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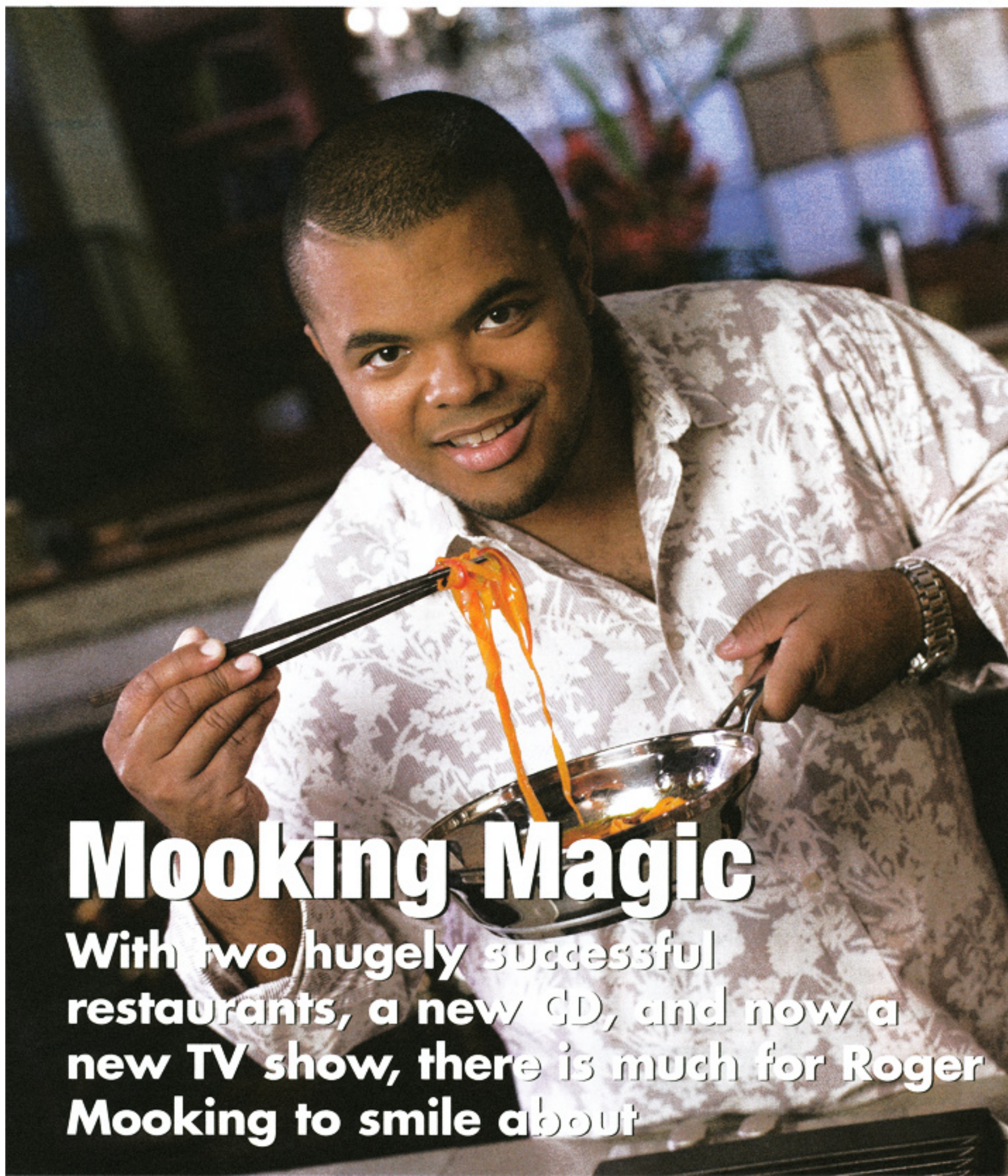
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Mooking Magic

With two hugely successful restaurants, a new CD, and now a new TV show, there is much for Roger Mooking to smile about

When I catch up with Roger Mooking by phone, his excitement is evident. "You caught me at an interesting time," he laughs. "I'm just sitting with some friends watching the first episode of *Everyday Exotic!*"

Unlike a group of friends assembling to watch Monday night football or *Survivor*, what makes this gathering so unique is that *Everyday Exotic* is Mooking's new TV show on the Food Network. In it, the Trinidad-born, Toronto-based chef demystifies ingredients that intimidate average blokes like myself. Curry powder got you stumped? Have no fear. Thanks to Mooking you'll be whipping up a mean curry and provolone mac 'n' cheese in no time, complete with asparagus stocks and a light dusting of Parmesan.

