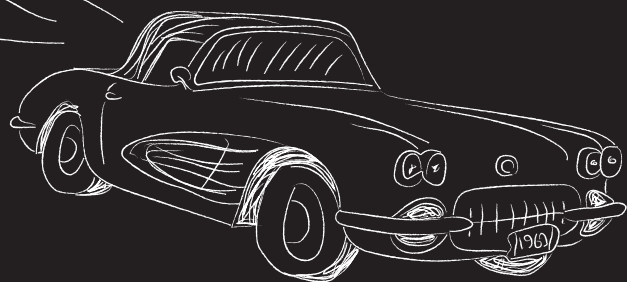


# MUSCLES IN NEW YORK!

by Thom Calandra

*Illustrated by Christine Watridge*







# MUSCLES IN NEW YORK

Written by Thom Calandra  
Illustrated by Christine Watridge



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First Edition: 2025

Cover design, book layout, and illustrations by Christine Watridge

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Printed in the United States of America  
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# IN NEW YORK CITY,

there is a restaurant: Brooklyn's greatest mussels joint.

It is called Mussels In New York. This joint serves the biggest mussels anyone has ever seen, plus other types of fish: shrimp and clams, ocean crabs and squid, which most folks know as *calamari*. Always with mounds and mounds of fettuccine noodles, or what the Italians call pasta.

Mostly, what the restaurant serves is right in its name, sort of: piles of steamed, garlic-sauteed Mussels, black-shelled outside, plump and tender inside, from the Atlantic Ocean.

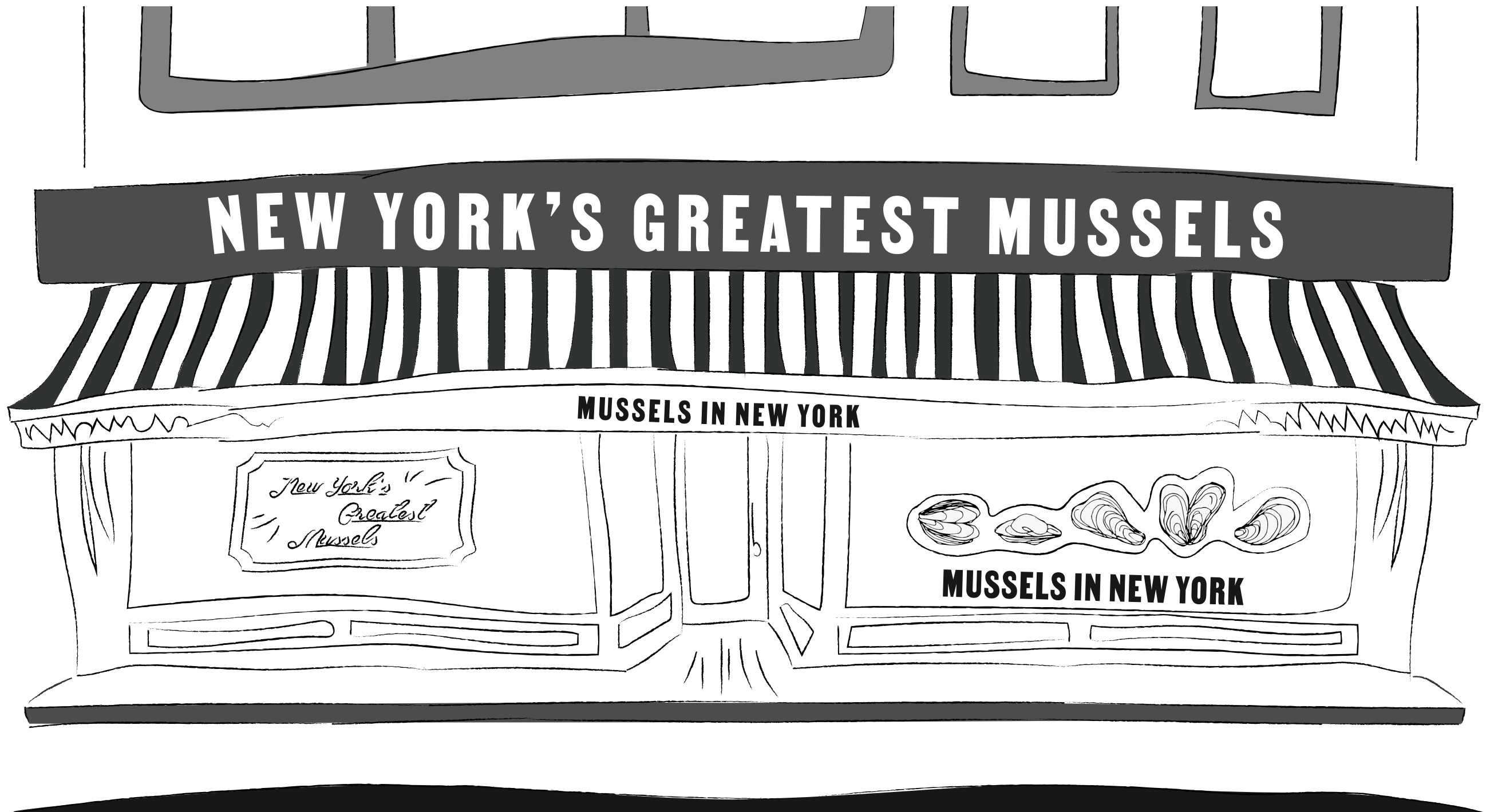
The owner of the restaurant is Gérald, only with an accent like so: *GER*-ald. Or French style, *ZHER*-ald.

