

# COOKING UP INSPIRATION



**Chef Hari Cameron dresses the plate for a wild mushroom dish at his restaurant, a(MUSE.) in Rehoboth Beach. STAFF PHOTO BY JOE LAMBERTI**

**By Jon Bleiweis**  
Staff Writer

**REHOBOTH BEACH** — After a morning of foraging in the woods one recent Thursday — something he says he tries to do between one and three times a week — Hari Cameron fills the trunk of his Honda SUV with sassafras roots and shopping bags filled with fresh picked greens, mushrooms and juniper berries.

Cameron, chef and owner of Restaurant a(MUSE.) in Rehoboth Beach, is happy with the haul.

While he's not sure what exactly he's going to do with them yet, his mind is at the drawing board. He may use lichen for a sauce. With the sassafras branches, he may smoke some seafood, then serve it skewered on the branches in a broth made from its roots. The assorted greens will help garnish plates or accent flavors.

"They're all lettuces," he said. "Some of them are more tart, some of them are more spicy, some of them are sweeter, but they're all beautiful and they're all local lettuces."

He said he'll use his haul as quickly as he can develop the right dish for them, usually a matter of days, if not that day.

"When we plate something, there's nothing on the plate that isn't edible," he said. "There's nothing that doesn't make any sense. It will make sense in the context of the dish."

It's a part of his culinary philosophy. When people ask Cameron what kind of food he cooks, he responds by saying it's food that has one foot grounded in American culinary tradition and the other foot in the here and now of what food can be in a modern context.

"It's interesting to me that there's all these things that you can eat that are just in the wild," he said. "Looking at it from a chef's point of view, it's like new flavors to plate with. There are things that are definitely regional delicacies but there are things people don't get to try everyday because they're not commonly eaten anymore."



**Chef Hair Cameron garnishes the final touches to his local foraged mushroom dish.** STAFF PHOTO BY JOE LAMBERTI



**Hari Cameron, chef and owner of a(MUSE.) restaurant in Rehoboth Beach, prepares his Heirloom Radicchio salad, containing cured Berkshire pork and various states of mustard.** STAFF PHOTO BY JOE LAMBERTI

Before he drives away, he snaps some photos of his bounty on his iPhone and uploads them to Instagram. Within seconds, the three photos have garnered a dozen likes, apiece. He started his Instagram account, HariCam, in August 2011 and has more than 1,250 followers. It's the part of his visual log that he shares with the world.

"It's crazy," he said. "In the power of seconds, you can just throw it out to the universe and it just comes back that quickly. Somebody already favorited it on Twitter as well."

In the last two years, he's been more active than ever in trying to preserve his ideas and create a greater social media presence. He laments over the idea that he took few photos while he worked at Nage for the eight years prior to opening his own restaurant. For years, many have asked him about whether he remembers certain dinners, and many times, he has had to say no.

He says he loves the visual impact food can have, and it's something he'll often think about when planning out a dish in his mind. He also said keeping track of his work is important, so he can reference back to it later on.

Now, Cameron will often take photos with his iPhone as he's cooking and put them online. That's on top of the numerous journals he keeps on him at a time, and the archives he has at his home.

"I can write down the dish I'm cooking, but it's a lot better to share an experience through the photos," he said. "I'll be five tickets deep and putting up a plate and hurry and put it on my phone. It's made it easy for me to share



**Hari Cameron takes a photo of a persimmon that he ultimately posted on his social media accounts.** STAFF PHOTO BY JON BLEIWEIS

my craft and the things I love."

But it's not just specific dishes and ideas that Cameron wants to preserve — one of his favorite things to do — it's the food, itself, as well.

This summer, for example, Cameron had 41 different types of local peppers grown in the area for him. He enjoyed them while they were fresh, of course, but also, as he described it, "I preserved the crap out of them."

You name it, he did it. He pickled, candied, canned, jarred, smoked and dried them, just to list a few. He took local heirloom fish peppers — a pepper from Africa that slaves used to eat, he says — and used it to make a fish pepper fish sauce.

