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Carmen Electric

When the Roma Café went dark, a black hole settled over the West End. Now, **Carmen at The Danforth** brings back the experience of dining in a neighborhood mansion.

BY COLIN W. SARGENT

If singer Ricky Martin comes to town to dine at “Carmen at the Danforth,” what will he order?

Chef **Carmen González** smiles. “Right now, he’s in New York doing *Evita*, so he’s homesick. I’d offer him something with a touch of Puerto Rico in it. I’d go with fish and roasted plantains!”

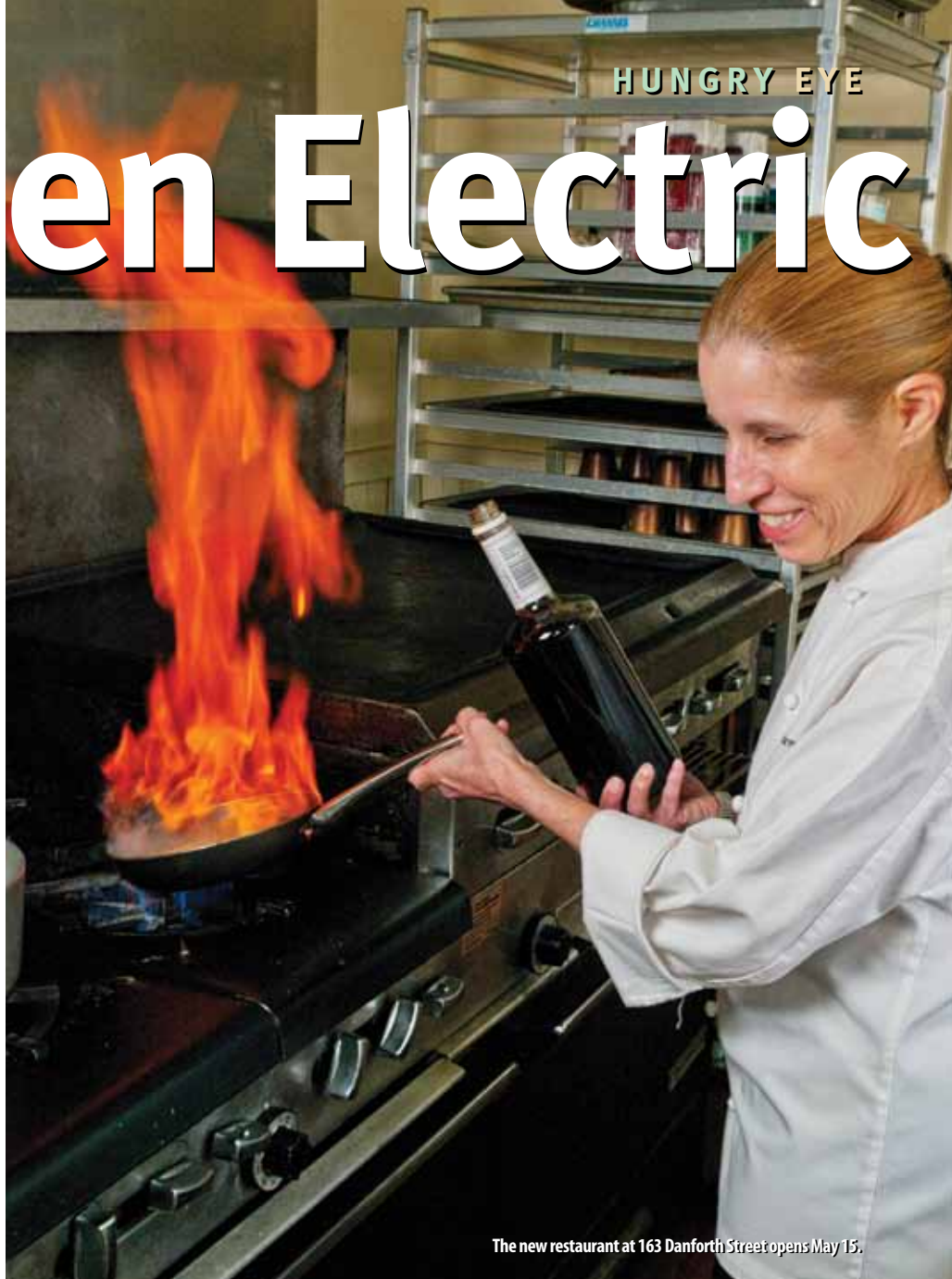
If you dine with González at her new restaurant, opening May 15 at The Danforth bed and breakfast, you can go international, too, devouring sizzling snacks as part of a culinary “journey through most of Latin America and the Caribbean,” where lobster will be served as few up here have seen it before.