Don't forget the accent; it is just like the chef's secret-recipe hot sauce for the mussels. Hot sauce – but only for those who like tingling, hot spice on their mussels and their fettuccine.

Of all the shellfish Gérald serves at Mussels In New York, the chef loves mussels most of all. They are the love of his life. They are tasty, too.

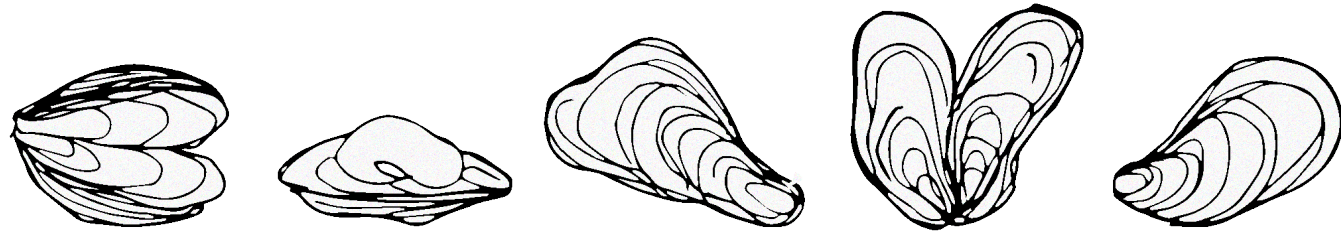
Gérald loves his little restaurant more than anything. He loves it so much, he lives in an upstairs apartment above Mussels In New York. Oh, he spends more time downstairs cooking than he does upstairs.







If Gérald had his way, everyone in school would learn to put ‘mussels’ in capital letters, like so: ‘MUSSELS.’ Or in French: ‘*LES MOULES.*’ Tasty? *Sans doute*, without a doubt!



Gérald moved to Brooklyn, which is a section of New York City, from Africa when he was a teen-ager. He moved from The Congo, which sounds scary and jungly but these days is a country with 75 million people. But not many mussels.

Gérald points out to his customers that he speaks French because four of every five people in The Congo speak French.

How can that be? In Africa? Gérald says it is because Belgium, another French-speaking country, ruled his home country for 50 years.

France and Belgium ruled a lot of Africa as their colonies. Not anymore.

