

EPISODE 44

[00:00:02] MS: *You're dealing in a world that's above the 23-year-old's fundamental that's been in America for nine months. I felt we could improve. I'm busy. You know what I mean? I felt slightly embarrassed a year later, because I knew there was a lot of black chefs that has worked hard and deserved all the accolades. All of a sudden with one scoop, I became one of the most recognized black chef in the country, in the world. That's a lot for someone who's 23.*

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:38] LW: Hey there. It's Light Watkins, the host of the At the End of the Tunnel. If this is your first time listening to At the End of the Tunnel, this is a podcast that tells the story behind the story of changemakers, who have taken a leap of faith, who've overcome a huge life challenge and who've used their platform for social good.

This week, my guest is a world-famous culinary guru. He is a three-time James Beard award-winning chef and he's the founder of Red Rooster in Harlem USA. His name is Mr. Marcus Samuelsson.

I've been a fan of Marcus's for years, as I was living in New York at the time that his star was rising in the culinary world. In fact, Red Rooster was just down the street from my apartment. I was so excited to have this conversation, especially after reading his 2012 memoir called *Yes, Chef*. He's written many other books since and he's got his own podcast and he's been featured on several shows. That book, in my opinion, tells his origin story so well. As you know, I'm obsessed with origin stories.

Now, one note about this interview with Marcus, we only had a very short time to talk, so I didn't get a chance to go as deep as you're probably used to hearing me go, but I want to take a little time now to give you some context into Marcus's fascinating backstory, in case you're unfamiliar with it.

When Marcus was three and his sister was five, they were in Ethiopia, and there was a tuberculosis epidemic happening at that time. Both of them, along with their mother, contracted tuberculosis. They were coughing up blood and the whole thing. There were no doctors in their little village, which was located about 75 miles outside of capitol of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa.

Get this. His mom carried three-year-old Marcus on her back with his sister in tow and they walk the 75 miles by foot to get to the hospital. When they arrived at the hospital, there were a thousand other people waiting to get in and somehow, his mother was able to get them help. Unfortunately, she never left the hospital. Marcus and his sister were separated from their family and they were orphaned and put up for adoption, which is how they ended up In Sweden. Crazy story, right?

Well, that was just the beginning, because Marcus's new family was a working class family and they only went out to eat a couple times a year for very special occasions, which meant that they spent a lot of time cooking. Especially his Swedish grandmother, whose excellent cooking skills inspired Marcus to pursue a path of becoming a chef. As Marcus worked his way up through the ranks, he was often the only black person in the kitchen. He witnessed a ton of derogatory remarks by many of the chefs he worked under.

The moment that inspired him to eventually pursue his own restaurant was when a top Michelin chef that he was working for in France told him not to even bother trying to open up your own restaurant, "Because Marcus, you're black." As a black chef, it's going to be impossible, because no other black chef has ever done it.

Marcus took a leap of faith. He left France. He went to New York with only \$300 to his name and he ended up talking his way into getting hired at an upscale Swedish restaurant called Aquavit. Then soon after, the executive chef at Aquavit died of a heart attack. Marcus got promoted to the executive chef at the young age of 23.

Basically, he had his own restaurant. Then nine months later, Aquavit was awarded a three-star review by the New York Times, which is the equivalent of winning an Oscar for cooking. After years of study and apprenticeship and navigating racism and being very focused, and much of the time working for free, because as a black chef, he had to prove himself over and over by saying, "Look, let me work for free and then you can see for yourself that I know what I'm doing." After all of that, Marcus finally became recognized as one of the most talented chefs in the international culinary scene.

However, he was still known as the black chef, because there just weren't that many black people in those fine dining kitchens. Marcus was determined to open the door to more women and to more people of color in his kitchens. Then 9/11 happened and his restaurant closed. Then later, Marcus's old business partner, the owner of Aquavit came after him claiming that he owned a financial stake in Marcus's name, because Marcus got famous while working at Aquavit.

