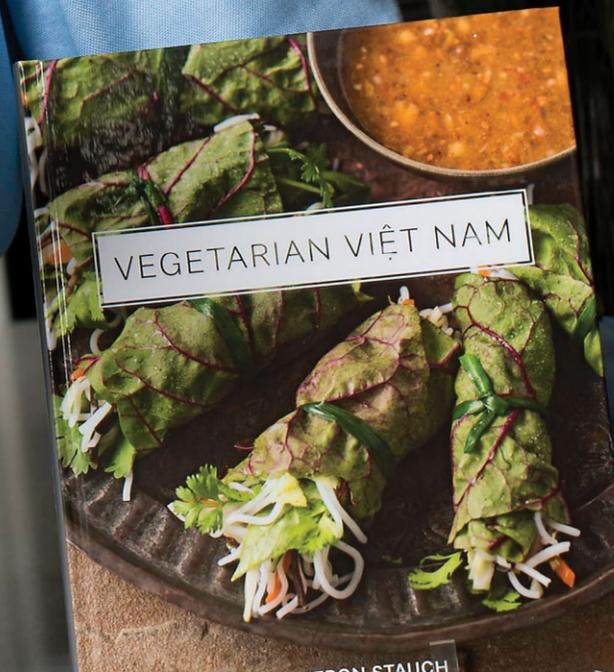


VEGETARIAN delight



His son's decision to stop eating meat sent chef Cameron Stauch on a mission that led to publishing a cookbook of vegetarian recipes



Kitchener-born chef brings world of experience to his culinary creations

BY CAROL JANKOWSKI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER LEE

When his young son announced he would no longer eat meat, Kitchener-born chef Cameron Stauch took it seriously, embarking on a search for vegetarian recipes that eventually grew into a lively book filled with the energy and flavours of Vietnam.

Stauch's family was living in Hanoi when Kiran, then age four, made the connection between live animals on the street and slaughtered animals he saw being transported home from a market.

Knowing there wasn't much of a vegetarian culture in Vietnam, Stauch first asked local friends for any recipes they had, then

began developing his own. Vietnamese sources generally had little to offer in meatless dishes made from local ingredients.

His book, "Vegetarian Viêt Nam," published in March, acknowledges the inspiration he took from recipes devised over centuries by Mahayana Buddhist monks.

"After a couple of research trips, I realized there was enough (in the topic) for a book," Stauch said in an interview during a June visit to his Kitchener parents, Martha and Warren Stauch.

"Vegetarian Viêt Nam" is a handsome hard-cover collection of recipes developed over two or three years of travel throughout the country. He took his own photos to illustrate the book and attended culinary

conferences where he made publishing contacts.

Writing the cookbook wasn't as straightforward as it sounds. When Stauch approached San Francisco-based food writer Dianne Jacobs for help in crafting a proposal to publishers, she said he first needed to personalize his manuscript, putting more of himself into the book. Contemporary cookbook buyers want context, cultural insight, some history and anecdotes from the writer as much as they seek cooking instructions.

He reworked the manuscript and found an agent to fine-tune his proposal. W. W. Norton & Co. in New York stepped up as publisher; Maria Guarnaschelli was his editor. The book was what Norton had been looking for — a sustainable topic with a lengthy shelf life, not a faddish flash in the pan. From start to finish, Stauch had devoted 3½ years to research, writing and marketing his manuscript. Last spring he did promotional book tours across North America.

The book isn't intended solely for those who are 100-per-cent vegetarian, Stauch says. "Some (users) will be millennials who are interested in what they call plant-based recipes, people looking for both health and flavour."

Son Kiran, now nine, remains a vegetarian. Stauch, his wife, Ayesha, and daughter, Lyla, 14, still eat meat, but 85 per cent of their meals now are vegetarian. But if they go out to eat, each family member orders whatever he or she wants. Lyla, especially, is "engaged and excited" to try new dishes, Stauch says.

Although Stauch didn't plan to write a cookbook, his interests and experiences over the course of 30 years contributed to it.

After graduating from Kitchener's Grand River Collegiate, he enrolled in environmental, development and international business studies at McGill University. "I was interested in travel, the environment and

corporate responsibility, but I didn't find a like-minded community at university at that time," he recalls. He was at least 10 years ahead of his time, and in hindsight says he should have taken an arts degree, followed by an MBA.

Approaching graduation from McGill, Stauch thought of the pleasure he found in occasionally baking for the family during high school and decided to look for part-time work in a restaurant. First was a stint as a dishwasher at the Keg; then he started cooking at a Montreal bistro. His final academic semester changed his life: he met Ayesha and was accepted to the Stratford Chefs School where he had "a wonderful experience."