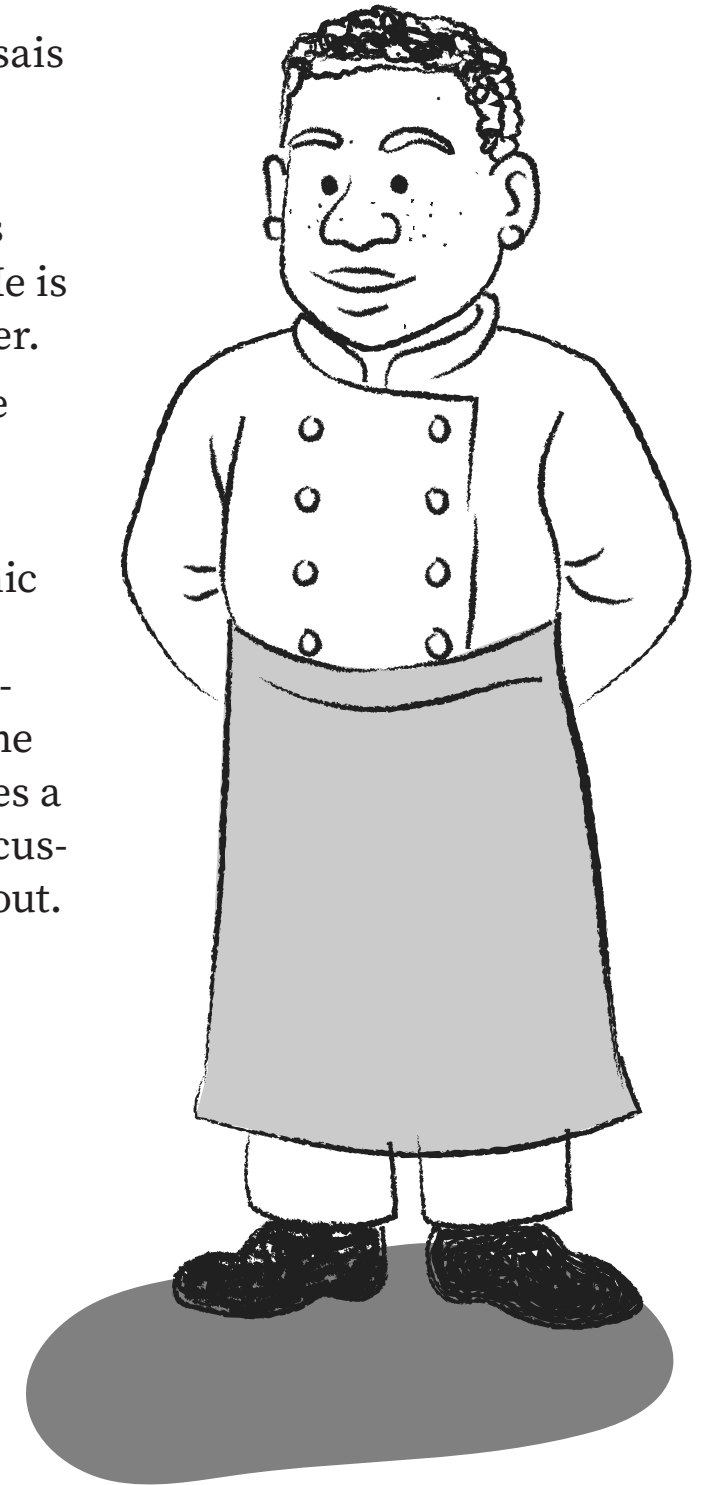
These days, Gérald speaks mostly English, which is kind of a requirement in his restaurant’s Brooklyn neighborhood.

Gérald Laforce Bukasais is our chef’s full name. A mouthful!