Marcus had to use his life savings to buy the rights to his own name. Then, shortly after that, he ended up cooking for Obama's first state dinner as president and he won a Top Chef competition on television. Then he was able to open Red Rooster in Harlem, which he refers to as a love note to the legacy of Harlem. He went from employing 250 people and feeding 4,000 mouths a week, to having to close his doors back in March of 2020 as a result of the pandemic. Of course, that wasn't the end of the story, because Marcus teamed up with the World Central Kitchen and he turned Red Rooster, basically, into a food bank that served meals to people in the community and to essential workers.

Today, Marcus and his team had fed hundreds of thousands of people, all while the future of his restaurant lingered in uncertainty. Marcus's journey reads like a real-life version of that book, *The Alchemist*, where a bright-eyed kid sets off on an epic adventure and experiences a lucky break, followed by a major obstacle where he loses everything. Then navigating around the obstacle forces him to innovate and iterate and he becomes even more successful, only to confront a new challenge, lose everything again and then rise from the ashes.

It was an honor getting to talk to Marcus Samuelsson. There's obviously a lot more to the story, so let's get to the conversation and I'll let Marcus fill in the rest of the gaps.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:06:57] LW: You come from a hell of a legacy, right? The story of your mother walking with you and your sister, 75 miles to the hospital, all of you have tuberculosis. She's not surviving. You guys are sent to live with a nurse with other kids. When you were a kid, was all that in your adoption profile? Did your parents make you aware of that? Because I know you said in your book that you can't even remember today, what you remember, what you don't remember and you have to rely on your sister. I'm just curious, how aware of those circumstances were you when you were a kid, when you were playing soccer, when you were getting teased, when you were living this relatively privileged life?

[00:07:35] MS: I think it's a blend. My mom, my Swedish mother, she was very confident. She grew up very poor, but she was very confident. This is that level of confidence that I brought with me. She constantly pushed us. When we left that house, we were confident. Our clothes looked right. We knew how to navigate and speak if somebody stopped us, which can happen. She pushed me into confidence.

My father was very strategic. He grew up poor, but he became a geologist and had his own company. He's done the whole class journey from poverty to upper middle class. My father was much more strategic. Where my mom can very much sometimes involved, whether the kids at school used to n-words or not, and she wanted to come down and talk to their parents and talk to them. As you get older, that just got worse and worse. "I can go. We can go together. We can talk to them." I was like, "No. Absolutely not. That dude is two years older than me and I have to go back to school tomorrow." Do you know what I mean?

My father, he was not focused on that at all. He was focused on strategic things. Like, "Your name will be Marcus, because it's an international name. You most likely will leave Sweden." Imagine you're a kid and this is told you that you must – "I don't know if you can live in England

or America. At some point in your life, you will —” When you're eight, nine, you don't think about as essence, but he was thinking about it.

[00:09:17] LW: You all would have English weeks too, where you had to speak English that whole week.

[00:09:21] MS: It was highly frustrating, because all you want to do with curse in Swedish. My parents were of that generation, where you might feel a couple of fingers in the back too. They did the best they could. They were amazing parents. My grandparents were amazing. My cousin, I love my cousins. Korean cousins, have Canadian, French-Canadian cousins. We were like a tribe. If you went up against the Samuelsson, you dealt with eight, nine kids, you know what I mean? We were gnarly. We did everything. We danced together. We played soccer together. We had a swim team. We were like a little tribe. You will get wrestled down. Do you know what I mean?

Like I said, my mother gave me confidence; the balance between arrogance and confidence. I'm 18-years-old pulling up in Japan. I don't speak the language. No one speaks English. I'm black. Clearly, they're not. I managed to navigate to work in the kitchen. That comes out of confidence. That comes out of the confidence, the way my mom taught me confidence. Because 80% of all communication is done through eyes and looks and smiles and stuff like that. You needed that way before Internet in Japan when you're a kid.

A year later, I pull up in Switzerland. Not only do I go there, I get the scholarship to get there. I'm not number two. I'm not number three. I'm number one. That gives you focus and confidence. I don't think that focus came from my father. It came from my mother.

