Interview
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the man with the pan

LUCAS MANTECA, CAPE MAY'S HOT NEW CHEF, ON HIS BIGGEST CHALLENGE YET

IF YOU are what you eat, I want what Lucas Manteca is having. One year after taking the reins at one of Cape May's finest dining establishments, the revered Ebbitt Room at The Virginia Hotel, the man is the picture of health – glowing, relaxed, surfer-dude serenity completely intact. When you consider the fact that he has also taken on the supervision of two of Cape Resort Group's other kitchens, at The Blue Pig Tavern and The Rusty Nail, has a child under the age of two, and a wife who recently opened a restaurant of her own – in another state, mind you – those glowing good looks and preternatural calm are mind-boggling. If this is what eating right and loving your job does for you, I'm in.

In case you're unaware of the stir Manteca has caused since his arrival here, he came to Cape May from his home country of Argentina via some of the finest restaurants across the globe, including stints in Costa Rica, Spain, Britain, Miami and New York City. His initial splash locally was the highly-regarded Sea Salt in Stone Harbor, where he was executive chef and co-owner with his wife Deanna, as well as the beloved Quahogs Seafood Shack, which he still owns.

A comedy of errors, including a sick child (mine), precluded us from meeting at his home in Cape May Court House, as planned. So I found myself headed to the eminently cozy sun porch at the Virginia Hotel on a rainy afternoon. Here are some snippets of our conversation.

How is your wife and your baby – the baby is how old? She is a year-and-a-half, and she is great, but getting into everything, absolutely everything. And her favorite word is no – everything is no, no!

Clearly she's a decision-maker. And your wife Deanna – what is she up to? She has opened a restaurant in Philly.

You're kidding me, right? (Laughing)

HE LIKES IT HOT
Lucas in the kitchen of The Ebbitt Room, which he runs along with The Blue Pig Tavern and Rusty Nail



No, it's true. She and my partner from Costa Rica, he is a friend from Argentina. It's been a lot of work, but now that it's up and running, she only needs to go up there a couple of times a week.

What's it called? Hoof and Fin, kind of a take on surf and turf.

So you're not involved in this project? No, this is entirely hers. At first it was annoying because I seem to get a lot of press and reporters were calling me and asking me about it. I had to make it clear more than once that this was not my project! It wasn't fair to her, after all her hard work. I'm proud of her, and it's nice that she has her thing and I have mine.

You two must have a great baby-sitter. We do, actually – that's worked out well. She works for the company [Cape Resorts Group], too. She's a singer, so she gets our crazy schedule.

And how would you say your first season went here at The Ebbitt Room, overall? It was great. Of course, it took time to adapt our cuisine to the clientele. We wanted to keep things contemporary and eclectic, and still respect what The Ebbitt Room did so well over the years. And we've also had time to step back and analyze and adapt some of the things we've done well and some things we need to change. It is a service industry, and we want to meet and exceed our customers' expectations. So even though we made some changes the roots are still there.

Speaking of change, it seems that your role at Cape Resorts Group has evolved beyond executive chef at The Ebbitt Room. What plans do you have for The Blue Pig and The Rusty Nail? We're going to emphasize the Nail as more of a seafood place than it was last year. It's a good fit with the location, and it's got a real beach vibe. Most places here serve seafood, but besides the Lobster House, there really isn't a real seafood place. We're thinking about things like clambakes and grilled lobster. We'll still have meats and sandwiches, so we can cater to the seafood crowd without alienating everybody else. For The Blue Pig we're thinking a little more upscale tavern environment, without being pricier. Of course you'll still be able to get simple tavern food, like a grilled pork chop, but we want to take it up a little bit. And we want to be able to utilize the farm a little more for both places, like we do here.



FAMILY TIME
Lucas and wife Deanna with their daughter Catalina









DINNER PARTY AT HOME WITH THE CHEF
Lucas at home in Cape May Court House prepared pizzas for friends – he's pictured grilling a tomato-based crust with sopresata, arugula and parmesan, and a white pizza with parmesan, truffle oil and egg

We talked about Beach Plum Farm the last time we met – how great is it to have something as useful as a working farm at your disposal? What would you say the time frame is from pulling a carrot out of the ground to its appearance on a plate? Oh, for the time frame, I'd say it's the same day. It's amazing, and as a chef it's so inspiring. In my new position I'm getting the opportunity to get more creative – not just with the menu, but with things like designing the fields and ordering the seeds. We're always trying to come up with a better plan to maximize the farm – it's such an amazing resource. We're also working on creating our own merchandise and featuring it in the restaurants, like our own pickles. We're thinking about having a complimentary plate of them on the table at The Blue Pig – an offering from the farm. We're also talking about merchandising our own preserves and doing more baking in-house.