With a childish, almost devilish grin that belies his 34 years, Mooking is a

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likeable cat. At Nyood and Kultura, the two wildly successful restaurants he co-owns with partners, it is not uncommon to see him working the room in his black kitchen attire. He is polite, well-spoken and funny, leaving customers chuckling as he makes his way back to what is obviously his home turf: the kitchen.

There was a time, not too long ago, however, when Mooking was cutting his teeth in the music world, having walked away from the chaos of the kitchen to chase another dream. And while the venture was successful – he won a Juno Award as MC Mystic with his band Bass is Base – disillusionment with the music industry eventually set in, pushing him to step away and enroll in cooking school at George Brown College, where he finished top of his class.

Since then, there has been no stopping him.

Q: How did you get into cooking?

A: I'm a third generation restaurateur, so I kind of just grew up in it. Both my grandfather and father had restaurants. At three, I knew that I wanted to be a chef. And at 14, I was cooking professionally in diners.

Q: At 14? What would you do with the money?

A: It's funny: I basically worked to pay for studio time, always taking the money I made in kitchens and using it to record. Music took over my life for awhile. Before long I was performing with James Brown, going to the Junos and winning awards. It was fun, but I got frustrated with the industry.

Q: Despite the disillusionment, you've just put out a cooking CD

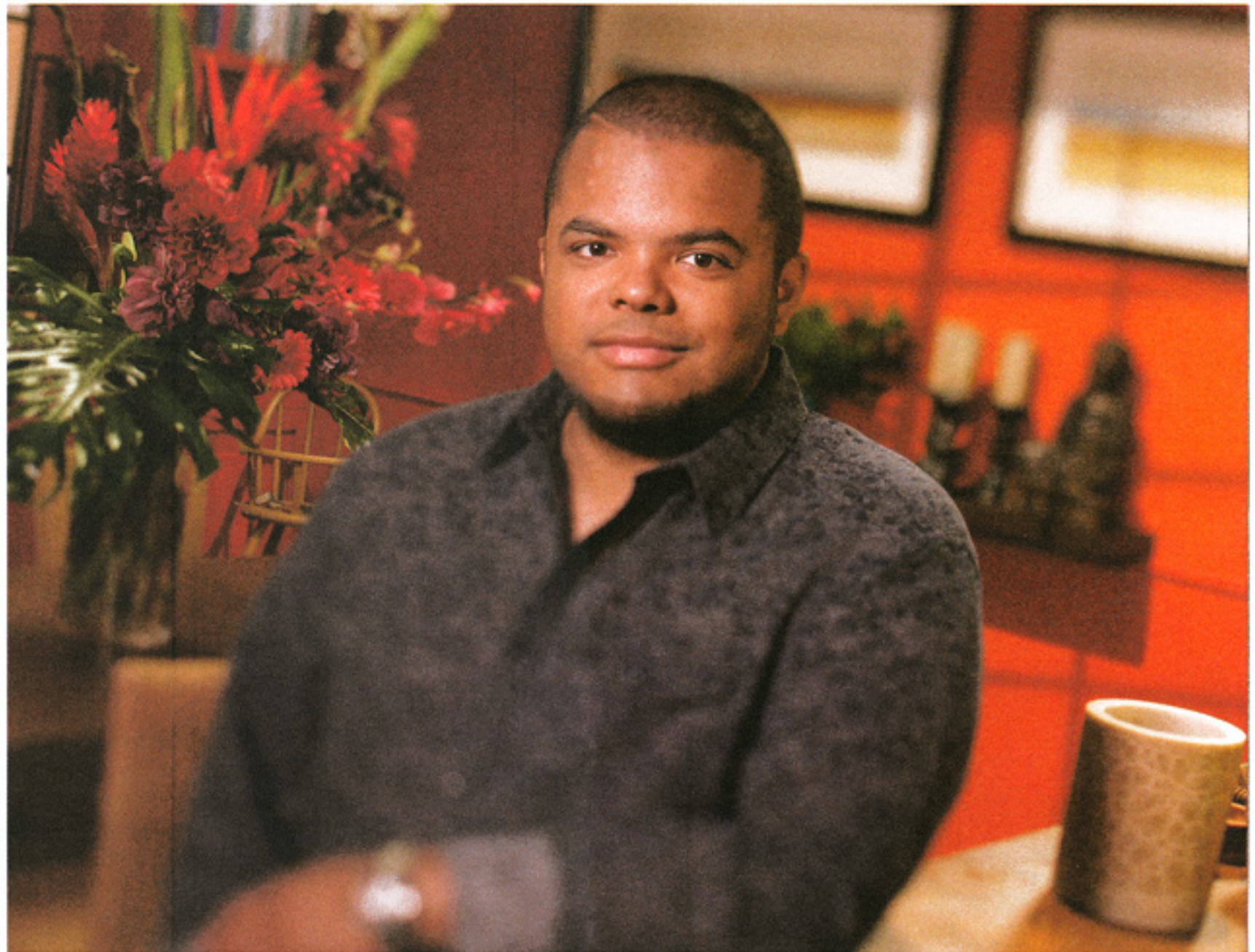
A: Yes, I landed a record deal with Warner Music and just released an album called Soul Food, which is a unique musical package, because the music is soul based – rock/soul, hip hop/soul, funk/soul – and then there are recipes on the inside that match the tone and the feel of the music. I guess I'm still spending money on studio time!

