THE STAR

OPINION

Food is celebrity chef Akira Back's second passion

By SHINAN GOVANI Star Columnist
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"As long as they get me a ski pass, and a place to stay, I will do it for free."

So Akira Back, the snowboarder-turned-world-renowned-chef with the comic book-sounding name, was telling me at his eponymous Toronto restaurant, when the subject of opening a place in Whistler, B.C., came up. I chuckled at the comment, which prompted an I'm-not-kidding look from the man.

Akira Back inside the restaurant named after him at Toronto's Bisha Hotel.

"Write that down," he instructed, a snatch of mischief in his eyes.

Just back from opening his newest restaurant in Hanoi, Vietnam — the latest in his armada of eateries ranging from Dubai to Delhi to Singapore to his original name-making resto Yellowtail in Las Vegas — Back is upfront about his first true love: winter sporting.

Ennobled by a teenagehood spent in Aspen, Colo. — when his family had the bright idea of moving from Korea to, literally, the whitest place in America — the Michelin-starred fellow is now equally content kickin it in some fresh powder as he is experimenting with "yuzu beurre blanc."

From shredding the slopes of Colorado to shaving a whole tuna like a samurai — that might be yet another way of framing his storybook bio.

Chef Akira had taken a moment to sit down with me last Friday while in town for a special, one-night-only dinner to intro a slew of new menu items. His first restaurant in Canada, enabled by veteran scene-maker Charles Khabouth, opened late last year inside the downtown Bisha Hotel.

Turning into an attraction ever since for both epicureans and expense-account types alike — it is the kind of place you imagine Damian Lewis's character in *Billions* going gaga over — it got a profile boost this month when it earned a prestigious North America-wide prize from the Build 2018 Architecture Awards.

The award, specifically for design, singled out the look honed by homegrown Studio Munge, which errs here on the side of sleek-black and sexy, complete with full-length cove ceiling boasting a custom graphic.

"My mom," the 44-year-old cook says, pointing upwards to the design, inspired by his mother's paintings. Indeed, every one of his restaurants — there are new ones underway in San Francisco and Dallas — also feature flatware with designs from mom.

But back to the snowboarding.

Though Back did it competitively for a bit, the good son got into it "because I didn't have any friends" when he first moved to Aspen — and didn't speak English either.

"I noticed everybody was skipping school ... so I skipped school, too, to watch the other kids in the slopes." The first day he tried, he fell hard, but he didn't let it stop him.

"I wanted people to know me. I wanted to be seen," Back added plainly.

That seems to have worked out well enough, given that his name is on the front of eateries galore these days. As the hymn of dinner service started to jangle, I nudged Back to answer one last question about the similarities between snowboarding and his latter-found love of cooking.

"Snowboarding is a solo sport where I am myself against the mountain terrain. Working in the kitchen, there's so much more to it. Here, I'm a coach. It is choreography, team work."

The culinary panache, though — evident from items on his menu such as the so-called Brother From Another Mother (unagi, anago tempura, foie gras, ponzu aioli)? Not so different from doing a theatrical kick on a snowboard, no?

As if that wasn't a gluttonous enough joyride in Toronto over the last week, there was mor than enough to chew off at the two-night affair held at the long-standing, just-under-the-radar-enough Italian restaurant Tutti Matti on Adelaide St. W. I couldn't not tell you a little bit about that, too, right? Let's pivot.

In a town where the eating events never seem to end these days — and in a time when food is pop culture — this one was arguably the bacchanal of the season: a double-header with Dario Cecchini, visiting from Panzano in Chianti, Italy. Often referred to as the "most famous butcher in the world," the right-from-central-casting meat-man was lured to Canada via that roving supper club known as Charlie's Burgers, at the behest of its intrepi founder, Franco Stalteri.

And what a spectacle! Arms sprung in the air, an index finger shooting up at various intervals, his torso leaning in and out as he flanked his cleaver, Cecchini seemed at times like Leonard Bernstein orchestrating *Beethoven's Fifth*, and people looked on as if watching a live concert. From the bistecca to the porchetta, it was *bellissimo*.

Or, as catering king Sebastien Centner put it on Instagram afterwards: a "truly once-in-a-lifetime dinner party featuring 8 of the most unique and memorable wines I have ever tasted."

Just how mythic were those two nights? Some people who were not present have started claiming they were, Woodstock-style.

Dine on, people.