

KITCHEN

Meet the dynamic duo behind the über popular Charcut, our 2011 Best Overall Where to Dine Award Winner.

BY LAURA PELLERINE



Not many people can say they've deboned a pig's head in just over two minutes, become a finalist on *Top Chef*, obtained multiple Mobil-5 Awards, and helped start one of the hottest underground culinary trends in Calgary. But then again, a lot of people aren't Connie DeSousa and John Jackson.

The prairie-raised power chefs behind the likes of Charcut, a popular downtown restaurant, and Alley Burger, a gourmet food truck, have been working together off and on since the late '90s.

Fresh out of culinary school, DeSousa

landed a job at Owl's Nest in the Westin, where Jackson was working as the chef de cuisine. She proved to be a natural, causing him to take her under his wing.

"I didn't want to mentor her," Jackson says, half joking. "Connie just proved to be an exceptional cook very early on. I was attracted to help her and wanted to be a part of her success. She does circles around me now. She's the boss!" DeSousa shakes her head in protest, but Jackson good-naturedly insists. "She tells me to 'do that again.'"

"A lot of people describe John as a super chef," DeSousa says of her colleague. "It's inspiring to work with someone like that—perfect cooking station, perfect tasting food. He was the kind of person I wanted to be."

It is this comfortable rapport and mutual respect that led them to reunite after pursuing separate culinary adventures upon leaving Owl's Nest—training and honing skills in restaurants around the world, including New York, London and Bora Bora. When Jackson became the Executive Chef at the St. Regis Hotel in San Francisco, he brought DeSousa in to work for him. It was here that they decided to go "home" to Calgary and open their own restaurant.

Backed with support and encouragement from their spouses Jean Francois Beeroo and Carrie Jackson, what was once a dream became a reality when Charcut opened its doors in February 2010.

"Everything you see here is what we envisioned five years ago," Jackson says. "From the light fixtures to the glasses to the picture of the pig."

Since opening, the sleek restaurant has been labelled as one of Canada's best by magazines like *Where* and *enRoute*, featured in *Reader's Digest*, and this past spring DeSousa came in third on *Top Chef Canada*.

While walking through Charcut, DeSousa

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and Jackson can tell a story about almost every item. The Douglas fir communal table was picked up for \$700 from a restaurant that closed in San Francisco; a picture of cows was painted by DeSousa's brother-in-law; and the mason-jar chandeliers were dreamed up by the owners themselves.

While the atmosphere is at once upscale and comfortably casual (there are no tablecloths, and glasses are made from recycled wine bottles), what drives people in is easily the food. The daily-changing menu focuses on simple, rustic, chef-driven dishes like their spit-roasted Spring Creek prime rib, heritage rotisserie chicken and duck-fat fried poutine. Even their veggie dishes are tasty: slow-roasted Heirloom beets with mint and basil, Hotchkiss tomato salad, and the house-made goat cheese is a creamy delight.

But at the heart of things, Charcut is a meat-lover's paradise. Jackson cheekily refers to their charcuterie board as an "amuse bouche," the team butchers their own meat, and one of their specialties includes a stuffed pig's head shaved paper thin.

Sausage is made in-house every day. Today, Jackson expertly mixes an Eastern European Kielbasa sausage by hand in a bowl over a bed of ice. "The temperature has to stay below 50F," he says, "if it doesn't, the texture gets gritty." Before stuffing it in entrails, DeSousa fries up an "apple patty" to ensure the flavour is spot on, but some days they will also just test it raw. "We know where our meat is coming from," DeSousa shrugs, while Jackson adds, "I love raw pork."

Sourcing the best meat, produce and herbs was always a top priority. Before opening, they spent 40 days getting to know 40 farmers and their families, and have since maintained good relationships with farms across Western Canada—Innisfail, Lethbridge, Okanagan, Vegreville and Langley to name a few.

"When it comes to local, if you can get it, we will," Jackson says. "But we're not preaching the 100-mile diet, it's all about flavour at the end of the day, and besides, Connie can't live without lemons."

Sporting a high ponytail, black Charcut T-shirt and pink lip gloss, DeSousa is self-admittedly more reserved than her boisterous counterpart. It isn't until she walks through her prep area that she starts to open up, chatting more, cheeks flushed, excited to show off a vat of just-made goat cheese, their custom-built charbroiler and some of her favourite kitchen gadgets. "This vintage slicer is great because an electric one gets too hot and will make the casing of a sausage melt," she says, rotating the handle to show the ease of the manually controlled, bright red device. "This Paco Jet," she points to the next, "can make ice cream in about two minutes. It's so fresh that we have to freeze it, or it would melt before it got on the floor."

Her passion for the quality of food is one of the reasons she visits tables nightly asking patrons how their dinners were. "Because we don't wear white chef jackets, she'll often come back with a tray of dishes," Jackson says laughing. "People don't realize she's the chef. Which is funny for us in the back."


They may not wear formal coats, but a closer look shows there's no doubt who's in charge. At almost any time of day you will see either Jackson or DeSousa expertly conducting a food orchestra in their open kitchen. During the first year, Jackson and DeSousa worked seven days a week, often coming in at 5 am to plan the day's lunch and dinner menus. A year later, once their sous chefs became more experienced, they took Sundays off. But not for long.

Building off the success of their "Alley Burgers" (gourmet burgers sold in the alley of their restaurant for \$5, and announced



via Twitter), this summer they decided to turn their pet project into a bigger one—a gourmet food truck. "We got bored," Jackson says, shrugging his shoulders. "We're a little bit crazy."

And if running a restaurant and a food truck wasn't enough, the team is launching Charpop, a pop-up restaurant with Aviv Fried of Sidewalk Citizen Bakery and Toronto's Grant van Gameren. It will operate for three days only in a secret location in mid-January.

"It never feels like work, coming here," Jackson says. "Some chefs will open a restaurant and then move on. This is it, we're here to stay." 

MASTERS

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