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Letter from the Editor

TO SAY THAT THE PAST 20 MONTHS HAVE BEEN CHALLENGING WOULD BE AN UNDERSTATEMENT.

2020 was the year of “Enough!” The world shut down amidst a pandemic during which a fed-up Mother Nature seemingly imposed a global reset; the murder of George Floyd may have finally woken up and infuriated enough of mainstream society (that have long benefited from the status quo) into acknowledging, not just the existence, but prevalence of systemic racism and will hopefully “move the needle” from a place it has for too long been stuck. And the #MeToo movement forced us to reckon with the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault, and actually listen to those victimized and stop completely overlooking the actions of the offenders (unless, of course, you are Donald Trump). These struggles continue in 2021 and likely will, sadly, for years to come.

2020 may have also been the year that people rediscovered the importance of supporting local and independents. I’ve always believed in the economic, cultural, and emotional importance to a community of supporting independent, locally owned businesses, but the significance of the practice reached a heightened sense of urgency during the pandemic. The buying decisions we made and continue to make will determine which businesses still exist once the pandemic is over.

Small businesses are the backbone of our communities, and we all need to make a conscious effort to support our locally owned restaurants, independent wine shops, butcher shops, record stores, bookstores, galleries, bakeries, and the list goes on. It’s been shown that 2/3 of every dollar spent at a locally owned business remains and is reinvested in the community [compared to less than half of every dollar spent at a chain store]. As importantly, locally owned, independent businesses give our communities their identity.

Quench Magazine is and has always been proudly independent, and the magazine has gone through its share of challenges and changes over the past year. The pandemic shut down our printing press and as a result the magazine has been out of print since mid-2020. Add to that new ownership, a new editor-in-chief and a renewed direction … with almost 50 years of publishing history, this magazine will not be maintaining the status quo.

We have always challenged convention and we will continue to elevate our efforts as the magazine embarks on its next evolution beginning with this (Fall 2021) issue, which marks the relaunch of print for Quench.

The magazine will be a greater, truer reflection of our society. We will explore and share the stories of the iconic, the change-makers and the up-and-comers in the culinary, wine and craft beverage industries, and we will be expanding our coverage into music and the arts – because we know that those who love wine and food are also passionate about other art forms that elicit emotion and spark discussion.

We are committed to amplifying the historical and cultural context of wine and food and to making food and wine accessible, engaging, relevant, and enjoyable for all audiences by telling the stories that need to be told, the way they should be told, by the people who should be telling them.

We are excited to share the many upcoming changes, new voices, and new features. We also know the importance of remaining an independent publication with a diverse group of talented writers. To achieve this together, we have launched the Quench Writers’ Fund on Patreon to support our mission to serve you, our readers, even better and to provide opportunities and mentorship to underrepresented voices and young writers and storytellers. Scan the QR code on page 9 for more information.

We are committed to making a difference and we will continue to tell new stories, by both new and familiar storytellers, with the same spirit, integrity, and soul as we have for the past half century. Welcome back to Quench Magazine.

Gurvinder Bhatia
editor-in-chief
CONTRIBUTORS

Adrian Miller
Adrian Miller is a food writer, James Beard Award winner, recovering attorney, former special assistant to President Bill Clinton, and certified barbecue judge who lives in Denver, Colorado. Adrian is featured in the Netflix hit High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America. His most recent book, Black Smoke: African Americans and the United States of Barbecue, was published earlier this year. His go-to restaurant that never disappoints is Georgia Brown’s in Washington D.C.

Åsa Johansson
Åsa Johansson came to Italy from Sweden in 2001 because she loved Italian films from the ’50s and ’60s and wanted to learn Italian. It was love at first sight. Following a degree in political science and journalism at the University of Florence, she now writes about wine, food, and travel and lives in the Tuscan hills. Since 2019 she produces her own extra virgin olive oil from the olive trees near her home. Her go to cocktail is a gin & tonic and the best concert she ever attended was Alanis Morissette in Stockholm in 1997.

