


All About Connectivity

Marcus Samuelsson Unpacks Sustainability

Marcus Samuelsson



Interested in learning the secrets behind Marcus Samuelsson's delicious food? Watch him do an exclusive cooking demo at the SACCNYS Sustainability Summit on November 7th!

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- Marcus Samuelsson

Marcus Samuelsson wants us to be careful how we talk about sustainability. A restaurateur, community builder, and visionary entrepreneur, Samuelsson owns over 30 restaurants around the world, with locations from Malmö to Harlem. He says sustainability means something different in each location. What's innovative in one atmosphere or region might be redundant in another. As we move toward an increasingly interconnected world, evolving our understanding of sustainability will allow us to work toward true change.

What innovations are changing the way we eat or how we think about food?

I think that technology and media combined are drivers for us to learn about food from all aspects of the world. We weren't as connected before. Now, we are exposed and introduced to new habits of eating. In many ways, this makes the world bigger, but it also makes it more connected.

How does food drive market innovation?

It's all about connectivity. Food has always been a marketplace where people come together. Whether it was the old traditional markets of Marrakesh or Egypt, there's always been the market that we traded on. Whether it was sugar or spices or salt, they've always been these incredible market drivers

Then we moved into the period of "finer" food. First it was a focus on French food, then Japanese food, then it became Italian. Now we're going back to seeing ethnic food as sustainable food. We go deeper into the jungle to find super foods. The quest of what's good food will always be there. And it should be challenged. It is challenged.

How do you execute principles of sustainability throughout such a broad spectrum of different restaurant styles around the world?

Sustainability means different things for different places. In our restaurant in Gothenburg, we have our own garden, so our vegetables and our garden program are extremely sustainable. We cook what we grow, right?

In Harlem, I look at sustainability from a neighbor model. The most important aspect of sustainability here is that your community is working. If we had a restaurant in Ethiopia, "organic" would have no value, because all food would be organic. And then you look at a place like Sweden that has a lot of great ideas about sustainability, yet local food is so expensive most restaurants can't afford it.

What does sustainability mean for the restaurant industry moving forward?

The word restaurant means "to restore a community." The consumer no matter where you go will be more and more informed, so in order to present the value proposition, the word sustainability will eventually be like electricity, something you take for granted versus highlight. I don't think we're there yet, but I think that's where we're going to end up pretty soon.

At some point buzzwords like sustainability become empty. Do we need to step back and say, "What are we really talking about here?"

Yes, but it also means very different things in different companies. You can argue that fast-food restaurants are very sustainable, because they have delivery once a week versus the three-star Michelin restaurant that has maybe 30 deliveries a day. So, which one would you look at to be the most sustainable? I'm not saying that one is doing a better job than the other. I'm just saying that it's a very broad conversation and you have to be responsible with how you engage in it.

Are there specific technologies you see driving forward the restaurant industry?

You always look for better software so you can backend manage your operations—anything from inventories to customer's response. And then via Instagram or Twitter, you can have a dialogue about it. On the other end, you look at changes in the marketplace. We went from cash to bitcoin, so you have to respond to that if you're a merchant. It's about being aware. About going to forums, speaking to other colleagues, and staying curious.

Can you talk about innovations you see occurring in the kitchen itself?

We learned a lot from Japan—kelp, for example. Now we're looking a lot at grains—like teff—from Ethiopia, one of the oldest grains in the world. Then you look at things like let's say bugs for new proteins. Twenty years from now, maybe a rib eye is not the protein of choice. Maybe bugs from Cambodia are the protein of choice.

To me it all stems from being curious. Curious about what you get and curious about how you can evolve. If you're committed to that, sustainability cannot be avoided. You have to say, "Okay what's next, what's coming?"

Any final thoughts?

The intersection between food and technology is where the modern chef is today. It's not where we started, but we have to be part of that, both on the creative side and on the backend side.