

## Creating a Safe Space

An Interview with Michael Sparks, Chief Executive Officer, The Underground Kitchen

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Michael Sparks is a fashion designer turned culinary entrepreneur who created a pop-up supper club that offers its members unique fine dining experiences, set in unexpected, secret locations within their city. A 35-year veteran fashion designer, Sparks made the segue into the food industry when he moved to Richmond from New York in 2009, as the culinary scene was just beginning to flourish. As an avid home cook and food enthusiast, he relished the discovery of the city's epicurean gems and wanted to share them with others, but found it difficult to forge friendships with other professionals who were constantly on the go. Eventually, Sparks connected with several of his neighbors and together they formed The Underground Kitchen (UGK), which brings people together through a shared experience of fine dining, community and a sense of occasion.*



Michael Sparks

**INSTITUTION BRIEF** *The Underground Kitchen (theundergroundkitchen.org) is experiential dining that has been called the “most exclusive dining ticket in town.” Its luxurious, intimate, themed events feature four- to seven-course menus created by some of the top emerging chefs in the country. Typically, the locations of its events remain “underground” until 48 hours prior to the event to heighten excitement and intrigue. UGK gives its chefs carte blanche to go beyond their culinary comfort zones to create unforgettable menus that leave a lasting impression. Bringing chefs, farmers, and niche purveyors closer to guests is customary at UGK events. UGK strives to educate consumers about where their food comes from, the history and influences that make its chefs unique, and the care and expertise that is exercised in presenting their dining experience. UGK is dedicated to promoting a diverse group of chefs, most often seeking out those who are typically underrepresented in the culinary world. It strives to educate chefs not just about preparation and presentation, but also about the business of running a kitchen, partnering with local vendors, farmers, wineries, and constantly evaluating their standards to keep them to the highest level. In addition, UGK is committed to educating its guests about where their food comes from, about how pairings are created, how menus are developed, the details of gourmet techniques, and about the unique backgrounds, talents, and offerings of its chefs, vendors, sponsors, and farmers.*

### What was your vision for creating The Underground Kitchen?

The vision for UGK was to create a safe space free from discrimination and abuse for people of color, women, those with disabilities and members of the LGBTQ community. This allows chefs to express their art through food with authenticity while at the same time honoring their culture. Our chefs are shown appreciation for talent rather than oftentimes finding themselves supporting white male chefs doing most of the work without recognition. Our chefs are not just offering amazing food, but providing an experience.

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### How has The Underground Kitchen evolved since its founding?

It all began in my backyard, moving from New York City to Richmond in 2009, when we knew no one. As a home cook, I thought a great way to engage with others in our community would be throwing New York Style dinner parties. As these parties grew, all the profits went to organizations that provide relief to local areas with food insecurities. Within the first six years we provided a culinary experience to 32 cities along the East Coast which has now grown to 42 cities, with a concentration in a four-hour radius of Richmond. We put on four to five events each month, 54 events per year

which include being invited to the James Beard House with five diverse chefs to cook during a collaboration of diversity. At Fort Monroe, we curated a beautiful event honoring the history of this site and those that passed through its walls both at the beginning of slavery and at the end of slavery. We have many corporate events and a TV offer on hold as we wait for COVID to subside. Beyond the exclusive dinner experience through The Underground Kitchen Community, we have provided hearty soups rich in flavor and fresh baked bread, beautifully and thoughtfully prepared by our chefs, to over 170,000 families in need and first responders over the course of this pandemic.

### Where do you see the greatest opportunities for growth for The Underground Kitchen?

In allowing a diverse selection of chefs an audience to spread awareness, start owning their heritage, and reclaiming and presenting it in new ways, we want to empower them to move toward the lifestyle of owning their own brands and creating a platform to share their story through food and culture combined with the ability to sell directly to the public.

### What do you see as the strengths that Richmond offers from a business standpoint?

Richmond is a secondary city that is growing and forgiving, and that allows one to make mistakes, figure them out and try it over again. Richmond is on the cusp of a new beginning, being the old confederate capital and recognizing the past for what was by removing the reminders of oppression and division. This has inspired people in the city and a lot of our young and vibrant residents are the first in their families to break barriers in society, bringing a fresh perspective grounded in our communities. At UGK we are in the middle of it all, with an executive staff collectively bringing over 120 years of experiences. We joined forces to change the face of the food and hospitality industry and Richmond is at the heart of it all.

### Did you always know you had an entrepreneurial spirit and desire to build your own business?

I have been preparing for 40 years for where I am now. I never looked at myself as an entrepreneur, and I see myself as more of a trailblazer. My focus is seeing the potential of others, celebrating their gifts and getting them the recognition they deserve, rather than self-promotion. ●