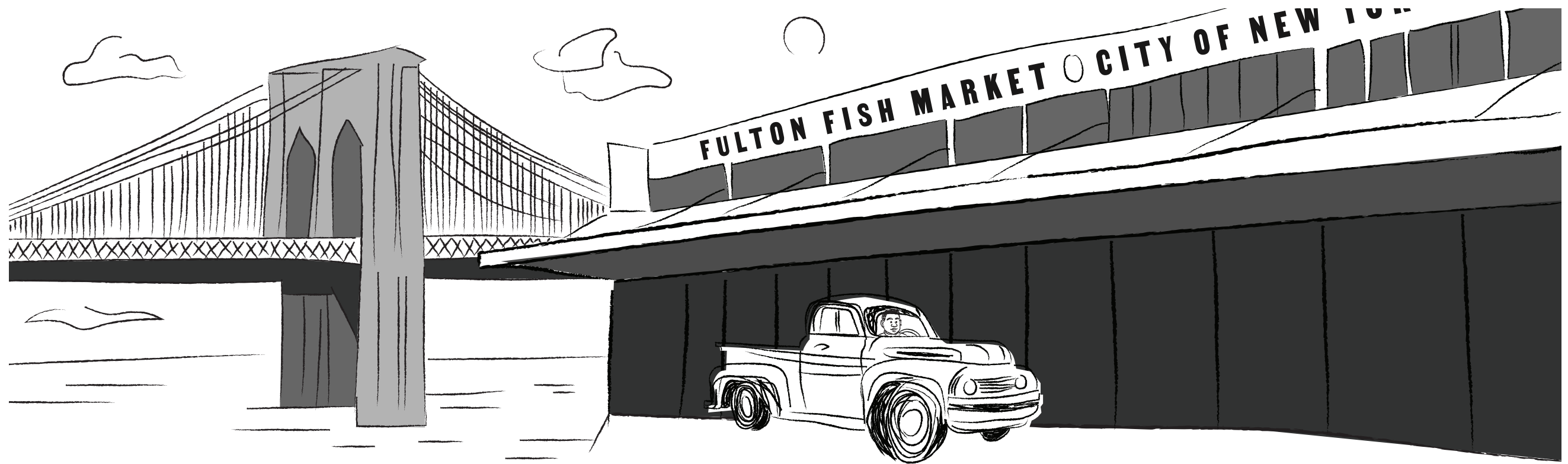
Gérald not only owns Mussels In New York. He is the chef. The dishwasher.

The delivery guy. The clean-up guy. Mussels scrubber, waiter.

Gérald is the mechanic who fixes the big brick oven and the busy dishwasher. Or fine-tunes the cash register, so it makes a *BREEENG* sound when customers pay on the way out. *Breeeng!*







