



# GLOBAL CUISINE HITS A HIGH NOTE

  
KULTURA  
EXECUTIVE CHEF

Former Juno winner Roger Mooking  
builds a second life mixing it up in the  
kitchen at Kultura

BY PAMELLA BAILEY



“There’s still a supposition in the minds of people that a chef should be from France, particularly in the hotel environment.... You have to over-perform to achieve, not to overachieve. I realized that going in.”

“**M**usic is my point of reference for any creative endeavour,” says Roger Mooking, executive chef of Kultura restaurant on King West. Mooking first came to public attention as MC Mystic of the Juno Award-winning R&B group Bass is Base in the 1990s. After making his mark in the music industry — touring with James Brown and performing at the Olympics — Mooking now makes culinary music in the kitchen at Toronto’s latest ultra-cool resto-lounge.

Kultura opened its doors in August 2006, and has become a hot spot for fashionable young professionals. While the swanky interior — plush chocolate leather banquettes, exposed red brick walls, wooden ceiling beams — certainly sets the mood, it’s the food that leaves patrons clamouring for an encore.

Delectable cultural combinations fill the menu, such as Jamaican chicken risotto (\$12): here a smooth, creamy risotto infused with lemon and coconut balances the heat of jerk-spiced chicken. Another crowd favourite is the Mediterranean chicken samosas (\$11) stuffed with minced chicken, asiago and sage complemented by sweet, spiced apple gari chutney. The plates are meant for sharing, each one providing diners a savory trip across continents.

Music may be his muse, but Mooking, a native of Trinidad, credits the foundation of his culinary creations to his upbringing. His Chinese grandfather owned a restaurant in Trinidad and other relatives own restaurants and catering companies. “Some of the first food I learned to cook was Chinese food,” says Mooking, “roasting chicken, wrapping wantons, making chutneys.” And then there were the Trinidadian dishes: “Of course, pilau and curries. In Canada, I picked up the French techniques. Those are my foundations for cooking.”

A graduate with top honours from George Brown’s Culinary Management Program, Mooking refined his skills at bistros and French restaurants in the city before landing a role in the Royal York Hotel’s Epic restaurant, the flagship restaurant for the Fairmont chain of hotels, under Chef Jean Charles Dupoire. He later moved to Barrio Lounge on Queen East as the opening chef, where he experimented with small sharing plates in a laid-back dining atmosphere.

Mooking says there are barriers in the restaurant industry for people of colour, due to an old-school mentality in the hiring process. “There’s still a supposition in the minds of people that a chef should be from France, particularly in the hotel environment.... You have to over-perform to achieve, not to overachieve. I realized that going in.”

At Kultura, Mooking overachieves by experimenting with the menu, spending 80-hour weeks at the restaurant, keenly aware of Toronto’s demanding palates. “In a second, new restaurants come up and, if you are not relevant, you’re gone,” says Mooking.

Despite the hard work and long hours, the affable young chef loves what he does, remaining passionate about both food and music. He is currently working on a score for Disney when he’s not in the kitchen. Mooking feels fortunate that Toronto has embraced his brand of international cuisine. But if Mooking’s creativity and commitment to his musical success is any indicator, foodies and music fans alike can expect a lot more from this rising culinary star.

KULTURA IS LOCATED AT 169 KING STREET EAST, 416-363-9000.



### Caribbean Shrimp Appetizer

Recipe by Roger Mooking  
Executive Chef of Kultura

- 20 shrimp (21-25 per pound),  
peeled and deveined
- 2 tsp vegetable oil
- 2 tsp shallot brunoise (finely diced)
- 1 tsp garlic puree
- 4 ripe bananas, chopped
- 2 tsp Sambal Oelek
- 4 tbsp light soya sauce
- 4 tbsp water
- 1 tbsp lime juice freshly squeezed
- ½ bunch cilantro (coriander) chopped
- 1 tsp sesame oil
- ½ tsp honey
- Salt and pepper to taste

Preheat a skillet to medium heat and add vegetable oil. Add shrimp in a single layer and sear on one side until lightly golden. Turn shrimp over individually to other side then add all other ingredients (except sesame oil, honey, salt and pepper). Toss to coat. Then add remaining ingredients and toss again. Season to taste. Serve hot.

Serves four.