

# His adoptive mom believed in him. It was the key ingredient to Marcus Samuelsson's rise

By Carlos Frías  
January 29, 2019



Chef Marcus Samuelsson, who was adopted from Ethiopia by a Swedish family, discusses becoming a TV star over Cuban coffee, pastelitos and croquetas. BY [MATIAS J. OCNER](#) | [CARLOS FRÍAS](#)

Marcus Samuelsson couldn't look at the plate of croquetas and pastelitos in front of him without stopping to think of his hero, his champion, his late mother.

It was two years ago that he was in Miami Beach for the South Beach Wine & Food Festival, about to walk on stage for a cooking demonstration, when he got the call that his mother, Ann Marie Samuelsson, had died at age 87.

"I was just breaking down, crying," he recalled on a recent afternoon while picking through pastelitos at Tinta y Café in Coral Gables, exactly the kind of small neighborhood find that his mother — his inspiration as he worked to become a chef — would have loved.

His friends Alex Guarnaschelli, Aarón Sanchez and Andrew Zimmern went on stage with him and carried him through the demo, he recalled, his face brightening at the memory. ("It's also about having great friends," he said.)

“I always wish I could bring her with me to places like this,” he said between thimblefuls of Cuban coffee. “She loved to go places and she would have commented on all of this.”

It was Ann Marie and her husband, Lennart, who adopted Samuelsson and his sister after their birth mother died from tuberculosis in Ethiopia when he was 3. The couple raised him in Gothenburg, Sweden, where he later attended culinary school. It was the beginning of a meteoric rise for Samuelsson, now a television culinary star, from “Top Chef Masters” to his newest, “No Passport Required,” who also oversees a range of high-end restaurants, [including an upcoming spot in Overtown](#).

He recalled straddling cultures, often as the only black person in his school — or in the neighborhood. His wife, the model Maya Haile, and his sister Fantaye helped reconnect him to his Ethiopian roots.

“As people, we’re all searchers. When you’re not adopted, you know where your parents are from, where your heritage is from. When you’re adopted ... you have another history,” he said.

But it was Ann Marie who helped her son follow his passion when he decided to become a chef. They found a guide of every Michelin-star restaurant in Sweden, and she helped him write a letter to each one, asking for a job.

“We wrote to every single one of them. And we got 30 nos,” he said. “Every time we got a letter back — if we got a letter back — and it was just ‘No!’ you get to a point where you don’t even want to open it. You stare at the letter, don’t dare to open it.

“Eventually, we got *one* yes.”

He takes a sip of coffee.

“It’s how much do you want it, how much can you envision it,” he says.

He turns to the plate of fresh-baked pastelitos — the guava particularly catching his attention — and the croquetas with the creamy filling, fresh from the fryer. A Scandinavian at heart, he goes right for the bacalao (salt cod) croqueta. In every bite, he imagines his mother’s reaction.

“The Swedish version would have been a little bit different, but that” — he’s pointing at the pastelitos — “would have been danishes for her. These croquetas” — he picks up one stuffed with creamy bacalao salted cod — “the salted fish would’ve been her favorite because she could relate to that. So I always think about, ‘What would my mom say?’”



What he appreciates, he says, is the handmade feel of the pastries. It reminds him of his grandmother, who grew up poor after the world wars and learned to use every last bit of meat and vegetables.

“Which also, by the way, would have made her a Brooklyn hipster,” he said, laughing. “She went foraging. She did nose-to-tail way before there was nose-to-tail.”

Of course, that means she also made everything herself — even his clothes.

“If you wanted it, you had to make it. Which is great at home but not if you wanted a pair of Levi’s jeans,” he said. “We’d go shopping and I thought, ‘Ok, cool, I’m going to get a pair of jeans.’ But she only went to the store to check it out and say, ‘I can make that.’ “

He laughs and laughs.

“I don’t *want* you to make jeans!”

So he became a sneaker head. He has a vast collection of stylish shoes, including a pair of red mohair Keds peeking out from under the table.

But it was that austere beginning that helps him appreciate the climb to stardom.

“I’m deeply in love with my profession,” he said. “It’s the most exciting time ever to cook. I love what I’m doing.”

Read the article [online](#).