Whatever Cameron likes is whatever is in season. When you eat in season,

everything tastes better, he says. With winter starting, that could be citrus and using up everything he has pickled and preserved all summer long, such as a beach plum jam.

"My farmers are only having things they wintered, so I have to make the best of product I'm getting from other areas," he said, adding he sources locally as much as possible.

But since it is winter, he also gets time to be adventurous in the kitchen. He was excited for the arrival of a 225-pound Berkshire pig, of which he will use every single part, from the head to the feet, to the blood and the bones. He'll use it into the spring, as the meat cures.

Cameron's foraging partner, Nathan Tanner, said he appreciates how the

chef respects his ingredients and always looks forward to the final result.

"He blows my mind," he said. "You know what it is though, it's (his) love of the food. He takes the time, finds good recipes, experiments with the stuff and then he'll spit out something you didn't expect. It's a lot of fun."

"Nature made it perfect," Cameron said. "I just have to make it edible."

### Becoming the muse

Born in Seaford, Cameron, 31, spent his childhood moving throughout the Northeast and mid-Atlantic, from Washington, D.C. to upstate New York, before his family settled in Georgetown around the time he entered middle school.

He spent his youth around food and restaurants; his mother was a server until he was in middle school. When he attended Sussex Central High School, he worked at Grotto Pizza, starting as a dishwasher and then becoming a host, and then a pizza cook.

He started at Delaware Technical Community College for a semester, studying business and communications, but at the time, he realized it wasn't for him.

So he went back to the restaurants. He worked various restaurant jobs in his teenage years, but it wasn't until a seasonal job at The Buttery in Lewes, when he was 19, when it all clicked for him.

Cameron served as a jack of all

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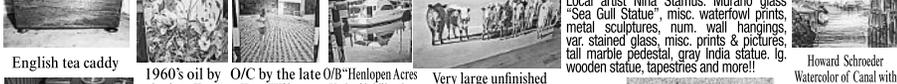
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Howard Schroeder Watercolor of Fishing Village/Harbor  
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## COVER STORY



Chef Hari Cameron, left, and garde manger Adam Scanlon, keep a fast pace in the kitchen of a(MUSE.) in Rehoboth Beach. STAFF PHOTO BY JOE LAMBERTI

## Cameron

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trades at the restaurant, saying he did anything he was needed to do. One night, there was no one to make salads, and he was asked to step in.

"I started doing it and it kind of made sense to me," he said.

He knew he didn't want to be a 50-year-old waiter. But that was when Cameron began to see himself as a chef or restaurant owner.

After his stint at The Buttery, Cameron moved to downtown Rehoboth Beach and started to get jobs as a cook. He was unskilled at the time, but he knew that was the direction he wanted to go.

For three years, he could be found at the Rams Head Tavern, starting at the salad station, but making his way across the kitchen, mastering all of the stations. Along the way, by learning how to read tickets and work on the line, he started to learn how a restaurant operates.

That was when he began buying books on cooking with his paychecks and asking questions to those he worked for and with, picking up as much knowledge as he could. He helped out at other restaurants as well, giving him two eight-hour shifts each day as his way to improve his craft.

"If you don't like what you're doing, or if you don't have the passion or don't care about it, then it will be very difficult to be good at it," he said.

In May 2004, a 22-year-old Cameron was asked to be a part of the opening staff of Nage as a cook. He knew it was an opportunity he couldn't pass up.

As Nage's business grew, Cameron grew with it. The restaurant was the perfect proving grounds for creativity, he says, as he had the opportunity to create specials each day. He got a sense of new parts of the business, such as catering, brunches and wine dinners.

The following year, Cameron, now Nage's sous chef, decided to go

back to school and started culinary school at The Restaurant School at Walnut Hill College in Philadelphia, where he graduated in 2007 at the top of his class. About a quarter of the way through — he was working at a restaurant in Chadds Ford, Pa., at the time — he realized he missed the beach so much that he decided to return to work at Nage full-time, while attending school more than two hours away for a year and a half.

"I worked eight days a week for that time," he said, adding he also helped open Nage DC during that time. "It was one of the most difficult things I've done, but also one of the most rewarding."

But the time came when he knew Nage's direction was going to be different than what he wanted to do.

