

OUTSIDE THE KITCHEN

Chef: Alex Sze**Residence:** Hastings-on-Hudson**Restaurant:** Juniper, Hastings-on-Hudson

It's mid-morning, and, as Alex Sze talks about his culinary past in the cozy quiet of his Juniper storefront, the contrast becomes apparent—between this setting that defines him now, but surely not then, when his workplaces were anything but storefronts, and anything but cozy: Maestro and Michel Richard's Citronelle in Washington, DC; plus short stints at New York's Craft, Per Se, and Le Cirque, where he trailed without pay before landing at Fabio Trabocchi's Fiamma and Alain Ducasse's Adour. "I just wanted to learn as much as I could," Sze says. "I was behind because I went to college; other people had been working longer."

College would have been culinary school, but his parents had veto power, so a degree in Biology it would be. But summers were spent bussing tables in Martha's Vineyard restaurants and amassing star-chef cookbooks. "I knew I was going to do this, give [cooking] a shot, but I had to finish college first. I figured, if I didn't end up liking it, med school or dental school would be my default—that's what my parents wanted." And understandably so: Sze's father, an immigrant from Hong Kong,

had spent years bussing at Le Cirque before moving to Connecticut to raise a family and open a Chinese takeout joint with his wife. Their son would go to college.

One bachelor's degree later, it was agreed: a year or two to take that cooking shot. Sze moved in with his girlfriend's family near DC ("you don't make any money cooking," he says), and, Zagat in hand, marched into the District's top restaurants. One was Citronelle. They said no; he begged; he stayed. He worked the line afternoons and nights for three years, and spent mornings butchering fish, cleaning lobsters, and shucking oysters at lauded Italian restaurant Maestro. Hardly med school, but he was happy. And the post-work hard-partying conception? "At high-end places, there's not so much of that rock and roll; you have to be focused. It's not *Kitchen Confidential*."



Not Sze's style: fussy tourned carrots

Chef Speak

"...I think of myself as a cook, not a rock star or tattooed chef. It's less about artistry than craft, like a woodworker with beautifully milled wood..."

But if work was great, being near family would be better. His girlfriend's parents had moved to Chappaqua, his own were in Connecticut, and the northern culinary siren was calling. "Everyone wants to cook in New York," he says, so the couple moved, and he did: trailing day-to-day at Manhattan's finest, cooking a few months at Fiamma, making connections. And then one paid off. "I got a phone call asking if I wanted to work for Ducasse. He was opening Adour; I didn't even know that." Sze stayed eight months, then left to become sous chef at 10 Downing. "I wanted to keep changing, to get a broader scope of what's out there," he explains. A year later, it was time for the biggest change of all. "I wanted to open my own restaurant. I needed some fresh air, a more relaxed life." He borrowed money from family and landed in that cozy Hastings-on-Hudson

storefront. Juniper's been hot ever since.

He's content now, with his girlfriend-turned-wife and a brand-new baby. But the big-city gravitas hovers. "People ask what goes into my dishes," he says. "I tell them it's just three or four ingredients. They want some kind of magic trick, but there's no real secret. It's experience, trusting your instincts." Does he miss the star-chef kitchens? "I want to make food that I'm comfortable cooking, that's done well. I knew I couldn't spend hours tournéing vegetables, making everything look perfect. I think of myself as a cook, not a rock star or tattooed chef. It's less about artistry than craft, like a woodworker with beautifully milled wood. I love what I do here; I keep it low-key, and at the end of the day, I go home to my family."

—Diane Weintraub Pohl

SPICE RACK

Discovering unusual spices and herbs, one jar at a time

[**Sumac**]

aka...
sumach, farberbaum
(German), kankrasing (Indian)

Flavor Strength



Description: There is just one sumac tree from a species of approximately 150 varieties in which the berries are used for culinary purposes. The crimson berries are a bit larger than peppercorns and usually sold coarsely ground; the aroma is a cross between those of red grape and apple, and the taste is tangy with a fruity sourness.

Cuisine Connection: Common in Middle Eastern cooking, sumac is used in fattoush salad (toasted bread with greens), za'atar spice rub, and tabbouleh.

You Might Like to Know:

Regarding those other 149 or so varieties of sumac trees—unless you enjoy blazing red rashes and oozing blisters, stay away!

Purported Attribute: The Greek physician Pedanius Dioscorides (c. 40–90 AD) wrote in his *De Materia Medica* ("On Medical Matters") about the healthful properties of sumac—chiefly as a diuretic and anti-flatulant when it was "sprinkled among sauces" and mixed with meat.

—JBT

SIZZLING...

Veganism

(a diet in which no animal or animal by-products are consumed)



HEATING...

Flexitarian

(predominantly vegetarian diet, but meat on occasion)

FIZZLING...

Pescatarian

(a diet that includes no animal meat except fish)