

# Fire in the Belly

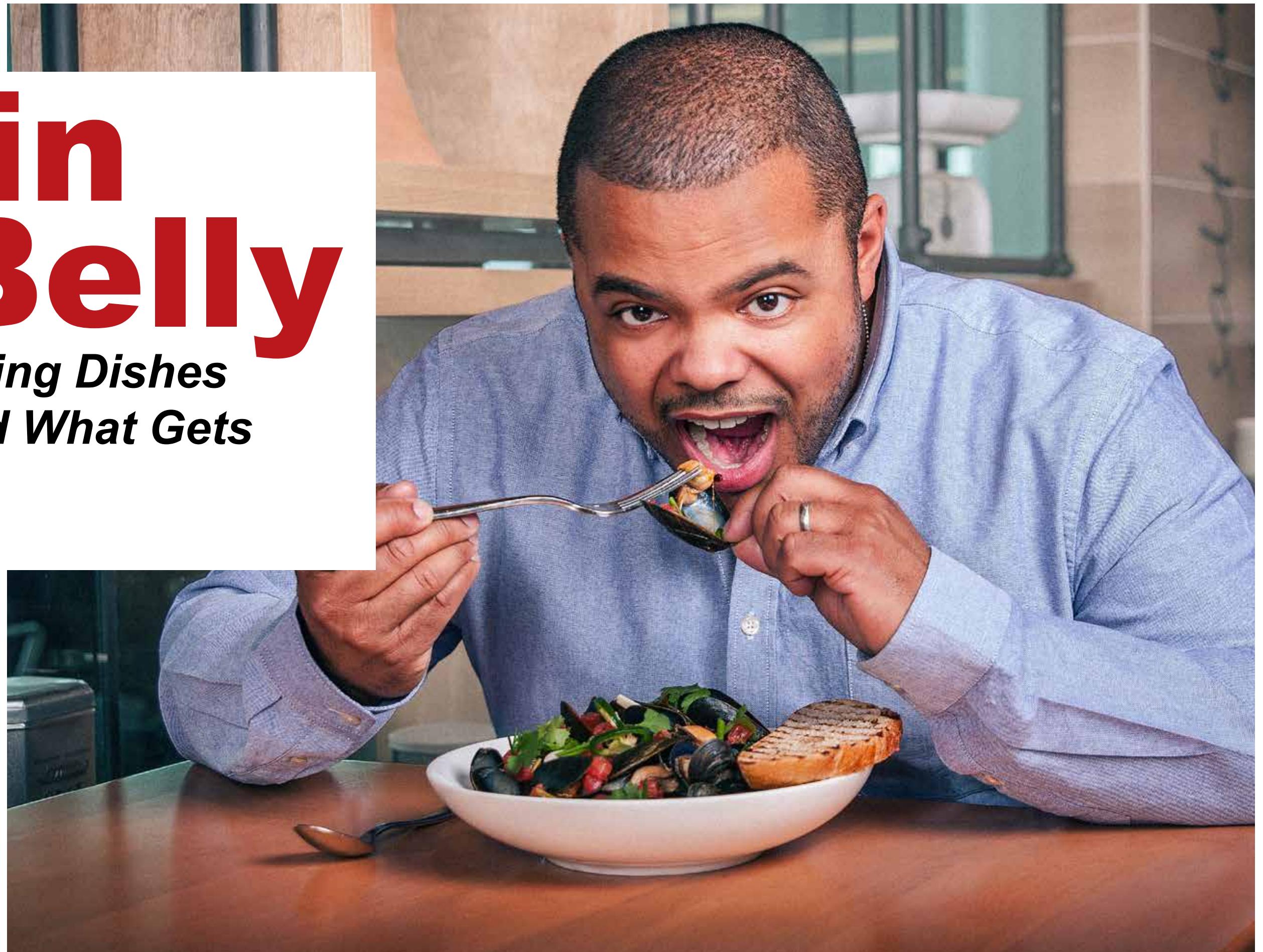
## *Chef Roger Mooking Dishes on Work, Life, and What Gets Him All Fired Up*

By Signe Langford

**T**he creative mind is easily bored. A true entrepreneur never sits still, is never satisfied with good enough, and never, ever, rests on their laurels. To pigeonhole Roger Mooking as a chef is to tell only a fraction of the story. A true Renaissance man, he has many irons in the fire, and many roles to play, and that suits him just fine. “I’ve always based my career around being an entertainer working in music or food. Cooking – being a chef – is just one of the tools in my kit; I’m an entertainer first.”

