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APR/MAY/JUNE 2015

The King of Cuisine

From inventive restaurants and TV shows to high-quality catering and cookware, chef Mark McEwan has built a sweeping culinary empire. Up next: grocery stores.

Portraits By Sheila Barabad Sarmiento | By Matt Alderton

The term "celebrity chef" doesn't do Mark McEwan justice. Although he's been head judge on *Top Chef* Canada and the star of his own reality TV show, The Heat, on Food Network Canada, he's more than a white coat and a famous name. He's a culinary workhorse. As chef and owner of the McEwan Group, his Toronto-based food empire, he manages four restaurants, a catering company, and a growing family of specialty food stores. And even though he looks like a chef, he typically behaves like a CEO—and some days like a general.

"A dinner service at one of my restaurants is like orchestrated combat, only nobody dies," says McEwan, 57, whose Toronto restaurants include ONE, North 44, Bymark, and Fabbrica. "It gets wild. Really wild."

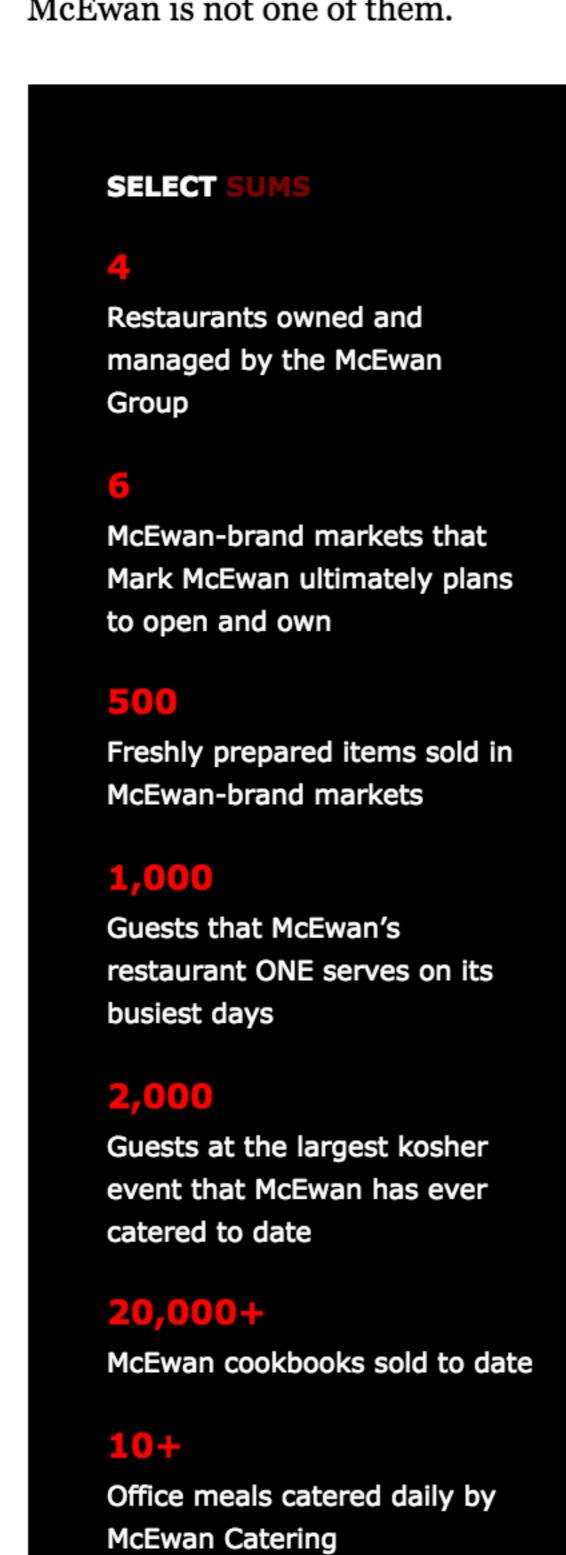
McEwan didn't go to business school, but lessons learned from hundreds of harried dinner services have yielded enough knowledge to earn him a dozen MBAs. "On a great day at ONE, we will serve 800-1,000 people, each of whom has two courses and two drinks," McEwan says. "It's a crazy, churning monster. When it operates

smoothly without any problems, it's a thing of beauty. How can you not learn from something like that?"

