

MB

BUILDING BRIDGES THROUGH FOOD:
CHEF MICHAEL BLAKE
ON HOSPITALITY, CULTURE EXCHANGE, AND
CULINARY STORYTELLING

Michael Blake is chef partner at Sara's Kitchen, the acclaimed Egyptian and Lebanese restaurant in Saratoga Springs, New York. A graduate of Johnson & Wales University, Michael has built a distinguished culinary career across renowned restaurants in Boston, Portland, and New York, with expertise in seasonal cuisine, menu development, hospitality, and restaurant operations.

Before joining Sara's Kitchen, Michael held leadership roles at notable establishments including the Harvard Club, Noble Rot, Area Four, O Ya, and Yaddo, where he spent six years creating seasonal menus for resident artist.

At Sara's Kitchen, Michael works alongside founder and co-chef Sara Ali to present a deeply personal and authentic expression of Egyptian and Lebanese cuisine rooted in hospitality, craftsmanship, and tradition.

He also operates MB Culinary Concepts, providing private dining, culinary education, pop-up events, and restaurant consulting. His cooking philosophy is rooted in authenticity, seasonality, and the belief that food can connect people, strengthen communities, and support sustainable agriculture.

Following his participation in the U.S. Seafood Showcase in Cairo, Chef's Corner Magazine had the opportunity to interview Chef Michael Blake. In this interview, he shares his insights on working with U.S. seafood, culinary innovation, and the role of chefs in creating memorable dining experiences.