[00:10:51] LW: I'm in my 40s. You're in your 40s. I'm sure you know a lot of people who may be when they're a kid, thought they want to be a doctor, or a police officer, or whatever. Now, they're a tech entrepreneur, or they're doing something else. It's very rare that someone has that vision as a child. They stay so laser-focused throughout their life pursuing that vision. I'm curious, do you remember the moment you realized that being a chef was your calling?

[00:11:20] MS: Yeah, absolutely. I remember several things between my – the years of 17 and 22. Food has given me so much. I remember traveling in Singapore, traveling in Switzerland, traveling in Japan and eating that Southeast Asian food and saying, “Who lied? This food is better. This speaks to me.” There was no vocabulary to love that food. There was no books about Singaporean street food. There was only books about French food. I was going to France and I was like, “What is this about noodles? What is this curry from India?” It spoke to me the way hip-hop spoke to me. There was no books about hip-hop. 1992, not yet. It was just rhythmically, Tribe spoke to me. You know what I mean? It was also a moment where I thought, if I keep at this, blackness can be my advantage. I’m highly misunderstood in this moment. I have no money. Literally no money, but I’m very happy.

If I was even trying to go on a date, I was clearly cannot pay this bill, so we got to figure this out. But I was happy. That took in everything. I was that kid in that corner learning. I knew and I started to write my own food. I couldn't execute it, because no one really cared what I wrote, but it was my food. It was things like grilled grouper with galanga and lemongrass and chili. Guess what? My French roommate, he didn't know what galanga and lemongrass was, but he knew everything about French cooking. I just thought, “Yes, I got it.” There was moments like that that it just sonically, rhythmically, this reminded me of soccer. I am on a different space. I know I can monetize, or maximize on that right here right now. I know there is a way out.

[00:13:11] LW: How did you get into the lifelong habit of journaling? It’s so interesting. You mentioned that the two things you always have with you were your chef's knives and your journal.

[00:13:20] MS: One of the blessings about being black male and black in general is that in order to make it, you just got to be better. You get told early and you get – there's a tight rope. If you follow that rope, you will navigate through it if you stay healthy. I've been very fortunate to stay healthy. I get up every day, since I was 17-years-old. I love food. I love the people that makes food and I love the people that eat food. I love the thought processes around food. I work hard every day about improving my team and myself around food.

Then, food is then allows me into these rooms, because someone like yourself, or going to the White House, or go into whatever, Australia, whatever it is, but it's through food. It's not through anything else.

[00:14:13] LW: You also were really good at talking yourself into positions and then also volunteering to work for free. I know sometimes, it didn't quite work out because the chef was just too close-minded. A lot of times, it did work out. Where'd you get that from? Who taught you that level of work ethic?

[00:14:31] MS: Watching my parents. There was two things to that. If I worked a year, I really worked nine months. Then there were three months where I hustled. I went back to Gothenburg and we ran clubs. I didn't sell any drugs. My friends sold drugs. The good kids who just hustled. We threw parties and they gave me the money, because everyone knew that I was on a journey. I mean, I've cooked for the whole party, or whatever. It was a trade off. You're 18, 19. Now I have money, or I made money during those three months, then I had a little bit of cash for the rest of nine months.

I didn't need a lot of money. I had board. I had housing. We ate at the restaurant. My parents gave me at least tickets. What more do you need? I was very covered in — there's friends. There's everything there. It's just you don't have — you can't buy a mountain bike, or you can't buy a boombox, or whatever the thing was. You can't buy new Nikes, or whatever you needed. I didn't need that. Those were not part of my priorities.

That was always, every year was nine months of really, really hard work and learning the craft, almost like a way a classical musician, then with three months off. They don't always come consecutively. It could be four and a half months of work, one and a half months off, four and a half — you know what I mean? It could be like that. You knew when you were getting off. Like, “All right, get back home to Sweden.” You hustle. You set up barbecues with your friends. You know what I mean? You just make it work.

