

The celebrity chef on building a culinary empire, the opening of his biggest restaurant yet and why he loves calling Richmond Hill home

CLAUDIO APRILE EXPANDS HIS EMPIRE by Karolyne Ellacott

Driven. Focused. Obsessive. One of the GTA's most celebrated and visionary chefs, Claudio Aprile has carved out a name for himself thanks to his relentless pursuit of perfection.

Initially stepping into the city's culinary consciousness while heading the kitchen at downtown Toronto hot spot Sen5es, the top chef daringly took off on his own in 2007, opening his critically acclaimed restaurant Colborne Lane, swiftly followed by Origin. Now, six years and soon-to-be three restaurants later, "indifferent" is not a word in Aprile's personal vocabulary.

Aprile's days run at warp speed: photo shoots, meetings, testing out new dishes for brunch. No detail is too great or too small. He speaks of his involvement in restaurant decor and customer sightlines. To escape the hectic pace of his day-to-day existence, the chef has chosen to live with his family in Richmond Hill. "It's very relaxing," Aprile notes. "I take my daughter to ballet class and my son to basketball. I just got a dog — I can't believe it!" He laughs.

But relaxing isn't something that comes naturally to the chef. "I wake up in cold sweats every night," he notes, matter-of-factly. A healthy separation between work and family lives helps ease the stress. "I'm [in Richmond Hill] because I value my privacy and like open spaces," he explains.

Aprile made his first mark on the food world as a preteen, overstuffing doughnuts and bending the rules while working at a west-end bakery. Hopping from kitchen to kitchen and putting in decidedly unglamorous time, the aspiring chef learned the ins and outs of the industry from the inside, moving up the ranks. Thirty years later, Aprile continues to challenge and reinvent the status quo when it comes to cooking.

"I get bored very quickly," he notes.

"For my prospects to simply be butchering fish all day? I want to learn new things."

Learning the ways of the business world as they come, Aprile points out that his restaurants remain entirely his responsibility: no partners provide a financial backbone to lean on. That, too, has been a learning process for the ambitious restaurateur. "To say I'm a seasoned businessman would be a lie — it's a whole new set of skills. Operating a fourth restaurant is a big leap." That fourth restaurant, Origin North, located at the Bayview Village shopping centre in North York, is his

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biggest yet.

Aprile's rise to the city's upper echelon of chefs began during that six-year stint at Sen5es. Forgoing vacation the entire time, the chef's thirst for knowledge resulted in stints at some of the world's best restaurants: London's Nobu, Alinea in Chicago and the incomparable, three-star Michelin rated elBulli in Roses, Spain. Having lived and worked in such diverse cities, travel has always been Aprile's greatest influence. Now however, he has chosen to seek inspiration at the opposite end of the spectrum.

"I'm more interested now in street food," he stresses. "I'm more interested in restaurants that are not critically acclaimed, that are not on short lists."

Aprile notes the human desire to

emulate others and the increase in culinary homogenization, pointing out the popularity of what he dubs sound bites: "Scandinavian cuisine," "charcuterie," "farm-to-table."

Refusing to be boxed in, the chef doesn't adhere to the trendy notions of, say, serving only Ontario-grown food. "It tends to infiltrate your creativity," he explains. "There are a lot of people cooking the same thing right now."

Aprile's individualism also materializes through his painstaking attention to detail, which has seen him portrayed as a force to be feared. "The biggest misconception about me would be that I micromanage," notes Aprile.

Admitting that it was indeed the case with Colborne Lane, he was pushed to overhaul his method following Origin's arrival. Since then, the chef has become a lot more communal in his approach. "The big lesson I've learned can be summarized in one word: trust."

Another change that's come with age has been Aprile's step back from molecular gastronomy — a term he never liked to begin with. At Sen5es, the chef's creations became synonymous with the culinary movement. Laser thermometers, liquid nitrogen and calcium chloride isomalt were commonly involved in creating Aprile's dishes. Here too he has mellowed.

"I've become less interested in science," Aprile notes. "You have to be honest with yourself and go beyond trends, do what resonates with you. I got typecast as some crazy scientific chef."

Origin, located in Toronto's trendy King Street East neighbourhood, initially came about in reaction to this typecasting — after Aprile and his team had exhausted the possibilities of a tomato. Rather than manipulating ingredients until unrecognizable, as he was wont to do, Aprile opted to open a

place that allowed the individual components of a dish to speak for themselves.

Last year saw the arrival of the Liberty Village outpost; come May, Origin North will make three. "I've been sleeping, eating, dreaming Origin for the last three years. I'm very obsessive that way — it drives my wife nuts!"

When the third chapter of Origin opens, Aprile's team will balloon to about 450 total. Those numbers will climb even higher when yet another restaurant opens: Trillium, slated to be part of Pearson International's makeover. As his sphere of influence grows, Aprile has had to learn to relinquish control, a trait that's weighed him down in the past.

Still working out the details of Origin North, Aprile remains mum on his new chef de cuisine and the menu itself. It will, however, differ from the others, with the majority of the dishes exclusive to the location. The space itself is being designed by Ron Wong, of Mackay Wong, and will feature plenty of natural light and light fixtures to compete with the other spots (Origin's chandelier is a sprawling jumble of Japanese monster toys; Liberty's pièce de résistance stacks replicas of fuchsia rifles).

When hiring his yet-to-be-named chef de cuisine at Origin North, Aprile's final query was this: "Are you scared?" When the chef broke down, he knew it was the right decision.

Aprile uses the analogy of the Thrilla in Manila to exemplify his approach. During the legendary boxing match between Joe Frazier and Mohammed Ali, the former went into the fight all nerves, while Ali was riled up with false bravado. As it turned out, Ali was spewing hot air.

"What gives me success is the fear factor in what I'm doing. I don't take it for granted — I enjoy it."