Interview Conducted by: Amal Bassaly

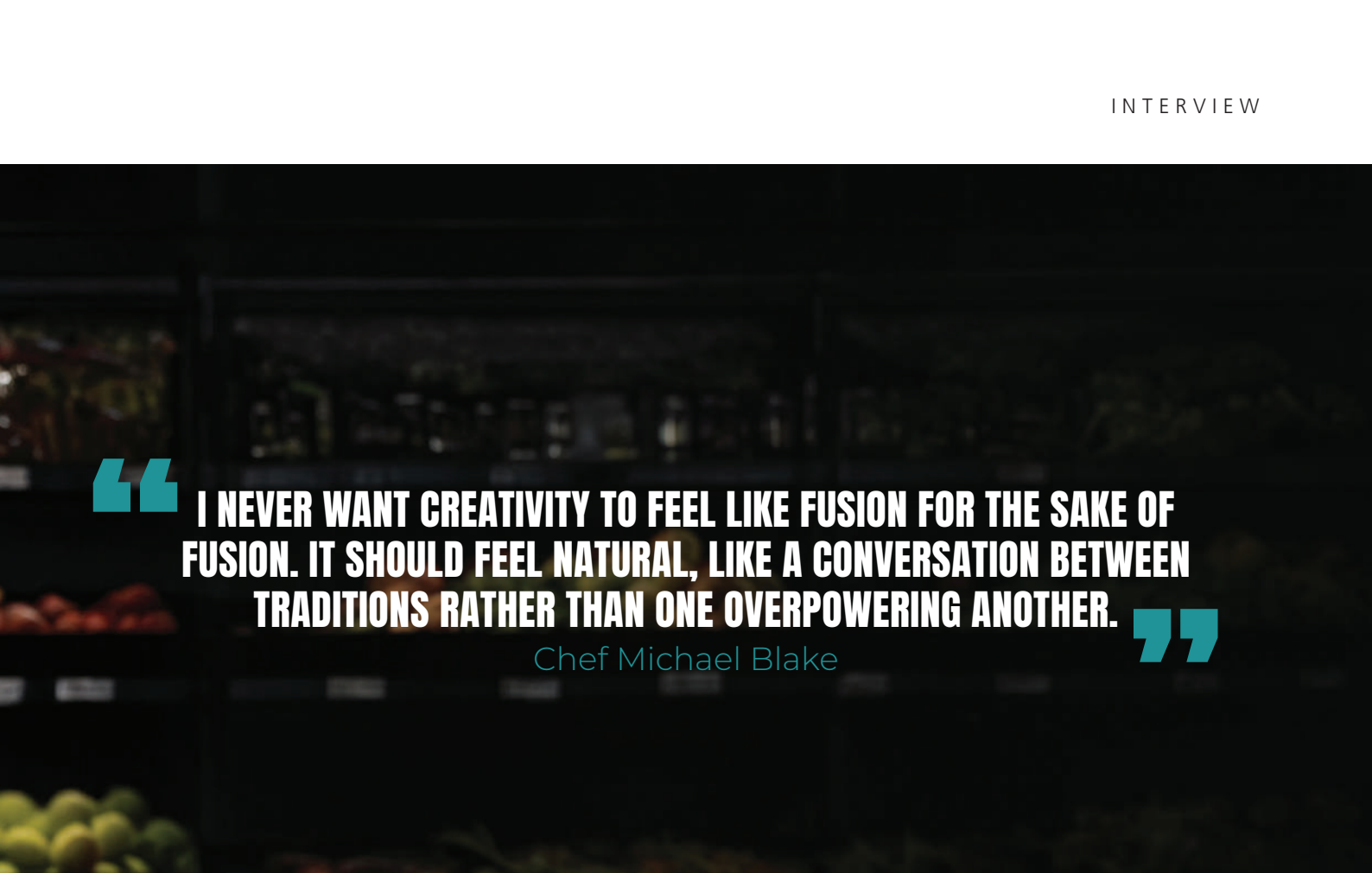


You've worked in a wide range of kitchens across the United States, from fine dining to casual concepts. Looking back, what experiences most shaped your identity as a chef?

One of the most influential aspects of my career has been experiencing the many different forms that hospitality can take. Early on, I worked in highly technique-driven fine dining kitchens, where precision, discipline, and attention to detail were paramount. Later, I found myself in more casual, community-focused restaurants, where creating an inviting atmosphere and fostering connections with guests were just as important as culinary refinement.

Each kitchen contributed something unique to my development. O Ya taught me the value of creativity and restraint, while Area Four showed me how to balance high-volume operations with a commitment to making everything in-house. My time at Yaddo revealed how deeply food can connect with art, culture, and personal expression.

These experiences helped shape my philosophy as a chef. Over time, I realized that I am most drawn to food that feels alive and personal—food grounded in strong technique, yet rich with warmth, memory, and a sense of identity.



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Chef Michael Blake

At Sara's Kitchen, you work with deeply rooted Egyptian and Lebanese culinary traditions. How do you balance authenticity with creativity?

For me, authenticity starts with respect. You have to understand why dishes exist before you try to reinterpret them. A lot of Middle Eastern food is tied to family, memory, and hospitality, so we take that seriously.

At the same time, creativity keeps food evolving. We might adjust presentation, refine technique, or introduce ideas from my background in fine dining and Japanese cooking, but the soul of the dish has to stay intact.

I never want creativity to feel like fusion for the sake of fusion. It should feel natural, like a conversation between traditions rather than one overpowering another.

What has collaborating with chef and founder Sara Ali taught you about Middle Eastern cuisine and hospitality?

Working alongside Sara has taught me that true hospitality is emotional before it is technical. In Egyptian culture, in particular, food is far more than nourishment—it is an expression of generosity, care, and connection. There is a genuine desire to ensure that every guest feels welcomed, valued, and completely at ease.

She has also deepened my understanding of the balance and complexity that define Middle Eastern cuisine. The interplay of acidity, fresh herbs, spices, smoke, and texture is often remarkably nuanced. While many dishes may appear simple at first glance, they reveal extraordinary depth and sophistication when you begin to understand the traditions and techniques behind them.

Beyond the culinary lessons, our collaboration has encouraged me to become a better listener and a more thoughtful chef. It has reinforced the importance of approaching both food and hospitality with curiosity, and an openness to learning from different perspectives.

Your cooking often reflects ideas of seasonality and cultural storytelling. What does storytelling through food mean to you personally?

Food carries memory better than almost anything else. A smell or flavor can instantly connect someone to a place, a person, or a moment in their life.

Storytelling through food means creating dishes that communicate something beyond flavor. Maybe it's a reflection of a season, a region, a migration story, or even a personal experience. I think restaurants become meaningful when people feel something emotional while they're eating.

At Sara's Kitchen, that might mean introducing someone to Egyptian food for the first time while also creating a feeling of familiarity and comfort.



You've said that food touches everything you care about, from ecology to literature to social justice. How do those values show up in your day-to-day work as a chef?

Food exists at the intersection of many interconnected systems—agriculture, labor, culture, economics, and sustainability. As chefs, the choices we make each day have an impact that extends far beyond the walls of the restaurant.

In practice, this can mean supporting responsible fisheries, reducing food waste, sourcing ingredients thoughtfully, and fostering a workplace culture where people feel respected, supported, and valued. It also requires a commitment to continuous learning and staying informed about the broader issues that shape our food systems.