[00:16:02] LW: I'm wondering now what your mental state was like, because you mentioned that you would vomit, you would throw up before every shift. I don't know if that was an exaggeration or not. You were also pursuing your calling, your passion. What was happening inside? Were you happy? Were you anxious? What was going on inside mentally?

[00:16:19] MS: Being way out of your league, way or your comfort zone. You have to understand, if I spoke French at that point to work at the highest level, they switched to German. If I could speak German with them, they switch to Italian. These are guys who speak multiple languages. They're all there to teach you, but also all there to get you. You can't mess up.

It is a hazing system that obviously — hopefully don't exist anymore. It's not the best way of getting the most out of you. But it's also we're in this school. If you're 18 and the oldest dude you know is 22, he's the old guy on the block. What do you think he's going to do? He's going to mess with you? Because that's his level of power. He gets messed with old guy that is 27 and he gets messed with a really old guy that is 31. You know what I mean? That's what it is. I'm not saying that that's obviously not healthy and something that —

I learned a lot, what to do and also what not to do. These guys were the best at their craft, the meanest at their craft. They were the best at the craft. I was just like, “All right. Let me get this. Let me get the best.” They will match us when I knew that, “Oh, my God. These guys know nothing about the world.” I remember, I was going to Paris with a chef, because now I spoke English and French. They started to see advantages with bringing this black kid around, because we got American customers. Then one of the kids, we were 21, 22. I really adored Manuel, like this really good cook. He said, “Hey, do you want to be in Paris tomorrow?” I said, “Yeah. I'm going with chef.” “Hey, can you just get me your Hard Rock Cafe hat?” It was the first time I had advantage.

I was like, you are this ballerina in cooking. You are a master. 22 and a master. What do you mean you want a Hard Rock Café hat? I felt at that moment that I've actually seen the world and they've been nowhere. It was the first time. I said, “Absolutely not. Fuck you. Not going

there.” First of all, we don't get an hour to take off to go into the city. For him, Paris was equivalent of going to the Hard Rock Café, because he's seen it. I'm like, we're cooking over this over here. We don't have an hour off to figure this shit out. I was like, “Absolutely not.” That was the first time where I felt like, “Whoa. I have an advantage of these guys? These guys know nothing outside cooking.” That was a big V. That was a big W for me.

[00:18:55] LW: You obviously had a string of different jobs. If I had to summarize just from what I've researched, the takeaway from all of those jobs in the culinary world would be don't be lazy, don't be complacent, don't take shortcuts. In other words, you have to be excellent. You have to work hard and you have to show up and all of those things, especially as the black chef. Is that accurate?

[00:19:19] MS: I mean, it's interesting you look at it from that view.

[00:19:22] LW: Oversimplifying it.

[00:19:23] MS: No. I just look at it, I'm in love. I love the craft. I didn't know how many hours I work. I still don't know how many hours I work. I'm in love. I'm deeply fundamentally in love with the craft.

[00:19:36] LW: I feel like, you also can't be lazy. In order to work your way up to an executive chef, you have to be damn near perfect.

[00:19:46] MS: Yeah. I mean, that's how you look at it. I didn't look at it like that. I felt like I found my groove. I think when you find your groove, like I know Serena worked hourly harder than most people. She just doesn't perform like that. I know Naomi works hard now. The hours of course, what you put into it. I was also deeply – I was going places. At the same time, you have to understand, my buddies were not going places. I mean, that's the time, you know that when you're 18, 19, 21. One buddy goes to jail. One buddy goes left. One buddy does really well.

You come back home and Jonathan is now dating Ava. They used to date Anders. You know what I mean? You look at your village and there's really no progress, or different progress. I was like, these are my choices. Should I be here in Gberg and be in that, or she live in Leon, Paris, New York, Singapore? I mean, I think the latter. Do you know what I mean? It's not monetary, but it is definitely experiential.

I've never thought about the amount of hours, because when you let – I don't know how many hours Nas crafted *Illmatic*. I'm sure he worked really, really, really hard on it, because when he came out with it, it was perfection. Because we've been sitting on that all – experiencing that all his life. At the same time, when I get a three-star review, I'm 23 and people are like, "How can you do that?" Because I've been sitting on that all my life.