Christopher Sealy
A graduate of the University of Toronto with a French Language and Literature Degree, Christopher Sealy is the wine director for the alo food group. In 2019, Christopher was voted #1 Sommelier by Canada’s 100 Best. He is a mentor for Vinequity, an organization which aims to amplify the voices of Black, Indigenous, People of Colour and LGBTQ+, in the Canadian wine community. Christopher’s favourite comfort food is Bajan Coconut Bread and in addition to all things wine, he enjoys dark rum.

Kathy Valentine
Kathy Valentine has been working as a musician and songwriter for over 40 years, most notably as a member of the groundbreaking Go-Go’s – recently inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Kathy’s acclaimed memoir All I Ever Wanted: A Rock and Roll Memoir was published in 2020. Kathy still shows up for gigs with her rock band The Bluebonnets in her hometown of Austin, Texas. The best concert she ever attended was Prince at the Los Angeles Forum.

Omar Mouallem
Omar Mouallem is an award-winning writer and filmmaker. His second film, The Lost Baron, which documents the unlikely link between fast-food and Lebanese refugees, and second book, Praying to the West: How Muslims Shaped the Americas, are both set for release this fall. His favourite travel destination is San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico.
A MUSHROOM BURGER IS, WELL, A BURGER WITH MUSHROOMS. After that, sky’s the limit. It might be topped with white cheese, yellow, blue cheese, onion rings, avocado—whatever floats your ‘shroom. They have no hard-fast rules and tend toward distinguished tastes, which is probably the reason you won’t find them at many fast-food chains.
But there's one region of the world where the mushroom burger is a definable entrée—a sizable beef patty smothered in sautéed canned mushrooms and sauce comprised mostly of cream of mushroom soup. You'll find it across Alberta and inland British Columbia, and the mountains of Lebanon—homeland of the man who popularized it in Western Canada.

Riad “Rudy” Kemaldean obviously didn’t bring the burger recipe with him from his home village in the 1950s when he immigrated with his brother. He found the sauce in Edmonton at one of a few remaining Burger Barons, a floundering fast-food shack that made a roaring comeback after he bought it. Joined by his relatives, the Kemaldeans/Kamaleddines (spelling varies depending on which brother filed the paperwork) soon had a dozen Burger Barons under their spell. After civil war broke out in Lebanon, these restaurants became training grounds for future Lebanese restaurateurs who took the recipes with them when it was time to strike out on their own.

Some of them even took the name.

While the mushroom burger recipe is standardized, the Burger Baron franchise isn’t. It’s not really even a franchise. It went bankrupt in 1961, a few years before the Lebanese immigrants discovered it, and since creditors never bothered to sell the brand’s intellectual property, and Jack McDonnell—the inventor—never thought to will it to his family, the entire brand is basically public domain.

The McDonnell and Kemaldean families did manage to band together eventually and reregister the trademarks in 1996, but the legal grounds of their corporate ownership are shaky. Regardless, you can’t patent a recipe — only an original ingredient — and so their secret mushroom sauce remains part of the collective memory of Lebanese Canadians.

“That mushroom sauce is important—it’s iconic,” says Judy Schulz, who first tasted the mushroom burger on an assignment for the Edmonton Journal in the early ‘80s. “Then the paper’s dining out critic, she had prejudices against hamburgers, but the Journal wanted her to review something more accessible to readers in the blue-collar city. Schulz begrudgingly drove to four fast-food joints, bought one burger from each, and brought them back to the office. “The mushroom burger won, hands down.”

Only a few Burger Barons remain in Edmonton, but you’ll find the iconic burger at mom and pop diners throughout the city and beyond. Whether the restaurant owners call their establishment Burger Baron, Burger Barn, Baron Family Restaurant, or something else completely, their businesses thrive mostly in rural communities. I’m related to several of them, and one, the owner of Boondocks Grill in High Prairie, 370 kilometres north of Edmonton, is my brother Ali.

Think of these diners as the Lebanese version of the small-town Chinese or Greek restaurant, only you’re more likely to find spring rolls and souvlaki on the menu than tabouleh. Their offerings vary depending on the local competition. One of the only things they agree on is that one burger.

