

OUTSIDE THE KITCHEN

Chef: Ethan Kostbar
Residence: Fairfield, CT
Restaurant: Moderne Barn, Armonk

For most of us, childhood accouterments are puppies, swings, and slides. Ethan Kostbar's were a slight departure: scorpions, bullet holes, and tank shells. His backyard was Israel's West Bank; his neighbors, 150 or so settler families. A seeming hazard, but to him, "the fondest memories of my youth. Although it was occupied territory, I didn't feel threatened; it opened me up to a new culture, new sounds [F-16 roars one of them]."

And, especially, new foods. "My love of cooking stems from my father," he says. "It was a hobby of his, and he found work as a cook at the Jerusalem Sheraton. He took us to the souk all the time to buy ingredients, and helping him at home in the kitchen inspired me." A few years later, after a move to Washington, DC, his training paid off. Needing to help support his family, Kostbar was hired at a Holiday Inn, working nights after school and on weekends in the prep kitchen. He was 14. "My father saw I was passionate about food, and didn't want me working at a fast-food joint," he says. "He wanted me to learn a skill."

And so he did, becoming expert at peeling potatoes and carrots for eight hours at a stretch. "My father picked me up the first day and I was crying, pleading with him not to send me back," he recalls, though now he's grinning. "He told me they call it work for a reason, and I'd be going back. I got used to it, and learned the value of a dollar." During high school, he got used to working a second job, too, at a bakery—and somehow, back home, found the energy to bake pies. Applying to The Culinary Institute of America seemed the right path, but first, a detour. For two years, he laid irrigation pipe in the fields of an Israeli kibbutz, then traveled in Europe until money ran out. The CIA it would be.

For most students there, the curriculum is exhaustive. But most students don't come from laying pipe in the desert. "It was like summer camp for cooks," Kostbar beams. "I had a great time." Fun—and illuminating. "It opened my eyes to all the different outlets within this field of hospitality." He explored many of them in those years, first at the Waldorf Astoria cooking for thousands of banquet meals a day, designing menus and creating specials, then gaining



Chef Speak
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Fresh produce from the rooftop garden at Moderne Barn

were just focused on cooking Tom's [Colicchio] food." My sycophant moment is over, but there's more to impress me: Kostbar's preference for hiring female cooks, a result of female mentors at the Waldorf and Kinkead's. "A male-dominated kitchen is a locker-room mentality," he says. "Having women in the kitchen keeps everyone in line; it's a lot quieter, more respectful, organized, and professional." More power to you, Chef. But estrogen doesn't deserve all the credit; the gym gets some, too. Kostbar does CrossFit five days a week for stamina, both physical and mental. "It clears my mind, mellows me out," he says. "There's a lot of hothead chefs out there; I'm able to collect my thoughts, roll into work, and absorb whatever comes at me." If he has his way, there'll be more things coming at him in the imminent future. "I'm always itching for another project, and I'm giving the [Moderne Barn owners] Livanos family suggestions. I love to see concepts come to fruition." One that already has: the restaurant's rooftop garden, a swath of greens and vegetables he tends with kitchen staff. Kostbar is exploring a hop-harvesting partnership with Captain Lawrence Brewing Company. "The Livanos took a chance hiring me, and we've been blessed with success," he says. "This was my opportunity to shine." I'm betting on a lot of future glare.

—Diane Weintraub Pohl

SPICE RACK

Discovering unusual spices and herbs, one jar at a time

[Star Anise]



aka...
 anise stars, Chinese anise, badian, steranijs (Dutch)

Flavor Strength



Description: Indigenous to Southern China and North Vietnam, star anise is the dried, star-shaped fruit of an Asian evergreen tree. The aroma is much like that of cloves, and the flavor is licorice-like and pungent. The dark brown fruit has eight canoe-shaped spokes and within each is a shiny seed. In slow-cooked dishes, star anise is usually added whole and discarded before serving.

You Might Like to Know: A related species is the poisonous Japanese star anise, (known as the "mad herb" in China) which lacks an anise smell and tastes similar to turpentine.

Medicinal Uses: In traditional Chinese medicine, star anise is used as a digestive aid and to help cure colic in babies. Shikimic acid, extracted from star anise, is one of the chief ingredients in the antiviral Tamiflu drug used to fight avian influenza.

—JBT

CHEF PHOTOS BY PAUL JOHNSON



SIZZLING...
Coconut water

HEATING...
Kombucha
 (effervescent fermented sweetened black tea)

FIZZLING...
Acai berry juice