The better question is: how can you not learn from someone like him? Calm, collected, and coordinated, he's as cool as can be—even in the hottest of kitchens. Whether he's planning a menu or a new business venture, managing people or a P&L, or grilling a fish or a Top Chef Canada contestant, he always follows the same formula: passion plus precision equals perfection.

Stirring the Pot

Many chefs have been compelled into culinary careers by their earliest and fondest food memories. McEwan is not one of them.



"Growing up, my grandmothers would put on great tables, so we were used to big family meals," says the Buffalo, New York, native who grew up visiting relatives in rural Ontario. "But when it came to going to restaurants, we really didn't do that. We were a family of four kids, so there was never a lot of extra money for that sort of thing."

Although he used to watch Julia Child and Graham Kerr on television with his mother, McEwan didn't enter his first kitchen until he was 16 years old. "I took a job as a dishwasher at Mindy's Wine Cellar in Amherst, New York," he recalls. "[The owner] liked what I did in the dish room, so he threw me into the kitchen one day and said, 'I need a cook.' That was my first experience, and it was a really good one."

McEwan moved to Canada shortly thereafter and continued to work in restaurants while he finished high school. When he graduated in 1976, he planned to enroll in hotel school, but first he wanted to explore food. So he trolled Toronto in search of a yearlong apprenticeship, which he finally found at the Regal Constellation Hotel. "I never did go to hotel school," McEwan says. "When you realize you have a flair for something —an innate understanding and ability with it—it becomes ingrained in you. So, once I hit the ground running, I never stopped."

McEwan began at the bottom but quickly rose to the top. In 1982, he was offered a position as executive chef at Toronto's Sutton Place Hotel. He was only 25 years old. "I was the youngest executive chef of a [four-star] hotel in the country," McEwan says. "All my contemporaries were 45-50 and of German, French, or Swiss origin. It was a huge deal in the city at that time. A lot of people said, 'He's too young,' 'How dare he get that job,' and, 'He's not going to make it.' But I put my

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OF MARK MCEWAN

fine-dining restaurant

Bymark

head down and worked my ass off, and at the end of the day, it worked out really, really well."

So well, in fact, that in 1990, at age 33, McEwan successfully opened his first restaurant, North 44. "It was a huge gamble for me," he says. "It just about killed me because I spent a ton of money to build it more than I actually had—and made a lot of classic mistakes. But I buckled down, cashed in some of my RSPs, and I made it work. Failure was not an option."

Recipe for Success

As McEwan sees it, the difference between him and other restaurateurs is commitment. "I've worked very, very hard," he says. "For the first 20 years of my career, I honestly worked 16-hour days, six days a week. That's the difference, I think. You have to be constantly focused and always replenishing your energy. You can't stop. If you do, your whole business starts to stagnate. My greatest challenge, then, is to stay relevant and stay fresh."

Reading keeps him fresh—"I tear more pages out of magazines than anyone I know," he says—but mostly it's perpetual forward motion. He moves constantly from one idea to the next. First, it was catering. "We started North 44 Caters because we had to," McEwan says. "We opened North 44 in the middle of a recession, and to increase your sales, you had to augment your business. Catering seemed like an obvious choice."

His catering business subsequently spawned his television career when he had the idea to pitch a reality TV show capturing catering antics at his clients' events. The Heat debuted in 2006 and ran for three seasons on Food Network Canada, after which McEwan was invited to be head judge on Top Chef Canada, which debuted in 2011 and concluded its fourth season in 2014.

"It's sort of what I do all the time in my business anyway, just When you think about

it, a chef makes an ideal grocer. For one, McEwan can minimize waste by using food from his markets in his restaurants, and vice versa. And his intimate food knowledge means he's ideally positioned to give his customers better products.

"The conversation about food never stops with my clients; if you put something on their plate, they want to know where it comes from," McEwan says. "Our story—natural, farm-to-table, chefdriven food—fits perfectly into their world."

Retail ended up requiring more work and more money than he'd ever anticipated, McEwan admits, but the result is everything he hoped for and more. "It started out as the worst thing I ever did," he says, "and will probably turn out to be the best thing I ever did."

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