[00:21:36] LW: There was that moment in France with George Blom, where you were basically told that thinking about starting your own restaurant is ridiculous, because no one is ambitious as you, has ever been able to do something like that. You could have listened to that. You're talking to a Michelin star chef, one of your idols at the time, but you decided to take the leap of faith. What made you do that?

[00:22:03] MS: I didn't know. My parents guided me. I didn't fly home. I took the train home. That's 40 hours of a train ride. It gives you a lot of time to think. Probably, 20 of those hours, maybe I was done. 20 of those, I was like, "Screw it. I'm going to go again." It's not just a linear path. What black journey of excellence is a linear path? None. There lies the beauty, culture.

I spoke to my dad and come home. He's like, "Just come home." He's like, "Do anyone in New York?" As a matter of fact, I do. You should go to New York. I said, "What? What do you mean New York?" You just picked a – there was a black mayor in New York City. That means that there will be space for a black chef. Now if you know anyone, go and get it. I remember when I was talking to my friend, Peter. He's like, "Do you want to come and work with us? Marcus, you have experience in some of the best restaurants" I was like, "Yes. Done. Bet." Two weeks later, I was on the plane, there.

[00:23:08] LW: You eventually become the executive chef at Aquavit. You're the youngest chef to get a three-star review. When that brought all of that new attention, did you feel differently inside? Or were you the same person that you've always been the entire time, but now you're just being recognized for your contribution to that culinary scene?

[00:23:30] MS: I think I felt mixed emotions. A, I didn't know what that meant. It's not like I read New York Times at that point. I was going to work. Maybe I picked up the Daily News on the side corner of Hell's Kitchen. You know what I mean? You're dealing in a world that's above the 23-year-old's fundamental — that's been in America for nine months. I felt we could improve. I'm busy. I felt slightly embarrassed a year later, because I knew there was a lot of black chefs that has worked hard and deserved all the accolades.

All of a sudden, with one scoop, I became one of the most recognized black chef in the country, in the world. That's a lot for someone who's 23. That was at that point, Patrick Clark was amazing. He passed away a couple years later, but amazing mentor an incredible chef. He guided me through that. I felt embarrassed, because he was 15 years older than me and clearly laid a path for me. People like Leah Chase and Edna Lewis, and so on. You got to again, you got to acknowledge your privilege.

[00:24:40] LW: How much of it was a political process, though? Or why do you think you were rewarded with that? What made you different from everyone else?

[00:24:48] MS: Fine dining is like classical music. It is not everyone's taste, but it operates on an extremely high level. Of course, working in a Swedish restaurant, gave you a European note sets, where a lot of black chefs didn't have, because very often, they came from the south, so they kept different narratives. The notes that I was operating from was something that the critic could understand. To a certain point, I still don't think they understand Sweden, because Sweden was also not at that point, part of the vocabulary of great countries of food.

We're all going to be given a toolbox of negatives and positives. Now it's, "Hey, you got 30 minutes. Figure this out." You know what I mean? Navigate yourself through this and be in a

Midtown, the high-end restaurant. I can also line up 10 items that would have been a disadvantage. When you are in Midtown, there's no one giving you that second love like, "Oh, this is a high-end expensive restaurant. The food should be better." I can make a case for the positive, but I can also equally make a case for the negative, because we were a very expensive restaurant.

When you tread on that high-end level, you better execute. There is no give. That's what I'm saying. It's like classical music. It's like jazz at the highest level. This is not rhythmically, where you can like, "Oh, we can play it over." No.

[00:26:14] LW: We're not really going into all of the failures as well, because eventually, 11 happen and you guys had to move out of that place. You opened up another couple of locations, but then it didn't work out. You eventually opened your own place, Mercado 55, which you described as your biggest professional failure. What was the takeaway from that?

