



The Insatiable Brad Long

Local Food Advocate, Round the Corner Cook, and Family Man

BY MARY LUZ MEJIA

Brad Long is sitting on a gold mine's worth of stories. As a one-time pro musician and former executive chef at Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, he has fed just about every high-powered athlete, singer, and rocker under the dome. He's a man who, by his own admission, wants to do and learn "more, more, and more." He's getting his wish as the restaurateur/chef behind the Evergreen Brickworks' Cafe Belong and father of five children!

In the early days, it was music and not food that took centre stage in Long's life. "Music was and is a major love of mine. At 13, I decided that's what I wanted to do. I did that until I was 28 and hit enough benchmarks that I could walk away without any regrets or shame. I played large gigs, performed and sang original music in the coolest venues, had radio play, videos, produced my band and some others, tried being a promoter and took a lame stab at my own record label," he says. Then one day, he found himself at a crossroads and veered off the music rollercoaster. He traded his guitar for a knife roll because, as he says, a demon whispered "foooooood" provocatively in his ear.

Although Long had worked in numerous eateries, starting as a busboy when he was 14, he admits it wasn't as easy as just switching paths. He was, however, surprised that every time he took a restaurant gig, they made him chef. At the time, Long remembers, "I really didn't know what I didn't know. So when I went into this business I did two pivotal things: I went to school full-time

and I took a job at Toronto's Pronto Ristorante. A two-day stage was an epiphany!"

Prior to Pronto, Long worked "under the table" for a pal who owned a restaurant. He says, "I always tell this story to see people's reaction, because the punch line is that I was chef three months later. Crowds split into those who understand and those who don't. The ones who don't get it think, 'oooh you must have been good to make Chef in three months.' Those who do understand know what a crap-hole it must have been to promote a three-month newbie to chef—which it was."

This and later experiences shaped Long's definition of the word "chef." A cook, by his and many other people's standards, is professionally trained in the preparation and service of food. A chef, however, "is a title you earn by being damn good at the business of food, the leadership of team, and the responsibility of staff training . . . I'm a cook. I also happen to hold the title of chef."

Which leads us back to Long's first professional gig at Pronto in 1990, where he suddenly felt at home. Fresh ingredients were used there and knowledge was shared in the kitchen, where they worked together as a team. Patrons were served by professionals who made it their priority to deliver. "[It was] nothing like the restaurants I had worked in before. Everyone was proud to work there and it wasn't their 'second job,'" says Long.

Three years after starting at Pronto, Long became sous-chef and eventually head chef. He stayed for a total of five formative years. As

a cook, he discovered no one wanted to recruit him. Once he became the chef at Pronto, offers started rolling in.

He took a job rebuilding the dining program at the CN Tower with Alfred Caron of the famed Bistro 990, who now oversees operations at The Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. After four years there, a call to open Maple Leaf Sports' new home, The Air Canada Centre, came through.

"Three stadiums later I broke out on my own. These experiences of vast volume purchases, huge brigades, multiple outlets, top athletes' nutrition programs, billionaire owners, millionaire season seat holders, and everyone in between taught the importance of good financial systems; logistical skills; and how to build a huge network of farmers and suppliers, plus all the people I fed—about two million a year. [It was] great experience and still I wanted more."

The insatiable Long won an enviable list of awards during his various tenures, including VQA Restaurant Awards of Excellence and Wine Spectator Awards as well as food critic Joanne Kates' Top 10 restaurant pick when he helmed the Platinum Club.

Long, who grew up in Port Dover, Ontario, is a local forefather of local, organic, sustainable food sourcing before it became *du rigeur*. His admiration for farmers, given where he grew up, runs deep. "I've seen the love, sweat, and tears that go into the stewardship of our land; somewhere along the line I've also seen the destruction of parts of this land and I see more coming. I understand the bigger picture, of how food goes from farm to table and all the systems in between; I've experienced what is sustainable and what is folly."

Long carried this mentality to Veritas, My Place: A Canadian Pub, and now Cafe BeLong. For Long, doing his part to demonstrate that every chef can do better to procure food ingredients ethically and serve what he calls "sexy, delicious seasonal fare grown 'round the corner" isn't just lip service. "I truly believe we can do this; I did it in a very difficult situation in a major sports and entertainment venue, and I think a lot of people need to see it as a successful business model before the priorities of ethics, farmland, or seasonality will kick in for them. Some people need to believe there's money to be made, so whatever it takes to convert them, I'm in; it really is that important to us all." **SE**



PHOTOGRAPH BY RICK O'BRIEN



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CHEF'S SURVIVAL KIT:

I can't get through the day without
... joy.

To relax I ... hide. Jeez, I have to.

I am currently reading ... Robert Heinlein (old sci fi, old habit).

My favourite culinary destination is ... home, without a doubt.

My fave kitchen tool is ... a handheld citrus juicer. But it changes all the time.

Desert island spice? ... That changes too, but uh, fresh basil.

Mentor is ... my 16-year-old daughter, Angela. She makes me question everything and has me do things differently. But don't tell her.

Favourite meal is ... eggs—any kind, any way.

Favourite not-for-profit ... a tie between The Stop and FoodShare.

Superpower you wish you had?

... Sleep. Wait. Is that a superpower? It should be.