

T.O.'S MYSTIC

ROGER MOOKING

CHEF ARRIVES

by Stacy Gardner

ROGER MOOKING WILL never go hungry. Being ambitious, talented and creative has ensured him "the good life" of an artist, the kind that doesn't have to starve. His passion for pleasing and producing works of appreciation can be found in his songs and his food.

Mooking, Toronto's executive chef of certified "hot spot" restaurants Kultura (cross-cultural cuisine) and Nyood (pronounced "nude"), is an unsung hero who is both mighty and unruffled. And, this fall is his time to shine. Not only does he have both hands firmly on the reins of two of the city's hippest establishments, he has also returned to his music career and is launching a new album come September. But it doesn't end there. Mooking is also the star of his very own Food Network TV show, also launching next month. Oh, and did I mention he's a new dad?

And, his works of creation and his philosophical approach, too, solidify that he is definitely the captain of his own ship.

Where he is now, and how he got there are what make Roger Mooking such an interesting and likeable fellow.

A slice of life

Mooking, 34, was born on the island of Bonaire, considered to be part of the Caribbean, where his Chinese grandfather immigrated (and owned a restaurant) and where Mooking's own father, too, established himself as a restaurateur.

A recipe in the making, Mooking was born into a repertoire of both soul and food — flavoured by the eclectic culture that has clearly nurtured his identity and creativity.

He moved with his family as a young adolescent to Edmonton, Alta., and found himself working in the restaurant business by the age of 14.

Like a scene out of a working-class Rockwell painting, he would save his money and then head to a recording studio to produce the songs that hummed in his head.

Mooking says he would do this "for years" — work in kitchen, leave kitchen, go to studio, record, write music, go back to kitchen, cook, make more money, repeat.

Then he found success with his music, and by his early twenties, he was in Toronto living the life of a

professional musician.

His band Bass Is Base formed in 1993, and by 1994 they were nominated for a Juno and won. Their hits, "Funkmobile" and "I Cry," won the group a loyal following of fans, and they would later go on to open for acts such as Celine Dion, Barenaked Ladies, Cypress Hill and the Godfather of Soul, James Brown, to name a few.

Record deals kept them busy: recording, travelling, performing and living within the melody of their own success.

But even amidst all of that, Mooking, known then as MC Mystic, was cooking up other aspirations.

More than seven years with Bass Is Base allowed Mooking opportunities (and all the fun a young guy could want in his twenties) beyond his own expectations, but there was a restlessness.

"I got tired of the music business. It became business, and I began to miss the simple art of creating, loving what I do — on its own, without all the demands of it having to be a certain way, a certain infrastructure," says Mooking. "I just couldn't subscribe to it any more." He says and pauses.

"I can't make good music if I'm not cooking, and I can't make good food if I'm not making music."

"It began to feel like slavery to me, and for me the process had to be beneficial to me. You know?... And I missed cooking. I wanted to cook. So I went back to school, enrolled in George Brown's culinary management program, graduated in 2000, and here I am."

Everyday exotic

Just as he was "pulled" from the

Royal York's Epicure Café to the trendy bistro Barrio, then onward to Kultura and Nyood, establishing himself as one of the finest young chefs in Toronto, he was also tempted by the idea of producing his own cooking show.

The concept of the show had been simmering over the last couple of years, a pitch here, a mitt there, and then finally something bounced to his liking.

"Demystifying the spices that many people are intimidated by," summarizes Mooking.

Perfect!

For your listening and dining pleasure, Mooking's album release with Coalition Entertainment is slated for September 2008, the same month his new Food Network show hits the airwaves.

On with the show

Taking a break from taping his cooking show, *Everyday Exotic*, for the Food Network, Mooking greets me at the front door of an east-end studio in Toronto.

We've already spoken on the phone at length, so when I assume the formality of "the handshake" upon meeting him, he dismisses it with a wave and easy smile and says, "None of that, gimme some love." A warm hug is received.

His kitchen set is as earthy and zesty as Mooking himself.

"My dream kitchen," he says smiling. There's the comfy sofa area, funky pillows and a framed shot of his album to be.

Yes, he's still making music — a solo album to be released in September.

"If I don't do both," he says, "then something suffers as a result."



Renaissance man Roger Mooking balances fatherhood, food, music and a new TV show

"I can't make good music if I'm not cooking, and I can't make good food if I'm not making music."

I have an image of him playing beats on pots and pans while his tapas march to the rhythms of his groove. He laughs.

"Actually, I like silence when I'm cooking. No music playing because I've got so many songs playing through my head already," says Mooking.

"When I'm chopping and cutting and stuff like that, it's very meditative," he continues.

"It's a great opportunity to filter through some of the musical ideas I have running through my head."

Mooking ruminates: The music is always happening, even when it's not obvious to anyone else. It's a simultaneous collaboration.

No wonder his menus get such rave reviews from the city's most sophisticated critics: he's a man who whistles while he works — the outcome (inevitably) has to be happy, artful and, most importantly, tasty.

I would have chopped off more than one of my own fingers by now. His ability to spread himself out over so much creative terrain without getting hackneyed amazes me.

I tell him he embodies the true

definition of being a dynamic multitasker. He counters, "It's probably just ADD."

Famous last words

Earlier, when Mookie begins giving me directions to get to the studio, he puts me on hold to tend to cries I had heard in the background of our conversation. I had assumed they were the yelps and squeals of passersby vying for his attention. Wrong.

His 14-month-old daughter and eight-day-old daughter — yes, eight-day-old daughter! — are beckoning him and his passion swells.

"My proudest creation yet," he gushes.

Two successful restaurants to run, a new album on the way and a new TV show to boot, throw in a brand new family and Mooking must be considered one of the busiest guys in town.

"Oh I don't know. I think busy is overrated," he quips, in another round of casual humour. "The corporate covet busy. We covet busy so much. People. Society. I'm actually more focused on getting lazy... ya know?"

And a philosopher, too.