ideas from cooks. But, for Schwartz, ever the mensch, all of that is secondary to his genuine desire to fix a broken industry. So far, the model, which is slowly becoming a trend, has held up. Yet it hasn't been truly tested by a recession, a drop in revenues or a shift in the tastes of Toronto's fickle diners. "I would personally rather shut the restaurants down than go against our core philosophies," Schwartz says. But, if faced with the choice of laying everyone off or compromising on his values, would he? "I'm concerned about the bottom line, but I'm more concerned about staff being happy," he says in one breath. In the next: "But I need to pay attention to both. You can only pay people if you make money."

Perhaps there is some story about Schwartz being a jerk that will emerge, but for now he seems humble to a fault ("I always simultaneously feel good at something and think I suck"). He says "please" and "thank you" in every interaction, whether it's with a customer, a line cook he's instructing or a delivery person he's doing business with. If he mentions a particularly delicious bread to a person he just met, he will likely bring them a loaf the next time he sees them.

Schwartz is almost comically free of drama. No visible tattoos. No drugs. He can't even drink beer (*oy*, the bloating). He is always on time. To relax, he works out on a StairMaster, plays guitar, eats Turkish food, listens to podcasts about the Holocaust and (literally) dreams about finding Middle Eastern bread in suburban strip malls. He also has flawless skin, perfect hair and the anime eyes of a K-pop star. It just might be impossible to hate him.



**B**EFORE HE SERVED DESSERT at his apartment tasting back in June, Schwartz cut a dozen slices of pastrami he'd cured, baked and steamed and laid them on a plate with a squirt of brown deli mustard. The meat was a rich ruby red, dark along the edges with its rub of coriander, black pepper, sugar and other spices. It had been steamed until the fat and connective tissue melted away and it was fork-tender. One bite and it was obvious: this was a pastrami to stir passions, one that deli lovers would argue over and travel for—a flavour bomb that perfectly captured the deliciousness of the cuisine Schwartz set out to honour, but also one that was clearly informed by the decade he spent cooking Chinese food. Pastrami's origins can be traced from the ancient preservation methods of Turkic and Mongol nomads, who rode west from China with spiced meats curing in their saddlebags, to late-19th-century Romanian-style Jewish delis in New York's Lower East Side. The line between Schwartz's cumin-cured Shaanxi lamb ribs and his pastrami sandwich is remarkably short.

"It makes no sense for me to be doing this," says Schwartz when asked what drove him to finally return to his culinary roots. "I'm almost facing a phobia. I'm doing this to punish myself. I'm reclaiming my identity that I've run away from..."

"...in the name of your mother!" says Hatuka, with timing so sharp it wouldn't feel out of place in a Jewish deli. "Sorry...your *dead* mother."

"This really needs to do well," Schwartz says of Linny's. "Otherwise I'm supremely fucked."

The stress mounts each week. Construction costs are ballooning, and the timeline has stretched long past projections (Linny's was originally scheduled to open in June). The risks are huge. Sixty people currently depend on Big Hug's success, but soon Schwartz will employ more than double that, with families and mortgages that rely on his business to do well.

This is just the second act for Schwartz. But each new venture places pressure on the unique model Big Hug Hospitality was built on. "I would like to make sure the magic and soul of our restaurants remain intact," Schwartz says.

The night before the Linny's menu tasting, Schwartz was expediting orders at Sunnys Chinese. It was 30 degrees in the kitchen, and orders were stacking up quickly. Schwartz was fussing over details: the precise amount of onions a new chef was putting in the husband-and-wife beef, the salt levels in the mapo tofu sauce, the shape of a stir-fry piled on a plate, the uniformity of every single rice bowl he scooped.

"When it's busy and ripping, I have no choice but to focus on what's in front of me," he says during a brief lull. "I help out when they really need me to, but whenever I do it, I'm happy because it lets me see, learn and fine-tune." Schwartz walks to the back, exchanges a few words with the dishwasher and returns lugging a heavy pot of rice. "It's fun." ■