## DRIVING FOR HIS MUSSELS

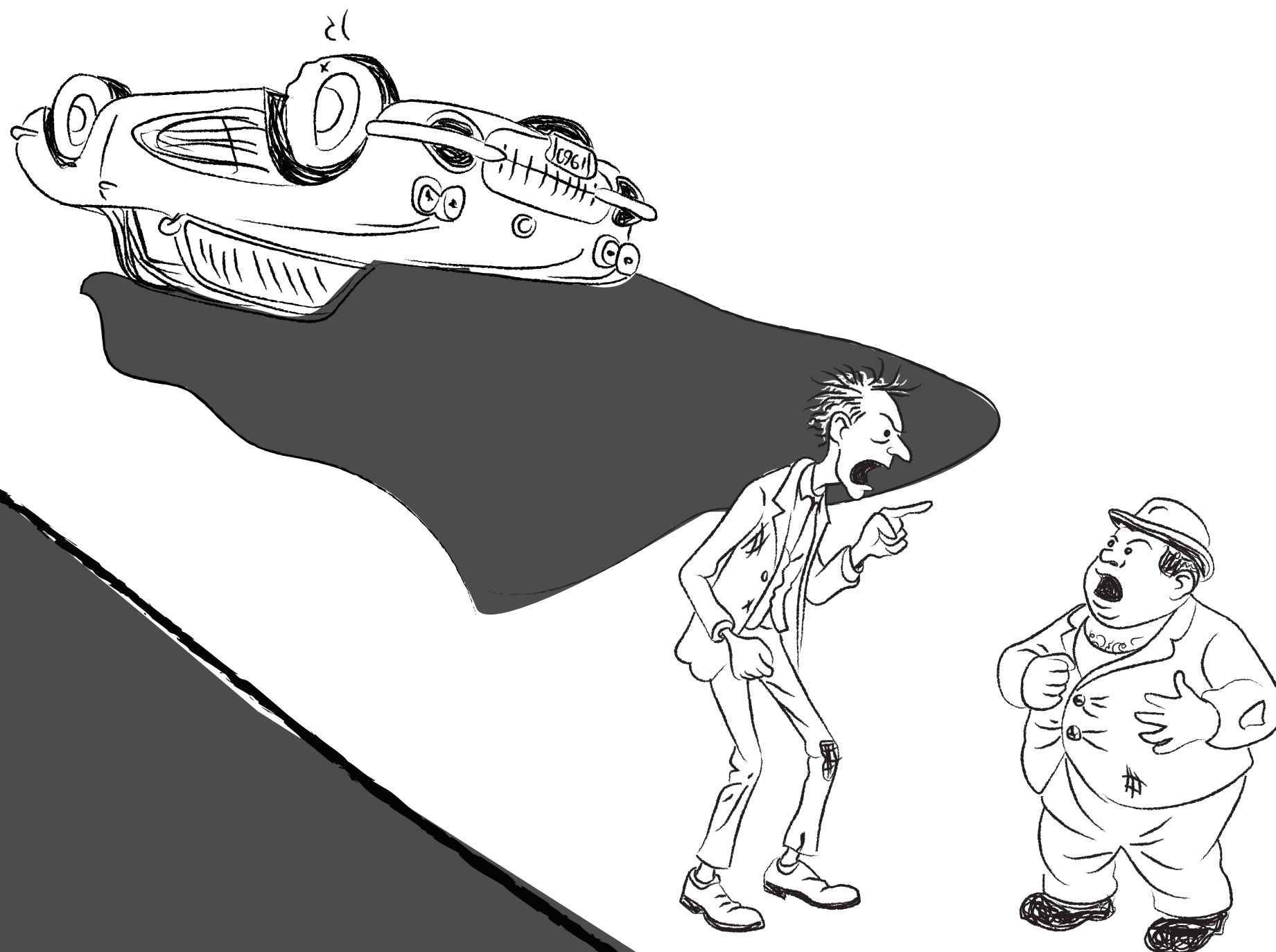
Most every morning, Chef Gérald drives in his rat-a-tat little truck to the Bronx, another section of New York City, early, early, before the sun shows its face. To get his mussels and the other seafood he needs from the busy Fulton Fish Market.

When he was growing up in the Congo in Africa, Gérald spent evenings with his father at his Papá's roadside fish shack, washing freshwater mussels foraged from rivers for a dish they called Congo Mussels.

Now, years later, in New York City, he uses mussels from the Atlantic Ocean, and from Long Island Sound. The salt-water mussels from the ocean are **PLENTY MORE TASTY** than those river-water mussels were in Africa.

The fishmongers at the Fulton Fish Market scoop shiny mussels from the largest vats of icy water you can imagine. “Hey,” they shout, “get *yér* shiny black mussels right here!”

Chef Gérald can lift onto his shoulders 250 pounds of mussels in one burlap sack. Our chef, he is strong. Like the accent on the first syllable of his name. He has the muscles.



One morning, when Gérald was driving his crusty old truck from the fish market, he saw a little guy and a big guy beneath the parkway he used to get back to Brooklyn. The two of them were waving their arms at each other.

This part is the drama of our “Muscles In New York!” story. OOPS, “Mussels In New York!”

Their car was lying on its side, a wounded automobile with a flat tire.

The two characters looked like Abbott and Costello, Schwarzenegger and DeVito. One squat as a clam and the other lean as a fettuccine noodle.

Oh, and they sure did look familiar to our chef.

The wounded car was a Chevrolet Corvette, a real muscle car.

Gérald loved Corvettes because they were lean, all muscle. He loved everything about cars and about his adopted New York and the whole USA, really. Even if he had yet to see anything outside Brooklyn, The Bronx and the rest of New York City.



# THE CONGO IN AFRICA

Gérald is what you call a transplanted New Yorker. From his Congo birthplace in Africa.

Gérald was glad to be a New Yorker in New York, even if it was 1. expensive; 2. loud; and 3. sometimes, scary.