[00:26:38] MS: When you get distance to it, I realized that Rooster wouldn't have been Rooster without Mercado. I had to go on that journey. I have to go on that journey of connect. There was a lot going on. I just met my family in Ethiopia at that time. I wanted to stretch and flex. I felt like African food, just to feel. I just finished a book about African food and how it links to American experience. There was no vocabulary on the other side to receive that.

I think, everything went well. My mistake was the guys I did it were club guys. That's no one else's fault than myself. That's not even their fault. They were clear who they were. These were guys I grew up with, basically. They were club guys. I wanted to do and I thought I could overcome that, but that wasn't on me. That's not even on them. I'm not even mad at them. That was my bad. Those are all the different things that happens when you got to put a restaurant together, you got to get a location. We had that. There's got to be a vibe and art. We had that. Got to build a kitchen. We did that. It just shouldn't be messed, that beautiful restaurant with club guys.

[00:27:45] LW: You were also in a club location to the meatpacking district. Like you mentioned, people don't come to that place to have the Kumbaya experience at an African restaurant.

[00:27:57] MS: No. It was very clear when you take a step back. When you are an artist, when you are creative, you don't step back. You go with everything. That's part of being an artist. I am very grateful for that experience, because that also made Rooster so delicious. That was the tipping point for Rooster. I mean, Rooster for me is a collective of so many Jezebels bowls of B. Smith, of Edna Lewis, of Shark Bar, Mecca, of Leah Chase. All those experiences, what happens in black restaurant, we hide out, we have political conversation.

The beauty of our blackness is that it looks like church. The rich person and the poor person is together. That's what Rooster is. That wouldn't have happened, unless I went through that. You know what I mean? We go through all those experiences.

[00:28:43] LW: Just before Rooster, and this really blew my mind when I came across this. You had this other very intense experience, where you had to basically buy the rights to your own name. Can you tell that story really quickly?

[00:28:59] MS: I think of black people, many black people have gone through those experiences in various ways. Whether it's a moment of catch 22. You feel really jammed, where part of it is yourself to blame. Part of it is that you were not educated about how the world has moved. Part of it is a real stigma from not having generational wealth. If you grew up with a family that were lawyers, first thing that we think about, who owns the name?

When you grew up with things like, even my parents, although they were middle-class, upper middle class, IP was not part of my father's journey. He had no clue. At the end of the day, he was a fishing boy, that made good in school. He didn't know the IP structure. I couldn't ask him about that. I do think that it was a hard-fought lesson. I was coming up reading the stories of Pillay and Marvin, black stories of our heroes. There was always a level of complexity and being broke and being great and doubt and confidence. So now what happened to me?

[00:30:17] LW: Basically, for the listener who doesn't know, your partner in Aquavit was basically saying that because you got awarded with the three-stars and I think you won three James Beard awards, that your name was intellectual property they partially owned.

[00:30:33] MS: I worked so hard on just plowing through that. I navigate — we both moved on. He's okay. I'm okay. I learned a lot. I try to choose to look at the positive. I learned how to become a young chef in New York. Because of him, I was getting a shot. I learned how to manage through that situation. It's not a boxing field, where you want to crush each other. It's really about how do you move forward in a way that it behooves you in the best place right here, right now.

[00:31:07] LW: That led to Red Rooster, which is your love letter to Harlem.

[00:31:11] MS: Yeah. For me, it's like, you can't — No one is interested to hear about a successful chef complaining about how hard it was. It was tough. It was very tough. I was also brought up to handle tough situations. Sometimes I did it very well. Sometimes I did it poorly. For me, it's a human side. Success has two sides. It has jealousy and has success. You're going to lose friends and family members and you're going to gain other people and it's not linear. I lost a lot of friends, either through the journey, or through other ways, and it's difficult.

You also gain amazing amount of people. It's just life. It's very tough. The world is very tough. I thought, I slept the last endless nights and I'm not going back there. I'm not. I just have this wall up. I'm not going back there. I'm not going to blame him. I need to blame myself. I just move forward.

