

4/12/2019

Chef Shmuli Schwinger to Lead Rutgers Chabad's Kosher Dining Program

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SUNDAY, MARCH 24, 2019

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Chef Shmuli Schwinger to Lead Rutgers Chabad's Kosher Dining Program

By Manya Goldstein | April 27, 2017

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Tucked in the corner of the large industrial Chabad House kitchen, the hidden alcove appears to be exactly what one would expect from a chef's office—cramped quarters, crowded desk, scattered order forms. Yet upon closer inspection, Chef Samuel "Shmuli" Schwinger's office contains elements of the unexpected. Two small brown boots rest unassumingly beside the desk, and assorted Pokemon cards peek through the layers of strewn receipts.

Schwinger and his 6-year-old son Shuey arrived on the doorsteps of the Rutgers University Jewish student center in September 2016. Sporting joggers and a patchy goatee, the Manchester native set out to transform the organization's kosher dining program, which serves approximately 150 students daily.

But Schwinger's story begins long before he stepped foot in New Brunswick. The 32-year-old chef spent the past decade traveling the world, embarking on an array of culinary adventures.

His Story

Schwinger's love for food started as a child. As the youngest of five, he often had to entertain himself while his older siblings went out with their teenage friends.

"Being home alone for the most part, I spent a lot of time with my mother who was a pretty decent [cooking] teacher," Schwinger said.

The aspiring chef knew he wanted to attend culinary school, but his options were limited. Schwinger grew up in a religious household and follows the customary Jewish dietary restrictions known as kashrut. Keeping kosher means abiding by a complex set of rules that include not combining meat and dairy and not eating forbidden foods such as pork or shellfish. Since there is no kosher culinary school in the United Kingdom, Schwinger headed off to the Israel School of Culinary Arts when he turned 18.

The ISCA program, which has since closed, operated out of the David Intercontinental Hotel in Tel Aviv under the instruction of chef Daniel Levy. At the end of the program, Schwinger accepted a shadow position in the kitchen before returning to the United Kingdom to begin his cooking career.

Back at home, Schwinger opened a chain of food trucks called "The Meaty Way" and served burgers, kebabs, hot dogs and shawarma.

Schwinger got married a few years later, but his ex-wife did not want to live in the United Kingdom. Therefore, the couple decided to move to Israel where Schwinger started his own sushi company.

"It was the first kosher California roll in the entire country," Schwinger said.

After learning they were expecting a child, the couple relocated to the United States for access to better healthcare.

Schwinger secured an executive chef position at Yussi's, a chain of deli and takeout stores in Lakewood, New Jersey. Five years later, he fulfilled every chef's dream by opening his own restaurant.

Shmuli's Smokehouse and Catering, located on Madison Avenue in Lakewood, serves meat entrees ranging from pastrami sliders to pulled brisket. The business still operates under the same name—but without Schwinger on premises.

In September, Schwinger accepted a position at Rutgers' Chabad House, the sprawling College Avenue building that serves the only kosher meal plan on campus.



“I saw there was a lot of potential here,” Schwinger said. “I figured it was only an hour up the road and made a lot of sense.”

He now works around the clock as the full-time chef (literally—he sleeps in the building three to four days a week). Schwinger said the students are a novel customer base that offers a unique set of challenges.

“One person will have a demand, and the next person’s demand will be exactly the opposite,” he said. “You try to find the middle of the road. It’s a challenge, but it’s rewarding.”

Schwinger’s Sidekick

As much as he loves to cook, there is one element of Schwinger’s life that overshadows all of the rest—his son, Shuey. Since his divorce, Schwinger looks after his son for half of the week. However, he is available for him around the clock.

“Shmul’s son is by far his number-one priority,” said Chabad House Education Director Rabbi Shaya Shagalow, who explained that Schwinger will drop everything when his son needs to be picked up from school.

“His son’s well-being and happiness will be at the forefront of every decision he needs to make,” Shagalow said.

The father-son duo can often be found in the kitchen, with Shuey helping his dad cut produce or package food items. However, Schwinger said that Shuey does not share his passion for food.

“He enjoys Pokemon a lot more than anything food related,” Schwinger said. “But he’s still a kid, so that could change.”

Schwinger said his son is also his favorite travel companion. The pair has flown to England three times a year since Shuey’s birth to visit his British family (which includes 30 first cousins).

“He’s 6 years old so he’s flown 18 times thus far,” Schwinger said. “He loves it.”

Above all, Schwinger credits his son for transforming him into a more mature and responsible adult.

“I used to party a lot. I used to be extremely carefree, and I never thought about what I was going to be preparing for the next day’s lunch,” Schwinger said.

Now, Schwinger prepares lunch seven days a week for hundreds of hungry college students. But his work at Chabad House does not stop in the kitchen.

Beyond the Kitchen

Schwinger’s love of party planning helps him bring Chabad House customers a number of special events throughout the year.

“I just always enjoyed hosting,” Schwinger said. “Some people enjoy being the guest of the party. I enjoy making the party.”

He transformed the dining hall for Election Day, Thanksgiving and the Super Bowl, decorating the room and preparing dishes to match each theme.

“When you’re dealing with 150 students, it’s not difficult to put on events. You just need to be a visionary,” Schwinger said.

Apart from his career, Schwinger is an avid world traveler. Over the past 10 years, he has ventured to Turkey, Jamaica, Jordan, Spain and Mexico. Schwinger’s travels have also expanded his cooking skills.

“I always found myself needing kosher food in exotic vacation resorts and figuring out that I can eat bananas for a week, or I can go to the market, buy fresh food and find a way of grilling or cooking it,” he said.

Schwinger considers food an integral part of any vacation.

“I’m not a glutton, but I love food,” he said. “No matter how good a vacation is, it can’t be good if you’re hungry.”

Over the years, Schwinger’s philosophy as a chef has developed along with his cooking expertise.

“You can never please everyone,” he said. “One person’s love for cilantro is another person’s nightmare. If you believe that you will be able to impress absolutely everybody, you will never be satisfied with your job.”

Schwinger stresses the importance of finding internal satisfaction in one’s work. At the same time, he remains committed to producing high-quality food.

“He doesn’t just want to get his job done, get a meal out and walk away,” said sous chef Chaya Willick. “He wants to make sure the food is good.”

Whether he’s serving kebabs in England, sushi in Israel or wings in New Jersey, one fact appears certain: Schwinger will always strive to put his best plate forward.

By Manya Goldstein

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