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Flynn McGarry, the 19-Year-Old Chef Who Is Conquering New York

A long-limbed slim strawberry blond with freckles and Elvis Presley-haircut without the grease, McGarry knew from age ten that he wanted to be a chef

Italian Hours

by Lucy Gordan

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McGarry is plating (Photo credit: Angela Pham).

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On March 1, 2018, after short internships and jobs at several American and European restaurants, he opened his own permanent restaurant at 116 Forsyth Street in New York's East Village. On May 23rd my husband and I savored the evening's ten-course tasting menu. A week later I returned in the morning to interview McGarry exclusively for La Voce di New York

Flynn McGarry, a long-limbed slim strawberry blond with freckles and Elvis Presley-haircut without the grease, was born in Malibu, California, on November 25, 1999. He knew from age ten that he wanted to be a chef. Two years later he launched “**Eureka!**”, a supper club

out of his family home with a ten-course tasting menu cooked on state-of-the-art equipment his parents had installed in his bedroom: a vacuum sealer, induction burners, a binchōtān grill, and an immersion circulator. The meal priced at \$ 160.00. Its signature dish was “McGarry Beet Wellington”.



Flynn McGarry (Photo credit: Chloe Horseman).

His fame grew fast. At age 13 *The New Yorker* published his profile entitled “Prodigy”. In March 2014 he was featured in his own *New York Times Magazine* cover story: “*The Chef at 15*”. It compared him favorably to other world-class chefs like René Redzepi who’d started their careers at a young age. That same year *Time* named him one of the world’s most influential teens. In 2016 *Vogue* covered him in a piece entitled “*Meet the Justin Bieber of Food: 16-year-old Chef Flynn McGarry*”.

On March 1, 2018, after short internships and jobs at several American and European

restaurants, most with three Michelin stars, still too young to have a liquor license he opened his own permanent restaurant at **116 Forsyth Street in New York's East Village**. The two-room space is divided into the Dining Room and the Living Room for canapés and champagne before dinner and desserts, coffee, and digestifs afterwards. Its décor is an upscale mixture of Scandinavian, Bohemian, and California casual. On May 23rd my husband and I savored the evening's ten-course tasting menu: "shrimp ceviche in rhubarb juice with grilled peppers and crème fraîche and summer savory; grilled snap peas with fresh tofu and smoked trout roe in chilled mushroom broth; beef tartare with stinging nettle tonnato, fava purslane; grilled asparagus custard with dried summer fruit; white asparagus with voodoo and baby pine; ramp tortellini and fried bread in a broth of parmesan and caramelized onion; grilled cucumber and celtuce in chili yogurt, smoked maple, egg yolk; an aged beet with its greens and bordelaise; lobster feast: a grilled lobster tail with apricot barbecue sauce and spicy flowers, lobster claw with salted plum and daikon; lobster knuckle with garbanzo beans and mint rose and lobster broth, naan; and alphonso mango with lime, strawberries and elderflower, chamomile and geranium." We chose the only Italian wine on the list, a Sant'Isodoro Verdicchio di Matelica Pié de Colle from the Marches. A week later I returned in the morning to interview McGarry exclusively for La Voce di New York.

What are your first memories of food?

"I grew up by the beach in Malibu, so my first memories of food are catching fish. Also our next-door neighbor would go tuna fishing and would always drop off large chunks of tuna for us. I was like five years old. That was when I first remember a whole fish, a food product before it was cooked and made into food".



Aged beet (Photo courtesy of Gem).

What are your first memories of cooking yourself?

“I was around ten years old. My parents were very into food and cooking. Everything they made was very simple. Roast chicken for example; and they always made sure that they had the best available ingredients, but they also always made the same dishes over and over again and I got sort of sick of eating either take-out after they separated or their same dishes all the time, so I started to cook myself. It wasn’t that I just made dinner. I became obsessed with reaching the high-end level of cooking. I spent the next two years learning the basics to get there. My parents gave me Thomas Keller’s *The French Laundry Cookbook* for my 11th birthday and I mastered almost all of its recipes. I also endlessly watched cooking videos on YouTube. I was home-schooled via an online program so I could focus on my cooking. When I got comfortable with my skills and knew I wanted to cook for other people besides my parents and my sister Paris, I’d have my Mom invite say five of her friends over and I’d prepare dinner parties, which kept increasing in size. Then, at age 13, I opened a pop-up

restaurant named "Eureka" out of my home. Its 10-course tasting menu cost \$150.00".

So when and where did you get professional training?

