

Introduction

Chef, restaurateur, and TV personality Claudio Aprile seems to succeed at everything he does but, as he told me, success and happiness aren't always one and the same. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth and welcome to Sittin' in the Kitchen. Claudio Aprile honed his skills at some of the world's finest Michelin starred restaurants. Here in Toronto, he opened Coburn Lane, Origin and Origin North, all to critical acclaim. To top it off, he's also a judge on the hugely popular TV show MasterChef Canada. With compelling honesty, Claudio shared his humble doughnut shop beginnings the current turning point in his career and his complicated relationship with chicken fingers.

Marion Kane:

So Claudio, we met at a garden party in Forest Hill and it was in aid of Braun launching its new products. And I said to you, Claudio, what are you doing these days? And you said I have two restaurants and I'm thinking of doing something new. And I said to you because I speak my mind at this age, "Why don't you just have one restaurant?" and you said you read my mind.

Claudio Aprile:

You know, once upon a time I had one restaurant and I was very happy. And then the next thing you know, I've got four restaurants and almost 500 employees. And I realized I wasn't very happy with it. For me, it wasn't success to have more. What I've realized is that success for me is just really being proud of what I'm doing and knowing that what I'm doing is good. I'm making major shifts in my life because I am realizing that I'm much happier in a smaller restaurant with a tight family nucleus in the restaurant where the team is very close. I want to do other things in my life now. Like, all I've ever done is cook. All I've ever done is be in a restaurant behind the line. And you know, like I enjoy painting. I love vintage motorcycles. I enjoy travel. I don't want to look back and think, man, I wasted my time. All I did was cook, you know. I didn't do anything else. And I think it's really important to take a pause and ask yourself, hey, what makes you happy? What do you like to do?

MK:

Are you at that point now?

CA:

Yeah, I'm very cautious when I answer this question because I don't you know. But I had this huge epiphany a couple months ago at Origin North, where I was on the line and someone put up an order of chicken fingers and they were burnt, frankly. And I said you got to redo these chicken fingers, they're burnt. And then I took like a pause and I realized the words that I just uttered that came out of my mouth were the chicken fingers are burnt. And I realized I'm not doing what I want to do. It's not what I want to do. I don't want to have a kid's menu. I focused and dedicated so much of my life to cooking and working in some of the best restaurants in the world.

MK:

In Michelin starred restaurants.

CA:

Yeah, I have and I'm very proud of that. I realized that, somewhere along the way, I made the wrong decision and that's not the chef that I want to be. I don't necessarily want to be a restaurateur. I just want to be a chef. I don't want to be a businessman. I want to be a chef.

MK:

So I've met you at a turning point in the crossroads.

CA:

I certainly have. I don't have a lot of time for people that just complain about their lives and they don't do anything about it. For me, I'm very mindful of where I am and where I want to be and I'm excited by these changes. These are new things that I'm working on and I'm looking at building something really special that Toronto has never seen before.

MK:

Meanwhile, you've got the celebrity chef thing going.

CA:

I don't know about that. Not very comfortable with that to be honest with you. The celebrity chef thing, whatever that thing is.

MK:

Some chefs aren't comfortable with it. Why aren't you?

CA:

I just think at the end of the day, I'm a working class chef. I started cooking when I was very young, only 14 years old, and it wasn't really a job for me. It was a place where I belonged. It's like a very family environment. So, for me to use the terminology, celebrity to describe myself is really counterintuitive.

MK:

Where were you cooking at age 14?

CA:

Well, actually you know what, I shouldn't call it cooking. I was in charge of filling doughnuts, jelly doughnuts and cream filled doughnuts at a doughnut shop.

MK:

Here in Toronto.

CA:

No, it was actually in Brampton. I worked at midnight shift at 14 years old, filling doughnuts, dealing with drunk customers and that didn't last very long. I would try and see how much jelly I could fit into one of these doughnuts to see these doughnuts explode on the people's laps and faces. So I got fired from that job.

MK:

Yeah, I imagine! (laughs) I know you came here from Uruguay. Do you speak Spanish?

CA:

I speak a little bit. I understand it fluently. My parents split up when I was 7 and at age 10 my mother got cancer. She got very ill, so she didn't have the strength to take care of a young 10-year-old boy who was full of energy. I mean, I was diagnosed with hyperactivity. So, I was a very, very energetic kid. So I was put in foster care. I didn't live with my family, so my foster parents were Maltese, so I lost the language and the South Americans would pick on me because I didn't speak my own language. And then the Wasps would also pick on me because I looked a little bit different. So I never really fit in.

