

FOOD NETWORK

THE COMEBACK

Despite his ups and downs in the industry, Rustic Canyon chef Jeremy Fox, who first made headlines at Ubuntu, is at the top of his game with his debut cookbook, a new restaurant and another on the way.

BY HOWIE KAHN PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUSTIN CHUNG



FARM FRESH
Los Angeles-based chef Jeremy Fox, whose new cookbook, *On Vegetables*, and restaurant, Tallula's, will launch this spring, photographed at a Santa Monica farmers' market.

JEREMY FOX, the chef of Rustic Canyon in Santa Monica, California, took seven years to complete his first cookbook, *On Vegetables*, out this month. Sitting in the restaurant's dining room, Fox explains that he signed the contract with his publisher, Phaidon, in 2010, just after leaving Napa's Ubuntu, where he made his name. Two years earlier, the *New York Times* had called Ubuntu, with its vegetarian tasting menu and adjacent yoga studio, one of the best new restaurants in America; *Food & Wine* named Fox one of its best new chefs.

Despite the acclaim, the restaurant was neither economically nor personally sustainable for Fox. He had to fill nearly 100 seats nightly in a rural area with avant-garde offerings like vadouvan butter-basted cauliflower and peas with white chocolate in a pea shell stock. "We were hemorrhaging money," Fox says. "And *ubuntu* means 'humanity toward others' in Zulu—or 'I am because you are.' It's not that I don't believe those things, because I do, but it all amounted to a confusing message for me. I'm not a vegetarian. I don't practice yoga. I felt like I had to play a character there. It made me totally crazy."

While working 100-hour weeks at Ubuntu, Fox, now 40, began taking medication to cope with the pressure. "I was trying to show everybody I was the best chef in the world," he says, shaking his head. Fox says he took sedatives to sleep, stimulants for focus and antidepressants to lift his mood. When he left Ubuntu in 2010, he sought positions at restaurants where the atmosphere seemed more manageable. Daniel Patterson brought Fox on to launch Plum, a progressive bistro in Oakland, but Fox left before it opened. Soon after, Tyler Florence hired Fox as the creative director of his Napa rotisserie-chicken restaurant, Rotisserie & Wine. "I was trying to go cold turkey and quit all the pills," Fox says. "I had no ideas, no motivation. I was just worthless." His work in the kitchen suffered. His book couldn't get off the ground.

Depressed, broke and recently divorced from Ubuntu pastry chef Deanie Hickox, in 2011, Fox considered moving back to Atlanta, where he had spent his teenage years. Fox's parents divorced when he was 1, and he'd lived in Georgia with his mom for most of high school. Fox explains that she traveled a lot for work, selling cemetery plots across the South. Often left alone at mealtime, Fox developed an affinity for the kitchen and began cooking for himself. "I started playing with marinades," he recalls, peeking out from beneath the brim of his >



SPINNING PLATES

Clockwise from far left: Dishes from Fox's new book, including daikon braised in orange juice; strawberry pavlova; yogurt and black pepper; carrot juice cavatelli; lima bean and sorrel cacio e pepe; corn polenta and strawberry sofrito; and beets and berries.

left to sit overnight before serving. Fox also makes lima beans elegant, simmering them for 40 minutes along with garlic and rosemary folded into a cheesecloth sachet.

During a recent dinner at Rustic Canyon, Fox topped a bowl of golden polenta with two quenelles, one of strawberry sofrito and the other of freshly made ricotta. Later in the meal, Fox's lima beans came dressed like cacio e pepe, but the dish went a few steps further, making use of the bean broth and employing both garlic confit purée and a cured egg yolk.

Reflecting on these recipes and Fox's overall talent, Phaidon publisher Emilia Terragni says, "I knew the book would be special. And Jeremy went through a lot, so I wanted to support him even when our accountants were saying, 'The book isn't going to happen; we should get the advance back.'"

OHIO AGAINST THE WORLD baseball cap (Fox was born in Cleveland). "I learned that I liked the process," he continues, "but I had no idea what I was doing. I'd see a commercial for the TGI Fridays Jack Daniel's menu, and then I'd try and marinate a piece of salmon in whiskey for six hours."

Culinary school at Johnson & Wales University in Charleston, South Carolina, followed, and Fox says he would have graduated if not for being physically assaulted on the morning of his final exams. "I missed my final in advanced baking and pastry because I was carjacked," says Fox. At that point, he decided his education was complete and took a job cooking at Mumbo Jumbo in Atlanta before moving to San Francisco in 2001, Aspen in 2002 and then back to Northern California in 2003 to work for David Kinch at Manresa, in Los Gatos.

After nearly a decade of living in Northern California and dedicating much of that time to elevating vegetable cookery, Fox decided against moving back to Atlanta. He decamped to Los Angeles in September 2011 instead. Josh Loeb, co-owner of Rustic Canyon with his wife, Zoe Nathan, recalls meeting Fox just before his move. "Jeremy seemed

reclusive at the time," Loeb says. "But a year later, we ran into him at the farmers' market, and he was a lot more confident and happy."

Fox had started psychotherapy and stopped taking medication for good. In late 2012, he learned there was a vacancy at Rustic Canyon. "We weren't looking for a name chef," Loeb says. "We wanted to commit to thoughtful but unpretentious and soulful food." Fox told Loeb and Nathan he'd been looking to go in that direction too, and he took over the Rustic Canyon kitchen in 2013.

"We've always wanted Rustic to be the best neighborhood restaurant in America," says Loeb. It's an aim Fox has embraced. "I like places like Zuni Café or Chez Panisse," he says, "where you can look at the food and not be able to tell what year it is."

In his tenure at Rustic Canyon, Fox has created a timeless menu. "Even the simplest-seeming dishes have layers of creativity and technique that most people would never think of," says Loeb.

On Vegetables is a 320-page illustration of that idea. Strawberries are used for a sofrito that takes six hours to cook, requires a meticulous process for washing and drying the fruit and is even better if

"WE'RE IN THE
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—JEREMY FOX

Fox says once he finally had the bandwidth to write the book in 2014 and 2015 (he and his second wife, Rachael, were expecting their first child at the time, a daughter named Birdie), the process went quickly, and he actually finished earlier than expected. "My editor told me I was the only person besides Jimmy Carter to ever turn in a manuscript early," Fox says.

In addition to completing *On Vegetables*, Fox was made partner at Rustic Canyon last year. Now he, Loeb and Nathan have two new restaurants in the works. Tallula's, which focuses on Mexican cuisine, will open in Santa Monica in May with Mario Alberto as executive chef. "It'll be the same principles as Rustic Canyon, food and technique with integrity," says Fox, spreading out a family-style serving of smoky, earthy lamb barbacoa with shaved vegetables and charred tomatoes, a preview of Tallula's menu.

"We're also in the process of building my dream restaurant," says Fox, citing that until now, he's always come into established kitchens and has never built one from the ground up to his exact specifications. Loeb says that project, currently unnamed, will open in late 2018 or early 2019. Fox smiles at the possibilities. "Being happy is a foreign concept to me," he says. "I never expected it, but here it is: I made a book that I love, I love the food that we do. It's all real. No smoke and mirrors." ●