He missed his Mamá, and he missed his young sister. The two of them moved to Europe when Gérald in his teenage years moved to Brooklyn.

Gérald's Mamá packed her only son off to New York to live with an older cousin. We'll learn more about our chef's teenage years, just not now.

Our chef's Mamá was born in Europe. She and Gérald's young sister moved to Belgium right after Gérald went to New York City.

Of course, Gérald missed his Papá fiercely, too. Maybe even a fettuccine stick more than his Mamá, but who's counting?

Papá had to still be in Africa, which is home, after all, and filled with beautiful people, fun music and scrumptious dishes.

Our mussels chef had heard from his father maybe three times, in short letters, since Gérald left for New York City five or six years ago.

That was in the days and weeks and months when his Papá would head to the Congo roadside fish shack where he cooked, and was driving his crusty old convertible VW Karmann Ghia that had lost its top and was missing one of its headlights.

His father's roadside cooking for the mine workers and railroad builders of the Congo had to use mostly river mussels that were native to parts of that rugged country. River mussels are from fresh water but they are nowhere near as tasty as ocean mussels.

Still, the river mussels were cheap. The Congo in Africa used to be the Belgian Congo, and in Belgium, they love their mussels. Shiny, black and scrumptious.

At his Congo fish shack, Papá had to scrub those hoary river mussels as hard as he scrubbed the simple tile floors of the restaurant. Gérald's father called it muscle grease.

Gérald's Papá used a big pit behind the shack to barbecue those tough river mussels for the famished workers.

Oh. But when Papá was flush enough with Congolese francs – the money they use there – to pay for a load of ultra-tasty ocean salt-water mussels that came from far away, well, no barbecue necessary. Papá would saute and steam the tender mussels, just as Gérald does now in Brooklyn.

On those fortunate days, word of Papá's salt-water mussels

spread so fast that at the shack's twilight opening, ultra-hungry workers stuffed the joint to overflowing and way out the door.

Those workers liked the barbecued mussels, as tough as they were, but they adored the steamed mussels.

When Gérald was maybe 3 or 4 years old, his Mamá asked him to paint a mussel or two on the hood of Papá Chef's Karmann Ghia. "We will surprise Papá with *mussels graffiti*," she said.

So Gérald did just that one Sunday morning before Papá woke up.

He painted a whole bunch of mussels on the hood of the old heap, and decorated the Karmann Ghia's two doors. Papá almost did not recognize his car.

Gérald so, so, *so much* remembered that morning, remembered it like black paint on a whitewashed wall. Father and son cherished that Karmann Ghia, especially when the car was not backfiring or refusing, like a stubborn mussel that kept itself muzzled, to open its doors on a thunderstorm day.

The sports car's on-again, off-again headlights those years ago looked like they were winking when Papá headed to the mussels shack on teenage Gérald's final Congo evening in the country.

How great, thinks our chef Gèrald, would it be to have a sporty car in New York, waiting outside the restaurant at the end of a very long day? How super would it be if Papá and

Mamá and his sister were in it?

Really *super*. Maybe even a little mussel graffiti on the car, too?

Still, every time Gérald was *this close* to saving enough money to buy even a used Chevy or a VW, forget about his adored Corvette, something went wrong at the restaurant in Brooklyn. The heaters stopped heating, or the big old brick oven started leaking gas, or the rusty plumbing stopped plumbing, and Gérald had to spend his hours and his mussels profits to fix these things.

## OH! THE MEANIES

Hey, where were we? Oh yes, on the way back from the Fulton Street Fish Market.

This very morning, under the freeway, that big guy, whom Gérald automatically named Monsieur Meanie, or Mr. Meanie, was yelling at his miniature, lower-case, eeny-meanie partner. They both were huffing and puffing as the two tried to lift their Corvette off the ground.

Big Meanie was doing the shouting at Little Meanie, and the small guy was doing the heaving and huffing.

Gérald pulled over. It sure was a Corvette, after all! Shiny, and black as a mussel. A little scuffed from being on



its side, but still a Corvette.