I believe food is one of the most powerful tools for bringing people together across different backgrounds and experiences. A restaurant has the unique ability to create connection, spark curiosity, and build understanding without saying a single word.



In addition to cooking, you've become highly respected for your work in menu development and kitchen operations. From your perspective, what are some of the biggest operational challenges restaurants are facing today?

Margins are tighter than ever. Labor, food costs, rent, utilities — everything has increased dramatically, and independent restaurants are constantly trying to adapt without sacrificing quality or hospitality.

I think one of the biggest challenges is building systems that are sustainable for both the business and the staff. Kitchens used to survive on burnout culture, but that model doesn't work anymore.

Restaurants also have to be more intentional now. Menus need to be efficient. Staffing has to be smarter. Spaces need to generate revenue in multiple ways. Creativity is important, but operational clarity is what keeps restaurants alive.

Through MB Culinary Concepts, you work on pop-ups, consulting, and private dining. What kinds of projects excite you most outside the traditional restaurant setting?

I really enjoy projects where food intersects with culture and storytelling. Pop-ups are exciting because they create this temporary world and energy that feels very immediate and collaborative.

I also love consulting projects where I can help restaurants refine their identity or operations. Sometimes small changes in workflow or menu structure can completely transform a business.

Private dining is rewarding because it becomes deeply personal. You can create experiences that feel intimate and completely customized.



As a chef who draws inspiration from many culinary traditions, what ingredients, flavors, or combinations are exciting you most right now?

Lately I have been really excited by techniques that build deep natural umami, especially curing vegetables and proteins in miso or koji. Those processes can completely transform ingredients — adding complexity, savoriness, and texture while still allowing the original product to come through. I love the balance between tradition, fermentation, and refinement that comes with those techniques.

I'm also very inspired by upgrading traditional dishes through sourcing. Working directly with small local farms and using produce at its absolute peak season can elevate even the most familiar dishes to another level. There's a vitality to produce that's been harvested recently — the texture, sweetness, aroma, and energy are completely different. A simple tomato, cucumber, herb, or pepper can become the centerpiece of a dish when it's truly in season.

I think that combination of thoughtful technique and exceptional ingredients is where a lot of exciting cooking is happening right now. Taking something recognizable and making people experience it in a deeper, more memorable way is always what interests me most.



You recently participated in the U.S. Seafood Showcase at the Nile Ritz-Carlton, Cairo. What interested you most about being part of that event?

What excited me most was the opportunity for cultural exchange. It wasn't just about presenting seafood — it was about connecting American seafood producers with Egyptian chefs and showing how these ingredients could fit naturally into regional and international cuisine.

I also loved seeing how engaged the chefs were. There was real curiosity and enthusiasm in the room. Those conversations are incredibly valuable because everyone leaves inspired in different ways.

Being able to represent both American seafood and the perspective of Sara's Kitchen made the experience especially meaningful to me.

The menu you presented combined premium U.S. seafood with regional influences and local ingredients. How did you approach creating dishes that would resonate with an Egyptian audience?

I wanted the dishes to feel familiar enough to connect emotionally while still highlighting the quality of the seafood itself.

So instead of forcing purely Western and European preparations, I looked at flavors and techniques that already resonate in the region — tahini, citrus, herbs, spice, char, pickles, baladi bread, and bright acidic sauces.

The goal was to show versatility. I wanted chefs there to immediately imagine how these products could work in their own restaurants and culinary language.

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After such a diverse career, what continues to motivate and challenge you as a chef today?

I think curiosity is the biggest thing. Food is endless. There's always another technique, ingredient, culture, or idea to learn from.

What motivates me most now is creating experiences that feel meaningful — whether that's through Sara's Kitchen, a pop-up, or a special event. I'm also motivated by building something lasting and sustainable for our community and team.

The challenge is balancing creativity with the realities of running a business. But honestly, that tension is part of what makes restaurants so dynamic.

Finally, what advice would you give young chefs entering the industry today?

Stay curious and remain humble. Every kitchen has something to teach you, even the most challenging ones. Focus on mastering the fundamentals early in your career—organization, discipline, seasoning, repetition, and communication. These skills will serve you far better in the long run than chasing the latest trends.

I would also encourage young chefs to protect their sense of wonder. The hospitality industry can be demanding, but if you maintain a genuine passion for ingredients, people, and the art of service, the work will continue to feel rewarding and meaningful.

Most importantly, travel whenever you have the opportunity. Experiencing different cultures firsthand broadens your perspective and deepens your understanding of food in ways that no classroom or cookbook ever can. ■