He had a 10-year dream of opening his own restaurant before he turned 30. And that's what he did after eight years at Nage.

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# Cameron

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## The maestro in action

Cameron opened his restaurant, a(MUSE.) on Mother's Day 2012. The punctuation in the name easily provides a double meaning: "Amuse" coming from the French term, *amuse-bouche*, meaning a small bite to make the mouth happy, while "muse" deals with the inspiration of the artist.

For Cameron, that inspiration has many sources. It comes from the seasonal and regional products that come and go as calendar months change, the ocean, the land, nature, cutting-edge culinary techniques, smells, tastes and sounds, and, of course, fun.

The thought of eating alone in a restaurant is daunting and depressing to many, but not to Cameron. It's something he says he does on purpose, as it allows him to focus solely on the food.

"Oh man, that's my favorite. I love it," he said. "When you go out to eat with people, it's more of a celebration of life and a social gathering. But when you eat by yourself, you can just sit with your thoughts and you can really think about the food and just enjoy its flavor."

Some menu items are staples, such as the jar of pickled vegetables. Other items constantly evolve. But it's the tasting menu where Cameron said he's best able to showcase his philosophy.

Ordered on a daily basis and available in four, six and 11 courses, the server responds to the request for a tasting menu by asking three



Hari Cameron cuts off some juniper berries during a recent foraging trip. STAFF PHOTO BY JON BLEIWEIS

questions, dealing with allergies, likes and dislikes.

Some people ask for vegan meals. Others ask for a carnivore's dream come true. Others say, "Chef Hari, we'd like you to cook whatever you'd like."

It's the Cameron's way to be able to cook what will make the guest happy — his idea of true hospitality. He says he loves being able to compose an experience and have diners enjoy his food.

"When you do that, it's like eating an interactive show. You can do crescendos and decrescendos," he said. "A lot of times, people say 'Cook whatever you want' and taste something, and they're like 'Wow, I never would've ordered it but I loved it and it was delicious, and I'm glad I got to taste it.'"

## The 'big juggling act'

Cameron says he cooks for people. He cooks to entertain. He cooks to feed. He cooks because it's a trade and a job he likes to do. He cooks to make money. He cooks to express himself. He doesn't cook for recognition.

ognition.

But 2013 can't be called a sophomore slump for the second-year restaurateur, as he was given a trio of recognitions this year — Best Chef in Delaware, downstate, from Delaware Today magazine, Restaurateur of the Year by the Delaware Restaurant Association and a semi-finalist for the James Beard Foundation's Rising

Star Chef of the Year.

Despite the accolades, he says he can't go into cruise control now; in fact, he says there's never a time for that. When you become complacent, he says, that's when opportunities for things to go wrong arise.

But that won't stop him from enjoying the status quo.

"I think everybody is always trying to rush to

## ONLINE VIDEO

Watch video from Hari Cameron's foraging trip at

**delmarvanow.com**

the next moment instead of really enjoying the moments," he said. "One of the reasons I wanted to get a restaurant is when you own a restaurant, you learn every day. I'm enjoying the moments now of owning a restaurant."

But he continues to have other projects on the horizon. While he said he's not rushing to open a second restaurant or be on a cooking based reality television show such as Top Chef, he is starting to do consulting work to help build a commercial kitchen in a house in Lewes, and he has high hopes to start a food truck this summer in Dewey Beach, with the goal of using local products to bring healthy food to the people.

That's in addition to starting to execute some ideas he has for books — writing is something he

wants to get more involved with, in due time.

Being Hari Cameron is "a big juggling act," he says, and it requires plenty of changing hats.

He'll spend his mornings wearing a business owner hat, writing emails and finding out what the day's needs are, while seeing when product will arrive and balance the books.

Then he'll head to the restaurant to prepare for the night, chef hat in tow. That's on top of any side gigs he may have at the time, from catering a wedding, to teaching a class, to taking part in a community event as being a part of the non-profit Rehoboth Inspired Chefs Initiative.

"It's a constant of trying to be better. It never is rest," he said. "It always is 'OK, what's next. What can we try to perfect?'"

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