MK:

Would you say that you were drawn to cooking because of your difficult childhood?

CA:

That's a great question. You know, I think for me being in a kitchen was a safe place for me growing up. It was a place where people noticed if you worked hard. That's one of the things I find really very attractive and very appealing about cooking is that you get gratification extremely quickly from your guests if you do something great, you see it in people's faces. They don't even need to tell you or speak or use words to convey that they're enjoying it or they're not enjoying it. It's a reward, during a service in a busy restaurant, you have hundreds of rewards or the adverse effect. I like big flavours. That's why I typically don't enjoy eating heavy cream or butter. You know, I appreciate French cuisine. I know it's the blueprint of cooking in many ways but I lean more towards Mediterranean, Southeast Asian, Pacific Rim cooking. I like flavors that are big, bold, that really punch you in the face.

MK:

I ate at your restaurant on Saturday and that's the kind of flavours you serve in your restaurant.

CA:

I like to eat healthy. If you can prevent some of these problems that happen later on through eating well, I think is something that you owe to yourself to do. I cheat once in a while, so I love doughnuts. You know, doughnuts are like my weakness.

MK:

I have to mention your TV show, MasterChef. I've been watching it and you're a very dignified presence on that show. I know Michael Bonacini, too. He's the other Toronto chef on the judging panel. And the third guy is Alvin Leung.

CA:

He's called "demon chef."

MK:

(laughs) Yeah, he's demon chef! What do you think makes a person a talented cook? And can you spot them almost immediately when they enter MasterChef?

CA:

One word, love. Yeah, that's it.

MK:

Love of what?

CA:

Love of food and love of pleasing other people. It's that simple. You can always tell if a chef has that or not. It's how they treat ingredients. I often talk about what the cooking world can teach you, can teach a young person and so many things. It teaches you how to interact with other people. It teaches you how to work in a team environment. It teaches you to respect the natural world, nature. It teaches you about punctuality. It teaches you about being clean, being organized like so many things are learned from cooking. It gives you so much. We need to be mindful of that, you know, and I think I think everyone should learn. Everyone should know how to make basic food.

MK:

It's a survival skill.

CA:

We live in a culture I think of - I always tread carefully when I say these things - but I feel strongly about it. We are an info-rich and knowledge poor culture. Right now, we have access to every recipe, every cookbook, every picture on these handheld devices or phones and we're losing the essence of a struggle, struggling to get knowledge. You know, the way that I learned to cook was through repetition. Through being yelled at, sometimes the chefs will even hit you. You I learned through peeling 10 of thousands of pounds of carrots, cleaning fish thousands of times. Like I learned through repetition. And I'm grateful for that. And I think there's something really beautiful about waiting, just waiting, waiting for it, you know, putting in the time, paying your dues, learning how to be a great cook before you become a great junior sous chef before you become a great sous chef before you become a great chef. Learning all of those things that you need to acquire before you can call yourself a great chef.

MK:

Paying your dues.

CA:

What I tell any young chefs that are aspiring to run their own kitchens is that they have to embrace the idea that they're always going to be a teacher and they're always going to be a student. And those two things are going to be happening at the same time for as long as they're cooking. You never become a true master of this profession. You're always learning and always teaching.

MK:

Last, I want to ask you something. What do you think about Toronto's food scene?

CA:

I think Toronto right now is going through homogenization. There's a lot of the same thing happening. There needs to be more innovation and there needs to be smaller restaurants that are focused on creativity that are not trying to be all things to everyone. And I'm guilty of that now, Origin has tried to be all things to everyone. We have a burger, we have a taco, we have miso cod. We have a lot of cliches on our menu. And that was driven by the economy, the economy in 2008 was a complete disaster. 2010 was still a disaster, was still we are still recovering. Origin for me was a reaction and a response to what I saw happening with the economy. And I'm very proud of what we've done. You know, we got voted #1 restaurant two years in a row by Toronto Life and then Now Magazine and now my goal is to go back to my skill level, to what I know and challenge myself and be very scared. I want to be scared again and I haven't had that feeling in many, many years. I haven't been afraid and I want to be afraid for a little while and do something that I know is going to be open for criticism and I'm OK with that. And that's a good place to be. You know, one of the greatest sayings I've said it so many times by Roosevelt, he said I feel sorrow for those lonely souls that neither know success nor failure. I think to live a full life, a rich life, you need to know both and need to experience both.

MK:

Well, Amen. Thank you very much, Claudio. That was my conversation with chef Claudio Aprile. Find him on Twitter at Claudio Aprile. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth®.