"At "Ray's and Stark Bar", designed by Renzo Piano at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art-a typically Californian casual place with international food and imaginative cocktails. Then I did short internships with Daniel Humm at "Eleven Madison Park" here in New York, with Grant Achatz at "Alinea" and "Next" in Chicago, and with Nathan Myhrvold "Modernist Cuisine" in Seattle before working with Ari Taymor at erstwhile "Alma" in West Hollywood for about three years, between the ages of 14 and 16. Then I moved first to Oslo where I worked at "Maaemo" and then to "Geranium" in Copenhagen before coming back to New York. Here I did a couple of six-month-long pop-ups (they're sort of like residencies) so I could continue to travel to Europe. Before I opened "Gem" I went to Italy for a short time, first to Calabria, where I worked on a farm outside a little tiny town called Sant'Agata del Bianco where I had friends, and then to Modena, Bologna, and Parma. I wanted to learn how to make hand-made pasta. I love Italy. I'm going back this summer, to Sicily, to Catania, on a week-long vacation. I think the big-name restaurants in Italy are great, but the aspect that always fascinates me about the food there is that it's really simple genuine home cooking".



Cavatelli with spiced squash ragù (Photo courtesy of Gem).

Who were your mentors? What did you learn from each of them?

“You could say that indirectly through his cookbook not in person Thomas Keller was my inspiration as were Daniel Humm and René Redzepi. Rasmus Kofoed, the chef and owner of “Geranium” in Copenhagen, Esben Holmboe Bang, the chef and owner of “Maaemo” in Oslo, who are both young and already have 3 Michelin stars. I admire them both very much, but I don’t really consider them or anyone else my mentors. I didn’t want to have a specific mentor. I’m self-taught. I wanted to see as much diversity in restaurants as possible and not be influenced by one person. I know a lot of people who had very specific mentors and their food mimics their mentors a lot. I never really wanted that. I learned so much from all these different restaurateurs in very different ways. I wanted to choose a wide-ranging collection, that was all very different, and in that way pick up very different skills from each one. For example, I learned business management from Humm”.

In a nutshell how would you define your cuisine?

“Modern American, very vegetable-focused, finding the best ingredients available and then, thanks to our knowledge and experience, trying to elevate them and to prepare and serve them in a way that is familiar, but much more exciting”.

What are your specialties?

“Before “Gem” at my pop-up “Eureka’s, it was “Peanut “Ritz Crackers with Foie Gras and Cherry Compote”. I’ve never put it on the menu at “Gem” because I think it’s a bit childish and silly. Its flirtatious cuteness has worn off. At “Gem” The beet dish: “an aged beet with greens and bordelaise”, never comes off my menu. We spend a lot of time finding the right beets and then it also takes a lot of time to cook them correctly. We braise them in beet juice and charred beet stock overnight; we smoke them; we grill them; we dry them for a day; we rehydrate them; we steam them; we dry them again. We take all this time and care to get the essence of their flavor and we serve them with a sauce made out of beet scraps. We make a sauce bordelaise, but only out of beets. We add beet stock. If you thought you tasted caramelized beef, it’s caramelized beets. There is no meat in this dish at all. We also take the greens from the beets and we whip them with some cream. It appears a very simple dish, but there’s a lot of thought that goes into it as well as refinement to make it how it is. From start to finish it takes about 48 hours to make. We’re taking a humble ingredient and transforming it into a really intriguing dish through technique and creativity. This is how we approach a lot of our dishes on the menu. As a kid I hated beets so I became obsessed with making them taste good.



Grilled sunchokes (Photo courtesy of Gem).

What are the essential qualities of a top chef?

“Creativity; unrelenting attention to detail, that for every little thing that gets done in your restaurant or in your life you need to have this crazy attention to detail so that nothing is overlooked; definitely you have to strive for perfection; trying to improve everything everyday. I like to work under pressure. No great chef I know is ever satisfied. He or she just wants to keep going, to keep improving. Many people ignore that a top chef has to be a savvy businessperson. He or she has to keep the restaurant open so has to know about its economics”.

What do you like most about your work?

“I love the creativity and experimenting with ingredients”.

The least?

“The paperwork and dealing with bureaucracy. For example, I wanted to design my kitchen

in a very specific way, but the Health Department wouldn't let me. I dread random bureaucratic and business matters that get in the way of my creativity”.



Potatoes cooked in yogurt (Photo courtesy of Gem).

I've read a number of criticisms about your being so young, spoiled and rich; so what do you attribute your success to?

“These criticisms are completely unfair. My parents are not rich. They are middle-class. My father is a photographer and my mother a screenwriter. They are creative people, but neither of them is famous. My success is due to my hard work, my determination, my drive and ambition to always do better, but also from all the support I've had from my family and the chefs that I've worked with. Yes, I'm only 19, but I do the same thing as a 34 year-old chef, so there's no reason to degrade me because of my age”.

Other chefs you admire besides Rasmus Kofoed and Esben Holmboe Bang?

“All the chefs that I've worked for have been a tremendous help and support, but I think that René Redzepi, although I've never worked with him, is probably the coolest, most interesting

chef right now. I can't wait to go to his newest restaurant. I've been to his new NOMA, NOMA No 2.. I think it's the perfect restaurant. Redzepi has created this culture of doing everything to the best level. It sets the tone for the rest of our industry".