He knew at the tender age of three he wanted to be a chef, and he’s been busy working to achieve this goal – non-stop – since his teens. Cooking has always been there – his family has always been in the hospitality business – and so has music. Remember Bass Is Base? That was Mooking’s – or rather, MC Mystic’s – 1990’s, Juno award-winning funk trio. (Do yourself a favour, hit YouTube for a ride down Memory Lane in the Funkmobile. – MM)

Emigrating from tropical Trinidad to often icy Edmonton is a major transition – Mooking came to Canada at the age of five – but rolling with life’s ups and downs is just one of Mooking’s winning personality traits. Determination is another. Mooking recalls, “I started working in a restaurant at 15 to earn money for time in the recording studio. I’d work my shift there then head down to the





studio. When my friends were partying after school, I was working.”

He graduated from George Brown College Chef School in 2001 and immediately began his professional career as a cook. His culinary “big break” came in 2004 when restaurant impresario, Hanif Harji, stopped by the tiny, unassuming neighbourhood bistro in Toronto, where Mooking pumped out high-caliber dishes from the tiny open kitchen. Harji was impressed and the rest is...well...you know.... It was his partnership with Harji that gave Mooking the right platforms to strut his stuff: the wildly successful Kultura Social Dining and Nyood. That was the springboard, and he’s been flying high ever since, with his focus now firmly on current projects: Twist by Roger Mooking, at Pearson International Airport, and Social Eatery by Roger Mooking at Telus Spark in Calgary. And then there is the music. He’s had over a dozen releases including: Feedback, Soul Food, Memories of the Soul Shack Survivors, First Impressions for the Bottom Jigglers, and Jungle Man.

That Mooking is driven is a given, but it’s not in a hardnosed way; he’s more of a performer, a juggler, a man finding a delicate balance on the high wire. For Mooking, life is work and work is life, so the idea of work-life balance isn’t something he stresses about too much. “I get to do what I love, and make a great living doing it.” Being a father to four little girls – four, six, nine, and 10 – and husband to wife, Leslie, is what matters most to him. “I’ve got mouths to feed.” Says Mooking, so, he does it all, from working with Sunset Produce – a Leamington, Ontario innovative, premium greenhouse grower – as both a brand ambassador and now Culinary Director, creating delectable recipes and videos, working on expanding lines of dinner kits, pastas, and branded produce; developing dining concepts; and starring in the TV shows he’s perhaps most loved for: Chopped Canada, Everyday Exotic, Heat Seekers, Man Fire Food.

Doing it all means he works away from home a lot, but he doesn’t take his home life and family for granted. “I tend to be around the house more in fall, and that’s when Leslie and I take out the calendar and plan the year ahead. I have an unbreakable rule. I never miss a birthday, important holiday, or anniversary – 10 years this October!” Leslie and the kids don’t live life on the road with Mooking; giving the kids a secure, consistent home life is the couple’s top priority. He doesn’t worry about the time he’s away; the kids are surrounded by love and the couple’s extended fam-

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ily. Right now, it’s all about the work. “I’ve been working my ass off for 25 years already, but one day, when the kids are a bit more grown, I’ll slow down. Although, the doctor says I’m shockingly healthy!” Somewhat surprising given his punishing schedule. “I flew across the country six times in eight days. Hop on the red eye, land, work, repeat!” Thankfully, he’s at a point in his career where he can travel in comfort, because the man spends much of his life in the air. You could say he has it all, but the one thing he’s missing is sleep; “If I get sleep, it’s a luxury. I was staying in a great hotel in the center of Tokyo, I should have wanted to go out exploring, but all I wanted to do was sleep!”