[00:32:19] LW: You've emerged as an activist. You're an activist chef. Especially since the pandemic happened, you guys have been on the forefront, along with the World Central Kitchen. You fed hundreds of thousands of people through your locations. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[00:32:36] MS: I mean, the blessings of living in Harlem is that you see America. When I walk my eight blocks from the restaurant and home, I walk through, I pass by several methadone centers, a couple of jails. I see people when exactly a year ago, how quickly it became a chaotic community. As somebody who employs 200 people and seats 5,000 people a week, you can't stand by and just watch that and don't do anything. You have to participate. So does Silvia, so does Melba, so does Debbie, so does Thelma. You know what I mean? We're a community, so there's that. We all do it in different ways.

This is real. When I call the police commissioner, why the dropping off all the Rikers Island's population in Harlem? It's not the population fault from Harlem. Those are institutional racism. They're not even from Harlem, some of them. Why would we just say that they're from Harlem if they're not? When all the homeless people get dumped into 125th and the 6th and they call the city on that? They're like, "No, we don't." "Yes, you do. I'm right here right now."

What do you think that does to a COVID population that don't have masks or anything? What do you think that happens to auntie just going and picking up her food? COVID is now pre-pushed back into our community on a different way than other communities. Who took that decision, that 125th and 6th should be the dumping ground for everything? Clearly, not somebody who lived in Harlem. When you see that, this is not something I made up. This is happening. Eventually, we unpacked it and explained it. I said, "Hey, I'm going to give you a week to unpack this and correct this. Otherwise, I'm going to put you on blast." And it eventually changed.

The institutional racism that happens in our communities is deep, is deep tissue. I live here and I see it. It's not just what you see in the surface, or the lines to the community kitchen longer. They are, because there's also more chaos dumped into our communities, and what's going to happen to that. It's not just me. It's JJ. It's people who are — Melba. The beauty about food is we work in the communities. We're there, right there. We speak to the line cook and we speak to the highest CEO.

[00:34:55] LW: What do you foresee in terms of how this whole thing is changing the landscape, the culinary landscape in New York and in the world?

[00:35:03] MS: What I do know is people of color, we're very strong. You can have an argument that we constantly been in different types of pandemics, and in many ways. If we can stay healthy, this might be the biggest reset of the history. If we navigate through it, the reset can help our communities and entrepreneurs to level up. It won't be one way. It won't be easy, but there is a reset opportunity here.

Through social media, through connectivity, through the social justice conversation that happened basically about a year ago. That is always how our journey happens. It's not one thing. It's COVID. Then it's America's having this big dialogue, and then you have the election. That is very American to me. All three things, high-level, fire, at the same time. This push and pull between haves and don't have. You can argue that we've done many things great in America, but we failed truly, with how we engage with one another, in terms of the color of our skin. Now we have an opportunity to reset. Food can be a major part of connecting with one another.

[00:36:15] LW: Two, other things emerged during this pandemic. You've released a book called *The Rise: Black Cooks and the Soul of American Food*, which highlights the black cooking diaspora. You launched a podcast called This Moment.

[00:36:31] MS: Yeah. I mean, Jason and I are – Jason Diakité, the rapper that happens to be American, black and white, but grew up in Sweden, but highly deep tissues involved in America. Went back and forth between America, the states and Sweden. Yes, it's very unique perspective. Also being a rapper, he writes all these lyrics and everything. He is in the communities of the community. We share a lot. For me, it was, as a creative person, what I was afraid the most was what I want to do with my creativity. I can't just sit here.

Me going to work at World Center Kitchen and hand out food was equally helpful to me, as it was to the people we gave the food. Me and Jason setting up this moment, and having my son

and his daughter crying in the back, it was a way for us to build. As creatives, we needed that. It might be like a post-traumatic growth challenge that we dealt with. We were doing it and I needed to finish my book. People ask, "Did you time the book to these conversations? What happened there?" I said, "Are you crazy? This book took four years to create. Four years." The only reason why it came out was because I was delayed two years with it.