Q: And now Everyday Exotic?

A: I had played with idea of a show for quite some time. Everyday Exotic was a one that I could really get behind, and sink my teeth into. People ultimately want to command their cooking repertoire, but are often intimidated by ingredients like cumin, for example. The show is great because it will teach people to incorporate these types of ingredients into simple, everyday meals.

Q: Why have you been so successful?

A: I read a lot of business biographies, and one of the things that I find common among really successful people, aside from honing their talents and skills, coming up with a great idea and positioning it, is that, at some point, they had to take a major risk. For me, it was leaving the security of a regular job in a kitchen to partner with some other people and actually open up a restaurant.



Thankfully, Kultura and Nyood have both been extremely successful.

Q: What advice would you give to people contemplating doing the same?

A: You need to take the risk and invest in yourself. Nobody is going to do that for you. I took a running leap and just went for it, and I really believe that at some point we all have to do that.

Q: Why do you love the foodservice industry so much?

A: Because it's about giving to people.

Q: What is the key to staying afloat in the economic downturn?

A: As a restaurateur you have to be concerned about people's incomes, because that affects how much and how often they go out to dine and invest in food services. Even though the stock market is fluctuating and the bankers are freaking out, people still have to eat. It's a primal business. That said: consistency is key. Everyone wants to know that when they get to your restaurant, that when they order the chicken penne, mushroom flatbread or

braised short ribs, that it will be as good as they remember. When you get that consistency down, you gain the loyalty of that customer and he or she will have a vested interest in you.

Q: Should people look at amending prices?

A: The way our menus are set up and priced, we're not trying to get \$150 a head. Yes, I want them to come out, have a great night and spend money, but at the end of the day, I'm not asking anyone to go above and beyond. We positioned our restaurants for longevity from the conception stage.

Q: What are your goals moving forward?

A: From the food and beverage side of things, my partners and I are looking to expand our restaurant repertoire by creating new and innovative concepts. From the TV and music side I'd like to put out a new CD every time I drop a new show. I'd also like to do some books and pots and pans. I just want to create things for people to enjoy. I mean, I'm dying to get to work every day. I just want to keep things that way.