

OUTSIDE THE KITCHEN

**Chef:** Jason Holmberg

**Residence:** Yonkers

**Restaurant:** Park 143 Bistro in Bronxville

**T**he chef as artist: we've heard it a thousand times. Change the "as" to "is"—now that's interesting. One that actually ran a gallery? Now that's news. Jason Holmberg is that chef, and that artist. Sculptor, more specifically. His gallery was in Denver, where he was a young cook and his business partner was a painter/bartender friend. "I didn't know if I wanted to go into restaurants or art," he says. "We put all our money into the gallery, but had to shut it down after three years; it was a money pit." Restaurants it would be.

But, sculpting dream deferred, it wasn't going to be just any restaurant. Wolfgang Puck had opened in Denver, and Holmberg joined as a part-time sous chef in 2003 to build some high-end cred. "That's where I got more organizational skills, ingredient knowledge, and plating skills," he says. "It was my schooling." He stayed for two years and then moved to the upscale bowling-alley chain Lucky Strike. Soon, New York came calling. "It was time to move on," he says, and opened Lucky Strike's Manhattan venue. Big city, big names: Laurent Tourondel's BLT Steak followed, then Terrance Brennan's Michelin-starred Picholine. "I wanted to learn fine dining, proper placement of the food, the cheese, the lighting... from bottom to top, there was so much money spent on quality," he notes.

But then there was quality of life. "Some people love the hustle and bustle of the City, but I'm more of a take-my-time sort," Holmberg muses. He found that time in Westchester, settling his young family in Yonkers in 2007. He commuted for five years, and then cemented his suburban commitment by joining Park 143. "There's a slower pace up here that's more humble; I get to see trees every day. [Manhattan] is like that girlfriend you really didn't like but for some reason there was a barrier you couldn't get over. I like the City, but I have to



**Chef Speak**

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stay away from it." Sure, Manhattan may have the at-your-fingertips conveniences, the all-day deliveries, the specialty shops, but, he claims, the trade-off is worth it. "Yesterday, I had to run out to the A&P for truffle oil, but I like that. I get to take a walk, and nature is an inspiration: the leaves, the flowers, even the wind blowing a certain way brings a smell that reminds me of something I want to use." Overplanning, overthinking is, for him, creative suffocation. "My work, my style, is more organic; there's no blueprint. Once I put one thing on the plate, it's an inspiration; it should flow like a river, going wherever it has to go. As long as my flavors are consistent, I'm okay with things looking a little different. I'm not taking pictures and posting them on the wall. I like to give my cooks leeway so creative ideas go back and forth. That helps me to see things in other ways, and helps them to learn from me."

And he himself is always learning. "I read a lot of [restaurant cookbooks]: there's Noma's, Gramercy Tavern's, Daniel Boulud's. Sooner or later, I want to have a restaurant of that stature. But first I have to make this one work as well as possible. I'm not a big spotlight seeker, not interested in being on TV. I just want a comfortable restaurant, a casual setting where you don't need a suit and tie. Where it feels like family. And where the food is always the star."

—By Diane Weintraub Pohl



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**SPICE RACK**

Discovering unusual spices and herbs, one jar at a time

**[ Pink Peppercorns ]**



aka...

Christmas berry, rose baies (in French), pink schinus

**Flavor Strength**



**Description:** Don't let the name fool you; pink peppercorns are not members of the peppercorn family (which grow on vines), but dried berries from two varieties of schinus trees. To further confuse things, they resemble peppercorns, and they, too, have a peppery flavor.

**You Might Like To Know:**

In 1982, the Food and Drug Administration banned the import of pink peppercorns from France into the US, claiming that eating the berries risked an array of symptoms, such as swollen eyelids, indigestion, and hemorrhoids. (Yikes!) France (where dishes such as côte de boeuf with pink peppercorn sauce are popular) maintained that the berries were safe to eat if grown in prescribed conditions. The United States later lifted the ban. The lesson? In culinary debates, defer to the French.

**Purported Attribute:** Birds that eat pink peppercorns are rumored to act intoxicated. Keep them away from your pet cockatoos!

—JBT

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