Because of the world stopped, I actually had a chance to finish it. I'm very grateful to all the contributors of *The Rise*. This is just the beginning, what's going to come out of *The Rise*. We're going to build. We now built the fund called Black Business Matters fund. We do local fundraising for black entrepreneurs, not just restaurants, because it impacts our community very differently. 41% of black businesses, because of COVID are gone. Not coming back. Things like that. These are things that we work on. This moment has been almost like, going to see a psychiatrist in a way. It's been me and Jason just pointing out and nobody's let some great people, like Nicoletta Jones, Kimberly Johnson, middle of the summer, Angela Rye. Also adding on other isms, like Sophia Chang, Al Gore talking about environment. Keeping this very energetic, high and low conversation about issues in our communities.

[00:38:47] LW: Also, it's a good thing that the book was delayed, because you got to add in some commentary about George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. I guarantee you, there's no cookbooks that are mentioning any of those really relevant topics. I was really excited to see that in the introduction of the cookbook.

[00:39:10] MS: Yeah. It's really sad that we have to go there and do that. It is. We got that in and I thank the publisher to stop everything, so I can rewrite that. It's really, really sad. The sad thing is that we know that those are not the last stories. These stories are amazing, but very American and it's so sad, because we know it's not the last stories.

[00:39:35] LW: Well, the other thing is I don't know if you follow the Equal Justice Initiative, Bryan Stevenson's group down in Alabama. On their social media, every day, they have this calendar, where they post some historical event that happened, that highlights the spread of white supremacy. For instance, yesterday, this is March 4th, they posted, on this day, in 1921, a

white lynch mob hunting a black man saw a different black man walking down a road and killed him instead. They claim mistaken identity, but they faced no punishment.

They say that, "We post these every day to overcome — because to overcome racial inequality, we must confront our history." I think, I'm in the meditation space, so I talk about it in my space. You're in the culinary space. We all have to address it. We have to talk about it. We have to put it in uncomfortable places, because the people who are trying to avoid it, they need to be confronted with that in order for us to really heal as a nation. That's how, I think, you're approaching that, which I was really inspired to see.

[00:40:40] MS: I thank you for acknowledging *The Rise* and the book and everything that we do. It's something that has been the biggest privilege of my life creatively to work on and to highlight and broadcast black stories in the culinary space, is what I devoted my life to. I'm slow. *The Soul of a New Cuisine* came out in 2006, so 15 years later. Definitely, I haven't done books between that, but it was a 15-year gap between those types of books. 15 years ago, nobody got it. There was no social media on that level. It's like, what's the link? Now people got it. It's been very helpful and refreshing to be able to have those conversations. We all know that we're not at the finish line. We're only at the beginning.

[00:41:23] LW: Right. I would say for anyone looking to dive into *The Rise*, I haven't listened to every single episode, but one of the episodes that I connected with really deeply was the Darryl McDaniels, who's the DMC of Run DMC. Particularly, because the crazy story he told about learning, he was adopted as an adult after he had had all this access, and he was thinking about committing suicide and how you guys really bonded over that, over those experiences, because you didn't meet your birth family until you were in your 30s. That just brought a lot of revelations into both of your lives. I would say start there, and then work from there.

[00:42:01] MS: Absolutely. Thank you. I appreciate you. Thank you so much for having me. Hopefully, next time –

[00:42:06] LW: Absolutely.

[00:42:06] MS: - we can have dinner together, or meditate together.

[00:42:10] LW: Thanks, brother. Take care, man. Appreciate you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:42:13] LW: Thank you for listening to my interview with Chef Marcus Samuelsson. Make sure you check out his new podcast, which is called This Moment, as well as his latest cookbook, which is called *The Rise*. I found his memoir, *Yes, Chef*, to be very inspiring as well. You can follow Marcus on Instagram @MarcusCooks.

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Thanks again for listening and for sharing this episode with your friends and your followers. I'll see you back here next week with another amazing story from the end of the tunnel. In the

meantime, keep trusting your intuition. Keep following your heart. Keep taking those leaps of faith and I'm sending you lots of peace and love. Have a blessed day.

[END]