Something the school's co-founder Eleanor Kane said — that one of her goals was to produce "thinking chefs" who cared about where food came from, about the environment, as well as about the customers" — resonated with Stauch. "The school felt comfortable, it felt right."

After an apprenticeship at the Art Gallery of Ontario restaurant, he returned to Stratford for the second four months of training. After graduation, he left for Ottawa where he helped open a small cafe, Benny's Bistro, at the back of The French Baker on Murray Street in Ottawa.

Meanwhile, Ayesha had done graduate study in England and joined Canada's diplomatic service. In 2000, she was posted to Hong Kong for two years. Stauch, not yet at the skill level a Caucasian chef required to work in a Hong Kong hotel, took short-term contracts.

He also travelled, getting to know the tastes of mainland Asian cuisine. But while that gave him a new set of skills, he wanted to work with a mentor. Back in Ottawa in 2002, he applied to Rideau Hall, knowing the governor-general's residence would have name recognition overseas. He worked there from 2003 to 2005, and again in 2009 to 2012 following Ayesha's posting to India.

Of the three governor-generals in office during those years, Adrienne Clarkson and

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TOP PHOTO: Young Jack Fruit Salad
MIDDLE: Spring Rolls
BOTTOM: Banh Mi

RECIPE TIPS

- Author Cameron Stauch says all of the ingredients for recipes in “Vegetarian Viêt Nam” can be found locally, starting with the B & T Food Centre and New City Supermarket, both on King Street East in Kitchener.
- However, the availability of certain Vietnamese herbs, different sizes or brands of rice paper or noodles, and different types of sauces or condiments (such as fermented soy sauce or Thai chillies) may depend on client demand, he says.
- If you can’t find the specified Vietnamese herbs, “go for a combination of cilantro, mint and Italian basil (which has a bit of anise flavour). I’d prefer you to add them rather than omit herbs altogether. They are important for the layering of flavours.” Stauch says he tried to present recipes as he experienced them, but he also tried to suggest alternatives.
- Finally, to anyone turned off by food adjectives such as “fermented,” Stauch suggests remembering it as just another way of saying pickled. “It’s vocabulary — sauerkraut is fermented.”

Michaëlle Jean were most actively involved in showcasing Canada’s regional flavours, ingredients and culinary traditions. “They saw the table at Rideau Hall as a place of culinary diplomacy,” Stauch says.

Almost daily they entertained guests who ranged from heads of state to recipients of bravery awards and school children who were given a cookie during their visit. Some meals were banquets for a ballroom filled with guests; others were intimate lunches for just a few people.

“It was a great place to hone skills on many levels,” Stauch says. “We also cooked for the staff cafeteria and for buffets. We didn’t want people to feel intimidated there, especially Canadians. We wanted it to be Canada’s home.”

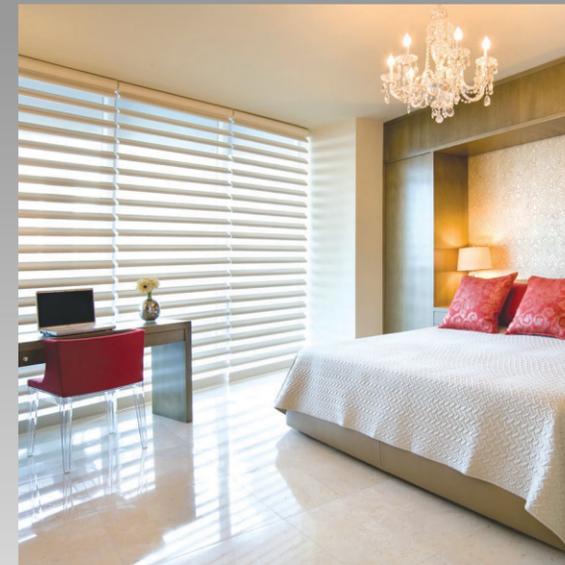
One of Stauch’s responsibilities was creating vegetarian dishes with the same look, textures and flavours of non-vegetarian courses being served. “We wanted to respect everyone’s dietary restrictions and preferences without making them stand out as different.”

After three years in Vietnam from 2012 to 2015, the family moved to Boston where Ayesha studied for a year. Next came a transfer to Bangkok in 2016. There, Stauch is at work on a second book, this one focused on vegetarian Thai dishes. He hopes this book will take just two years to produce.

As for lifestyle, as much as he enjoys discovering new languages and cultures, he just turned 45 and admits to “a little bit of desire to be situated in one place for a prolonged period. I’d like to move every five years, not three, because just as you feel comfortable, it’s time to move on.”

When he visits his parents, he’s excited to see how the food landscape in Waterloo Region has changed in the last quarter-century. “I hope the book will take people to the next new experience.”

Cameron Stauch blogs at A Global Kitchen: aglobalkitchen.com.



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