Are you aware that, although you have never worked with Redzepi, the dishes I ate here are more similar to his than to any other Michelin-starred chef's where I've eaten?

"Yes, we both like to experiment with vegetables".



Sweet potato bread (Photo courtesy of Gem).

I've read a lot about the influence of your mother and that "Gem" is named for her because her name is Meg; what about your father?

"He's been incredibly supportive also. He's been my guinea pig. He would always try my new dishes and would get super excited about any new "creation" of mine. When I became really involved with grilling he helped me build a crazy hearth in our backyard. He helped me create most of my equipment without going out and buying it all. He'd tell me, "We can make it on our own." His photography influenced me a lot too. I love taking photographs.

My whole family is esthetic-based. My mother is a writer, yes, but she's made a bunch of films including one about me. Entitled "Chef Flynn" and directed by Cameron Yates, it premiered at the Sundance Film Festival this year".

Your feelings about restaurant guides?

"We opened "Gem" just two months ago. My other two restaurants, both called "Eureka", were pop-ups so this is my first permanent restaurant".



Winter squash kojy lime (Photo courtesy of Gem).

Your sister also works here, right?

"Yes, Paris signs everything. She's like our business manager. I'm too young to have a liquor license in New York, for example, but she's older. She's 21; I'm 19. Our daytime staff is 3; at night we're 11. We have 18 seats. I work six days or 100 hours a week. We have two seatings a night (at 6 and at 9 PM) Tuesday-Saturday, serving a \$155.00 tasting menu of 12-to-15 courses. An additional wine pairing is \$100.00. I like to think of "Gem" as a supper club so my servings are small. One dish on the menu, called "Feast", is meant to be shared. My idea

is to emulate a dinner party”.

If “Gem” becomes very successful, do you think you’ll move to a more uptown address?

“No, I like this Lower East Side, East Village neighborhood. I think it’s still up-and-coming. The neighborhood feels ambitious which suits me perfectly. We’re an ambitious restaurant so I think the neighborhood is the right fit for us”.

So why New York, instead of Chicago or LA?

“I’ve always just liked New York the best. I’ve always wanted to live here. I think “Gem” fits into New York more than it would in any other city in the States”.

Why is that?

“I think New York understands experiences in dining more than other American cities that divide the experience into segments: the setting and the service separate from the food. For example, in LA and San Francisco there are many restaurants that are well known just for the food, but the service is terrible, but in New York it has always been about the full experience. “You’re going out to dinner, it’s an event.””.

Cesare Casella always wears rosemary in his pocket. I’ve read somewhere that you always have a pair of tweezers in your pocket. Is that true?

“When I’m cooking, yes. I use them to plate, to arrange the food on the plate. Everywhere I’ve worked, I’ve always used them so they’ve become a kind of extension of my hand”.



Ritz Cracker (Photo courtesy of Gem).

Up to now we have talked about Flynn McGarry the chef; I'd like to know more about Flynn MCGarry the person. For example, what are your favorite foods to eat?

"Pasta. Spaghetti cacio pepe or tortellini in brodo in Modena. Pasta is my comfort food. When we go out for special occasions as a family, we always celebrate in Italian restaurants".

To cook?

"Vegetables. During a long meal, I'd much prefer to eat a bunch of vegetable courses than a bunch of meat courses. Beets of course, squash of all kinds, and kohlrabi are my favorites".

Besides your own and Italian, what other cuisines do you prefer?

"Japanese".

A dish you dislike to eat?

"I really hate papaya".

To cook?

"Innards especially tripe. I think they are too aggressive".

Your favorite wines?

“Sicilian. Frank Cornelissen’s wines from near Mount Etna. I also really like Austrian white wines like Grüner Vertliner. We talk a lot now about natural wines. I learned a lot about them in Copenhagen. They go a lot better with my food than classic wines. Classic wines are about consistency. They always taste the same. What we do is not about that. It’s about how every time you come, the same dish you had before will be a little different on purpose. It’s like a home-cooked meal. It’s never truly the same”.

Your favorite dessert?

“Vanilla ice cream with chocolate chips”.

Chefs are well-known for having collections of fast cars, motorcycles or watches; do you have a collection?

“White button-downs. I have about 60 of them. I wear one everyday. Loafers too”.

What zodiac sign are you?

“Sagittarius”.

If you had not become a chef, what profession would you have chosen?

“Interior designer. I designed this place and I really enjoyed doing it. I think of interior design the same way I think of food. If I stopped cooking tomorrow, I’d immediately start designing interiors”.

Do you have a pipedream?

“I shoot for the stars. At the end of the day as long as people are coming every night and enjoying it I’m happy, but anything above that I’d love to have”.

[Lucy Gordan](#)

Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalistic accreditation in Italy and the Vatican, I'm culture editor of the US monthly Inside the Vatican; European... [\[More\]](#)

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