When I go out it's about the whole experience. Whether or not my table is ready when I arrive is not going to ruin my evening. The most important thing is the company of your friends or family. I don't let anything get in the way of an evening out.

Sound like some really exciting changes are in the works. In keeping with that theme, how often do you think a restaurant should change the menu? I'm a fan of changing it every week. Poor Johanna – she is our manager – I think I was driving her crazy for a while. She would say "You have to stop, we are killing trees!" But that was part of the analysis and research that I was talking about earlier. You need to keep in mind that people like to be familiar with the menu at their favorite places. What we are thinking now is having some signature dishes, the standby dishes, the favorites, and changing everything else seasonally – this would be at both The Blue Pig and The Ebbitt Room, since The Rusty Nail is only

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Yes, some* Exit Zero *sweetbreads fans have noticed that they went missing from The Ebbitt Room menu – I was told to ask about that! Well, that's a good example. We started with them maybe in April, and served them with scallions and a double meat stock. Then in the summer we grilled them with thyme, lemon and honey and served them over Bibb lettuce with a tomato confit. It's the same item, but we changed the preparation according to the season. So things will go away and then return, like a cycle, but the signature dishes will remain. And it's not just keeping the guests from getting bored with what you serve, you want to keep the chefs from getting bored. Sometimes when everything is rolling along people get complacent – then it's time to change.

How do you feel about the practice of overbooking restaurants? I'll tell you both of my viewpoints. As part of a service industry, and a company that really values our customers, our bottom line is that the customer has to leave happy. Mistakes will happen, especially in the busy season, and considering that you have reservations through several sources – you can reserve online, on the phone, the hotel can book for you as a guest, and we always want to accommodate our regular customers, whether they have a reservation or not. So mistakes can happen, and maybe we offer champagne while you wait, or a complimentary dessert – whatever it takes to make it right.

For me personally, though, when I do get to go out, it's about the whole experience. Whether or not my table is ready when I arrive is not going to ruin my evening. To me that is secondary to the most important thing, which is the company, being with your friends or your family. Being in this business, it's easy to criticize everything, because you're so much more aware of it, and I used to be that way. It can ruin your night if you let it. But now, I don't let anything get in the way of an evening out – it doesn't happen all that often, so it's really not worth it.

Favorite places to eat? Besides Hoof and Fin, of course! I do like it there! But probably Louisa's and The Black Duck are still my local favorites. They have really simple, honest food. And I like diners, we go to diners a lot. That might sound silly, but it's good, honest food.

I can't imagine that you indulge much in fast food, but I'll ask you anyway. Let's face it, we all have. We might not want to say it, and maybe after too many drinks, but we all have probably gone to McDonald's. I try not to eat food that's bad for me, but usually when I'm not eating well it's because of time and nothing else.

Do you have a favorite cocktail? Not really. I'm definitely more of a wine guy.

I would imagine that you really don't get much in the way of downtime. What do you and your family do when you have time off? Believe it or not, we talk about the business. It sounds crazy, and at first we were like we need to stop, we need to not let the business take over our lives. But after a while, we said you know what – this is our lifestyle. It's not just a job to us, this is who we are.

It sounds as if you've surrendered, that you've given in to this idea. That's exactly right! But you know, it's much better this way – we enjoy it. We are a little crazy, sure, but it is better this way. And when we do have time off, we spend it at the beach, whenever we can.

You have that surfer look – do you actually surf? Yes, I love to surf, and I do it as much as I can. To me the beach and the surfing are part of finding the balance I'm trying to achieve in my life. It was a huge challenge for me to come here, and I worked very hard towards that challenge. I've become more confident, and I'm finding that balance, and the beach is an important part of it. We have moved a LOT in our lives together, but it has always been around the water. Just the energy that you get from it – it really drives me. The beach and my family is what drives me.