

OUTSIDE THE KITCHEN

Chef: Chris Vergara

Residence: Tuckahoe

Restaurants: Meritage, Scarsdale; Harper's Bar & Restaurant, Dobbs Ferry; Saint George Bistro, Hastings-on-Hudson



Chef Speak

"Restaurants are a lot of fun—the people you meet are a mix of actors, artists, and criminals."

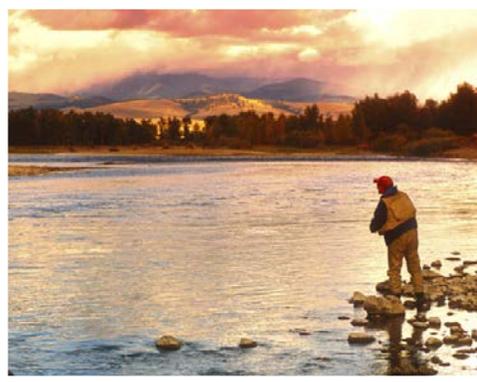
Below: Fly-fishing was one of Vergara's "breaks" from cooking.

"It wasn't a linear path," notes Chris Vergara, pausing to assess his career. I'll say. We've been talking in the Gallic jewel box of Saint George, his French bistro and third county restaurant, and I'm a bit astounded by his bohemian trajectory.

Fisherman, poker pro, itinerant traveler: He's been all of them between restaurant jobs and culinary-school semesters. And Vergara's restlessness began early, when he left his first upstate college after realizing that snowstorms were a daily addendum to class. The school's major in environmental ecology wasn't the main draw, anyway—fishing was. Childhood Adirondack lakeside summers with his grandfather had ignited that passion, and it would fuel his life's journey. Vergara returned home to Hartsdale, working in the kitchen of the Hilton Westchester in Rye Brook while plotting his next move. He didn't know it then, but another passion was brewing. "I always liked the kitchen's fast pace," he says. "Restaurants are a lot of fun. The people you meet are a mix of actors, artists, and criminals." He grins, then the smile fades. "Cooking's been a warm blanket for people who've been working on getting their act together. It's been for me."

He got his act together, albeit with multiple intermissions, by applying to The Culinary Institute of America. "It was a 21-month program and it took me two years to get halfway through," he says. "When you're young and broke..." he shrugs and looks away. "I took a lot of breaks." On the list: cook at Rye's La Panetière; poker enthusiast and fly fisherman in Boulder, Colorado; cook at Manhattan's formidable Picholine; a return to Panetière. "I did what I wanted to do," he says firmly, then flashes that grin. "Depending on when I dropped out of CIA, I could retake the classes I liked. I took charcuterie and fish kitchen three times each, garde manger twice." But weren't there rules? "I found the loopholes. And I was bored." Bored at the CIA? "Compared to working in a French kitchen, going to class for six hours a day is nothing," he says. "At Panetière, I was the only American in the kitchen. I was brought to tears at how beautiful the food was, how intensely they dealt with ingredients. That's when I knew I wasn't going to do anything else."

But there would be one more interruption: a car accident that destroyed his sense of smell for two years,



and, with it, his cooking plans. He escaped to Montana, signed up for college, paid for it by working as a poker dealer and playing cards, and fished. "If I was going back to college, it would be someplace where I could fish, ski, and snowboard." And all the culinary training? He pauses to light a cigarette. "It's hard to work in a kitchen if you can't smell anything." He exhales and shrugs. "I'm cutting down, trying to quit. I have a kid now; he's 14 months."

From all indications, I'm betting he'll succeed in quitting. The man seems to thrive on adversity. Two years after the accident, his sense of smell returned and so did he, to New York, but not to the CIA. In typical spontaneous fashion, he abandoned graduation for a restaurant: his own, Scarsdale's Meritage. He was 25. "It was probably a mistake to open that restaurant at that point, but it turned out all right," he muses. Within nine years, he'd open two more. "You've got to do it while you're young," he says, grinning again. "Being a chef, it's like with drug dealers—you never really meet an old one. It's a tough job."

Easy, it seems, will never be his game.

—Diane Weintraub Pohl

SPICE RACK

Discovering unusual spices and herbs, one jar at a time

[Juniper Berries]



aka...
juniper fruits, du song
(in Chinese), jagody jalowca
(in Polish)

Flavor Strength



Description: Depending on the species, juniper berries grow wild on prickly shrubs as well as on 40-foot trees in parts of Europe, North America, and Asia. The aroma is woody, piney, and a bit flowery. The flavor of the bluish-black berries is also pine-like, plus refreshing and savory, making it a superb complement for game meats or roasted duck.

You Might Like to Know: If you own many polo shirts and like to pop their collars, toast the juniper berry upon ordering your next gin and tonic—the piney juniper is what gives gin its unique flavor.

Non-Culinary Uses: Due to its refreshing, air-cleansing fragrance, French hospitals burned juniper twigs during a smallpox epidemic in 1870 to purify the air. Juniper-berry oil is also a common fragrance in men's colognes and aftershaves.

—JBT

CHRIS VERGARA PHOTO BY ANDRE BARANOWSKI

SIZZLING...
Wild Boar Burgers

HEATING...
Elk Burgers

FIZZLING...
Bison Burgers