“One of my signature dishes is a lobster and avocado terrine with key lime mayo and *aranitas* (grated green plantain and garlic fritters), which I plan to have on the menu, along with lobster fritters.”

Restaurant patrons will enter through the front door at 163 Danforth Street and be greeted by a hostess in the center hallway beside a free-form sculptural bar by artist Al Kronk of Rusted Puffin Metal Works. A lounge to the left invites with the “*pasabocas*” experience—hors d’oeuvres dancing in martini glasses and dreamy drinks. Live music from a baby grand will breeze in with “romantic Spanish” themes. It’s the ultimate relaxation area (“natural canvas with splashes of color to make the architectural details pop”) where both diners and the inn’s guests can test the delicious waters with something small.

Then they’ll float across the hall to the formal dining room—with its massive fireplace, high Federal crown molding, dentils, and paneling—which opens up to a separate Chef’s Table room with al fresco brightness and “a tasting menu only.” Think “wine flights and tastings.”

Here, foodies will get to chat with



The new restaurant at 163 Danforth Street opens May 15.



At Long Last!

Built in 1823 for merchant prince **Joseph Holt Ingraham**, **The Danforth** has been home to **Waynflete School**, **Canal Bank** owner **Elias Thomas**, and the **Roman Catholic Diocese of Maine** (purchased in 1941, for \$10K). **Barbara Hathaway** bought it in 1996 for \$350,000 and revamped it as a high-end bed and breakfast (guest **Drew Barrymore** couldn’t find her motivation to obey the no-smoking policy). While Hathaway wasn’t allowed to expand the inn, the subject of a lawsuit with the city, a 34-seat restaurant was approved circa 2002. In April, 2009, present owner **Kim Swan** bought The Danforth—all 15 fireplaces of it—for \$1.25 million. “I can’t take any credit for getting a restaurant here,” Swan says. “That was all the previous owner’s heavy lifting.”

HUNGRY EYE

Clockwise from top: Chef Carmen González at the restaurant entrance shows where Al Kronk's custom-made bar will serve guests; restaurant guests will relax in the lounge to live music from the inn's baby grand piano; González's red snapper and clams with fingerling potatoes and leeks in chorizo broth will be in demand at Carmen at The Danforth; Chef Carmen's signature lobster and avocado terrine, with key lime mayonnaise and plantain fritters, is one of many knockout dishes.

González, gain insight into her famous Nuevo Rico cuisine, and sample her peripatetic personality. What a blast.

"I've heard there's a ghost here," she laughs, taking in the luxurious appointments. "Coming from Puerto Rico, that scares me! So far, it's been very good to me."

González is going to be very good to you, too. Among the creations she's planning:

- "Crispy plantains topped with pickled shrimp and green papaya, pulled pork, crispy fried shallots, and house gravlax-fried capers and mustardy vinaigrette"
- "Bacon-wrapped diver scallops, malanga mash, warm bacon vinaigrette"
- "Crispy fried oysters, warm corn and pea relish, scotch bonnet-mango dipping sauce"
- "Roasted monkfish a la ciollia, yuca mash"
- "Maine cod, yautia purée, green olives, and piquillo relish"
- "Arroz con mariscos, drunken sweet plantains"
- "Rum-barbecued ahi tuna, three-tomato confit, a stack of beer batter sweet onion rings"
- "Pork ragu, farmer's cheese and sweet plantain lasagna, charred tomato sauce"
- "Adobo-rubbed pork tenderloin, roasted root vegetables, scotch-bonnet and mango jam, pork demi"
- "Lola duck two ways, corn flan, late vintage port sauce."

BIGGER FISH TO FRY

Like any celebrity chef, beyond her wizardry in the kitchen, González is a high-energy business executive, too.

Intermezzo magazine calls her a sensation, tracing her influences to growing up on the west coast of Puerto Rico, where she went with "her mother on Saturday mornings to the Crash Boat, a well-known beach. A local woman would wait for her fisherman husband to haul in his fresh catch of snappers and groupers. 'She would clean the fish right there. She'd take the fish, cut it, and she had a big cast-iron pot on the sand, over wood. She'd throw the fish into the pot and fry it right there, then serve it with a few *tostones* (fried plantains) on a purple plate.'"

Chestnuts like this are proof that the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: CYNTHIA FARR-WEINFELD (2); COURTESY CHEF CARMEN GONZÁLEZ (2)



Left: The dining and lounge areas will impress with exquisite architectural details. **Below:** The Danforth's owner Kim Swan (left) with Carmen González, who's been featured on *Top Chef* and *Top Chef Masters*.