Despite the discrepancies between them, their mushroom burgers are remarkably consistent. Ali learned the recipe from our dad, back when the family business was in fact called Burger Baron Pizza & Steak. Our dad apprenticed with his uncle, who bought one of the original Burger Barons in a neighbouring town from another Lebanese man, who apprenticed with Rudy in the ’70s. I have tasted all four of their mushroom burgers—and many more spanning Alberta—and they all strike the same balance of tanginess, saltiness, and soupiness.

The sauce base is an open secret. Nothing can conceal the distinctiveness of Campbell’s Cream of Mushroom soup, and the restaurant owners have given up trying. “The first time I tasted that mushroom sauce, I was eight years old again, back in my mom’s kitchen,” says Schultz, “and I can see her opening that can of mushroom soup, which I think plays heavily in the mushroom sauce. The mushroom sauce is
very much like that. The taste, the smell, the texture—it brings it all back.”

It’s the other ingredients that are harder to pin down, even for a career foodie like Schultz. “I think there may be some mayonnaise or lemon juice, or something—there’s just a nice little note there, off to the side.” My childhood memories of the back of the restaurant conjure up rows of jumbo-sized mushroom soup cans, but not a lot of mayonnaise jars and definitely not lemon juice.

The owners guard the secret closely, even though they themselves got it through a breach of security. A former kitchen staff of the now defunct Burger Bank food truck told me his boss used to make him wait outside while he assembled the sauce.

I recently interviewed many Lebanese restaurateurs for a documentary about the Burger Baron. Nobody was willing to share the recipe completely with the exception of Sam Chehdi. The long-time restaurateur in Mayerthorpe (population: 1,320) insisted the sauce is nothing more than soup, straight out of the can. To prove it he proceeded to cook mushroom burgers this way for us while our cameras rolled. He then fed them to our crew. Though it was a very tasty burger, something tasted off.

Walid Sahr of Whitecourt, who immigrated in 2000 and got into the business based on his first transcendent experience with a mushroom burger, fessed up to three additives—soya sauce, Tabasco, Worcestershire—then, somewhat suspiciously, added “there are some spices.”

“Sumac? Cumin?” I asked.

“I don’t like to talk about that.”

Khalid “Kelly” Kamaledidine, who kicked my film crew out of the stock room of his Edmonton Burger Baron, denied using any spices, but insisted there was a fifth ingredient, plus a specialty soya sauce. I wasn’t sure if these were red herrings. When I pressed him, he said, “Go ask your dad.”

I did—but my dad, long retired, could not remember the proportions or whether there was in fact a fifth ingredient. So, I asked my brother.

Ali could only recall it the way he was taught using industrial soup cans. Indeed, his recipe was a square dance of soup, Tabasco, soya, and Worcestershire.

Does he cook the soup or thin it out with water? I asked. No—but make sure the soup is Campbell’s recipe. “No low sodium or fat.”

“Does the soya have to be anything special?”

“Yes, very.”

“Really?”

“Nope,” he replied with a laugh. “We use Wings. Have used China Lily.”

I took the recipe back to a stage kitchen where we recreated it with the intention of revealing the recipe for the movie. After sharing a photo of our success on Instagram, we received complaints from members of the Kemaldean family. Nobody served us a cease and desist. They simply reminded me of what this is truly a recipe for.

“Families like yours and many others were given a chance at making something for themselves,” the daughter of retired Burger Baron owners told me. There may not be a patent to the brand and food, and each location may have mastered their own style of the sauce, but she hoped that we would covet this one secret to living out the immigrant dream.

And so, for now, it remains a trade secret of the Lebanese burger mafia.

Omar Mouallem is an award-winning writer and filmmaker. His second film, The Last Baron, which documents the unlikely link between fast-food and Lebanese refugees, and second book, Praying to the West: How Muslims Shaped the Americas, are both set for release this fall. His favourite comfort food is, perhaps surprisingly, not a mushroom burger (its lebneh).