Sleep is something he’ll have plenty of time for on what will be his first trip down under for the 2017 Margaret River Gourmet Escape food and wine festival, where he’ll be conducting cooking demonstrations, panel discussions, and hosting several events, including the intriguing, Feast of the Forest.

You might think, with all this jet setting the globe, from one glamorous gig to another; headlining a star-studded gala, being in front of the camera, surrounded by one’s people, all the attention, can lead to, well, going Hollywood. But not Mooking. He’s warm, natural, down to earth and surprisingly revealing when we asked him how he keeps it real.

With almost palpable emotion, he answers; “I have a grave site where two of my kids are buried. Knowing this – always having this in the back of my mind – I live with an ever present sense of what’s really important, how impermanent life is, a sense of sadness...and that’s real.” But he’s not beaten down by the losses. At 43, Mooking is doing what’s most important to him: providing for his family, seeing the world, entertaining people, and making things. “As long as I can make things – music, TV, food – I’m happy.”

While shooting a new show in Miami, we were able to keep him on the phone long enough to answer a few questions...



# Q&A

**MM:** You're speaking to us from the set of your new show on the Cooking Channel; what can you tell us about it?

**RM:** Not much! The details if the show are still very hush-hush; even the name might change, but I can tell you I'm travelling across the USA – with stops in New Orleans, Miami, Maine – in search of the most delicious foods being served up in these cities.

**MM:** Do you have a favourite dining destination?

**RM:** Malaysia. In particular, Kuala Lumpur. I have a friend there, and my shows broadcast there, so I get to visit about once a year. Malay food is a real fusion of Chinese, East Indian, and traditional Malay. It's hot and spicy, rustic, simple and complex at the same time. I love the rendang stew, roti canai, and chili padi.

**MM:** What's your favourite restaurant?

**RM:** Devi's Corner in Kuala Lumpur. Their curry and rice on banana leaf is so amazing and you eat it with your hands, it's so good. I got to Malaysia a lot, and that's the first thing I do on the way from the airport – ask the driver to stop at Devi's.

**MM:** How about a favourite dish?

**RM:** Goat roti. No question. I need to put that in my face at least twice a month, if not every week! Oh, and pho. These are two foods I will seek out wherever I am in the world.

**MM:** What's your go-to kitchen gadget these days?

**RM:** Cast iron. I've been amassing a serious collection of pans, skillets, griddles, and tavas for making roti.

**MM:** What's your weapon of choice?

**RM:** I'm still a Wusthof guy. I like the balance and heft of a good German knife in my hand.

**MM:** We've all watched with a combination of horror and macabre fascination as other Food TV stars have ballooned on screen from too much stress and greasy food, and no, we're not naming names, but the risk is real, so how do



you stay fit and healthy?

**RM:** In between shoots where I'm eating all this rich, meaty, food, I eat clean, with tons of green tea and salads. And I work out. Wherever I go I plan ahead, and find a kickboxing trainer; it's the perfect workout for me. It hits cardio, flexibility, balance, strength and mental concentration."

**MM:** Who is one of your greatest inspirations?

**RM:** "My grandmother. She was meticulous about everything her whole life: how she cooked and cleaned, her self-care, her attention to detail, all of it. She was wise and I'd say my relationship with her was a defining one for me and my own development, I'm totally detail oriented too."

**MM:** Are your kids little chefs in the making?

**RM:** I don't know if they have any professional dreams, but they like to eat and they like to

learn; we cook together and they're pretty willing to try almost anything. I taught my oldest girl how to make tarte Tatin and she does an amazing job. She knows how to set up a proper mis en place just like a pro and I'm teaching them to make perfect biscuits.

**MM:** Speaking of kids, four girls – are you done or do you want more?

**RM:** No more kids! We've got our hands full already. Yeah, we're done.

**MM:** Have you always had clear goals or do you just take life as it comes?

**RM:** Well, I had a goal at three to become a chef, after that there was always something I wanted to do. Music, food, entertaining. But my father gave me a great piece of advice when I was a little kid. He said, "I don't care what you want to be when you grow up, I just want you to be the best you can be at it." I've



kept that with me my whole career and life. I work as hard as I can to be the best that I can. Around 25 I reframed my career goals from being a cook to being an entertainer, because I struggled a bit with my identity and direction. I wondered how I could be both, so I reframed myself as an entertainer and a maker of things: music, food, shows, whatever. It's all entertainment!