González who'll dazzle Maine this summer is charming enough to make a story sparkle and deft enough to make it work for her.

Plus, the artist in the chef can't resist tweaking the cuisine. She experiments, challenges herself. "I couldn't get to sleep last night, I was thinking so much about the menu!" Though food writer John Mariani, in a 2007 story for *Food Arts*, credits González with "reinventing the street food of Puerto Rico," she can't help but transmit this tidbit with, "I like to go deep into Latin roots, but not so deep that it's limiting."

That's because, as a member of the NutriSystem Culinary Council advisory board of celebrity chefs (her NutriSystem creations will be released this year), she has bigger fish to fry, including reaching out to a huge audience in a place "where Latin and American and French cuisine touch," a subliminal Caribbean.

A long-distance runner (10Ks, half marathons), the health-conscious González says, "In Puerto Rico, we have street shacks where people are literally frying with lard. The sides are very large and they're greasy—so heavenly." And so deadly.

THE PERFECT PAIRING

"Which makes it all the more amazing when you try the 230-calorie dishes she's just designed for Nutrisystem!" says her friend and business partner Kim Swan, who purchased The Danforth from Barbara Hathaway in 2009 (two years after buying the nearby Pomegranate Inn).

González and Swan met through a mutual friend from Bar Harbor who was in New York as a marketing exec with Hiram Walker liqueurs. "I did a dinner for Ivana Trump and worked with her," the chef says.

"The chefs are the celebrities now," Swan says. "I saw her in Perry St.," the French bistro in the West Village, "beside chef Jean-Georges [Vongerichten]. You should have seen how she was treated, with people crowding around her. 'Oh, chef!'"

"When Kim bought The Danforth, I visited her the same week she got the keys," the MGM Latin America TV star says.

"She walked in and said, 'You are having a restaurant, right?'" Swan says.

"Three years we've been thinking about this!" González chimes in. This is not a ca-

(Continued on page 79)

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SOON...AT THE DANFORTH|PORTLAND

Carmen Electric (continued from page 45)

sual endeavor, though dining will be dressy casual and they hope to make a dramatic statement in casual dining.

As we shoot photos of the two pals, González, who isn't awfully tall, jokes to Swan, "Not in stilettos. Make sure you wear flats."

Of her show *La Chispa de Chef Carmen* (The Spark of Chef Carmen), seen in 20 countries, González says, "I'll have some cameras follow-

The Plans:

- "The original safe in the house will be the wine cellar," González says.
- "Our overnight guests will park in back and enter from the back door, while diners will come in the front door," Swan says, with González nodding. "We've arranged for additional evening parking with the Irish Heritage Center right beside us."
- "Our overnight guests have common rooms upstairs," Swan says, "so they'll have their own sense of luxury and privacy even if there are 34 more people here downstairs at the restaurant. They can stop by at the lounge and get something light with a drink on their way out or go into the restaurant if they like," an inspiration to have guests and diners sharing the privilege and ambience.
- "I'm looking for an apartment in the West End," González says, for herself and "my eight-pound toy poodle, Jeeter." (Yankees fan?)

ing me up here in June. The angle is, 'what's it like to be a chef going through all the excitement of starting a new restaurant?'"

INDUSTRIAL LIGHT & MAGIC

While González and Swan haven't covered all the angles yet (there's a flurry of redecoration in an already strikingly beautiful setting), the ones they've made look easy were once deemed impossible.

Hours will be Tuesday through Saturday, 5:30 to 9 p.m., and Sunday brunch.

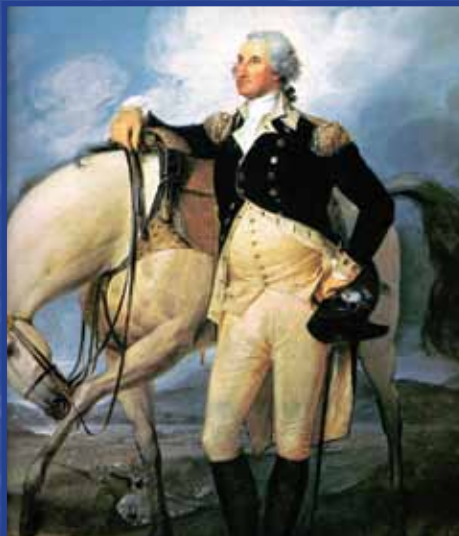
"The last seating is at 8:30 p.m., with things quieting before 10," says Swan in deference to neighborhood residents.

These two seem to have all the right moves. "It's going to be brilliant." ■



➤ For more, visit portland-monthly.com/portmag/2012/04/hungry-eye-extras.

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