**MM:** Are you ever going to head back into the recording studio?

**RM:** I've had this album in my head I've wanted to do for about eight or 10 years, and the pressure is building, but I have no time. Right now in my life, I just don't have the time to get to the studio in Toronto."

**MM:** Do you ever get a day off?

**RM:** Not too often, but when I do, I keep it simple and stay at home with the family. We'll

cook and eat together, go for a walk, just hang out and be together, maybe make some bread in the outdoor oven. I love what I do every day, I get to do what I want, with who I want, and that's huge. I've got no complaints."

**MM:** What gets you all fired up in the kitchen these days?

**RM:** Not being in the kitchen – cooking outside! Grilling, smoking, cooking over flames, there's something so natural and perfect about it. (Tune in to Man Food Fire to see what all the excitement's about! – MM) I have an outdoor oven and I love it. And bread. I'm totally into bread and baking. I recently dragged a 20 pound bag of organic flour home – that raised a few eyebrows – but I'm really into Spanish pan de cristal.

**MM:** Speaking of Man Fire Food, can you tell us about a real stand-out moment or was there

something you ate that really blew your mind?

**RM:** I'm continuously amazed at how many ways people devise to cook over an open fire. Just when I think I've seen it all, wham human ingenuity strikes again. We dug and fired up an imu – a traditional pit oven – in Hawaii and when the community found out, everyone brought their own dishes and added to the cookout, piling them into the imu. The next day, when the imu was unearthed there was a feast big enough for a week's worth of meals for the whole crowd. That is what cooking is about.

**MM:** Do you still find time for your charitable work?

**RM:** Absolutely! I'm still with Save the Children International and Canada; I'm also the local ambassador for Second Harvest and the Chair of the George Brown College Professional Advisory Committee. 🍌



# Campari® Tomato Galette

Rustic and elegant, this Campari® galette is a Roger Mooking classic.

## Ingredients

1½ C unbleached all-purpose flour  
5 Campari® tomatoes  
½ tsp ground black peppercorns  
½ tsp kosher salt  
½ tsp dried oregano  
½ C cubed unsalted butter, room temperature  
¾ C cold water  
½ tsp finely chopped fresh rosemary  
1 tsp finely chopped fresh thyme  
2 Tbsp breadcrumbs  
¼ C grated Parmesan  
1 large egg, beaten

## Directions

Mix all dry ingredients so they are evenly combined. Crumble the butter into the dry ingredients using your fingertips only until pea-sized crumbs form. Place mixture in a bowl and refrigerate for 10 minutes. Using the handle side of a wooden spoon, mix cold water into the flour mixture until it comes together. Using your hand, gently knead dough into a disc, and refrigerate about 10-15 minutes.

Slice Campari® tomatoes to ¼” thickness with a very sharp knife and set aside.

In a separate bowl, combine rosemary and thyme together.

On a clean surface lightly dusted with all-purpose flour, roll out dough to 10” circle. Thin the outer 1” of the circle so there is a thinner border. Carefully transfer circle to a parchment lined baking tray. Refrigerate for 10 minutes.

Preheat oven to 375 °F. In the centre of the dough, spread the breadcrumbs and leave a 1” border uncovered. Sprinkle half of the Parmesan on top of the breadcrumbs. Starting from the centre, place the tomato slices in concentric circles, overlapping each slice by half, making sure the tomatoes cover the edge of the parmesan-breadcrumb mixture. Sprinkle a pinch of ground black peppercorns and the mixed herbs over the tomatoes. Sprinkle remaining Parmesan over the top of the tomatoes. Lift the edges of the dough and fold them inward over the filling, pleating as you go, to create a folded-over border.

Brush edge of galette with beaten egg. Bake in preheated oven for 35 – 40 minutes, rotating pan halfway through. The edges of the dough should be browned and the dough cooked fully through.

Allow Galette to rest for 10 minutes before transferring to a service board. Serve warm with Crème Fraiche.



Recipe by Sunset Produce and Chef Roger Mooking