Gérald knew he was strong enough to help get the sports car back on its feet. Our chef was young, 23 or 24 years young. He had plenty of muscles. He was kind. He had a soft place for people who needed a helping hand.

Plus, Corvettes were convertibles made of fiberglass and they were very light cars.

Big Meanie was red in the face, and steam was almost coming out of his large ears. The two meanies had a spare tire, but they didn't have a jack to lift up the car. So they couldn't change the flat tire!

Big Meanie looked like he was going to blow a gasket, he was so angry!

It was so early in the morning. Gérald pulled in his old truck behind the Corvette.

He stuck his head out the window and asked if he could help.

The two of them were arguing about something. They didn't give Gérald the time of day even. How rude? Very. *Très*.

Little Meanie, he had something that looked like a jagged piece of sharp black metal, maybe it was a blade, in his back pocket, Gérald saw very clearly. They were shouting at each other LOUDLY, and their yelling was bouncing off the cinder-block walls of the underpass.

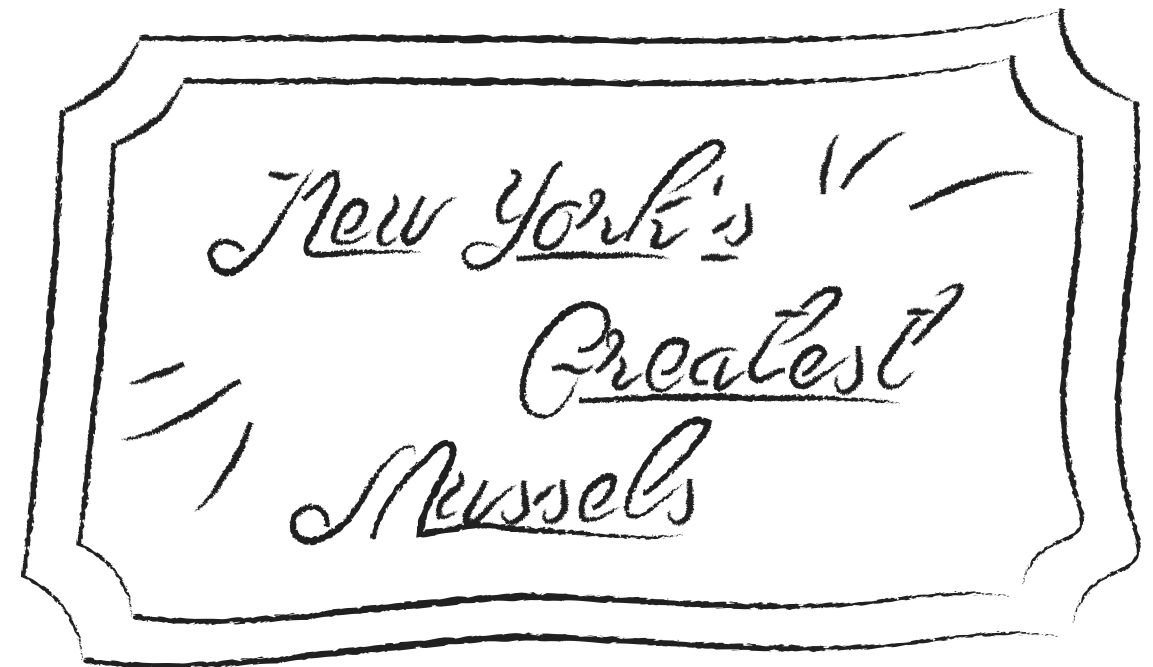
*Adieu* – goodbye – was best in this tunnel of trouble, our chef thought.

Bye-bye now. Gérald drove his old truck through the parkway underpass and onto the freeway to Brooklyn. He wanted to help but those two guys were too busy fussing and yelling up a storm to accept our chef's help.

When he returned to his Mussels In New York kitchen, Gérald set to work to wash and scrub the shellfish even cleaner than they already were from the fish market.

Then he mopped the floors. He cleaned the window with the large and brightly lit black-and-white-and-blue sign, "New York's Greatest Mussels."

Gérald washed the pots and pans. Swept the floor.

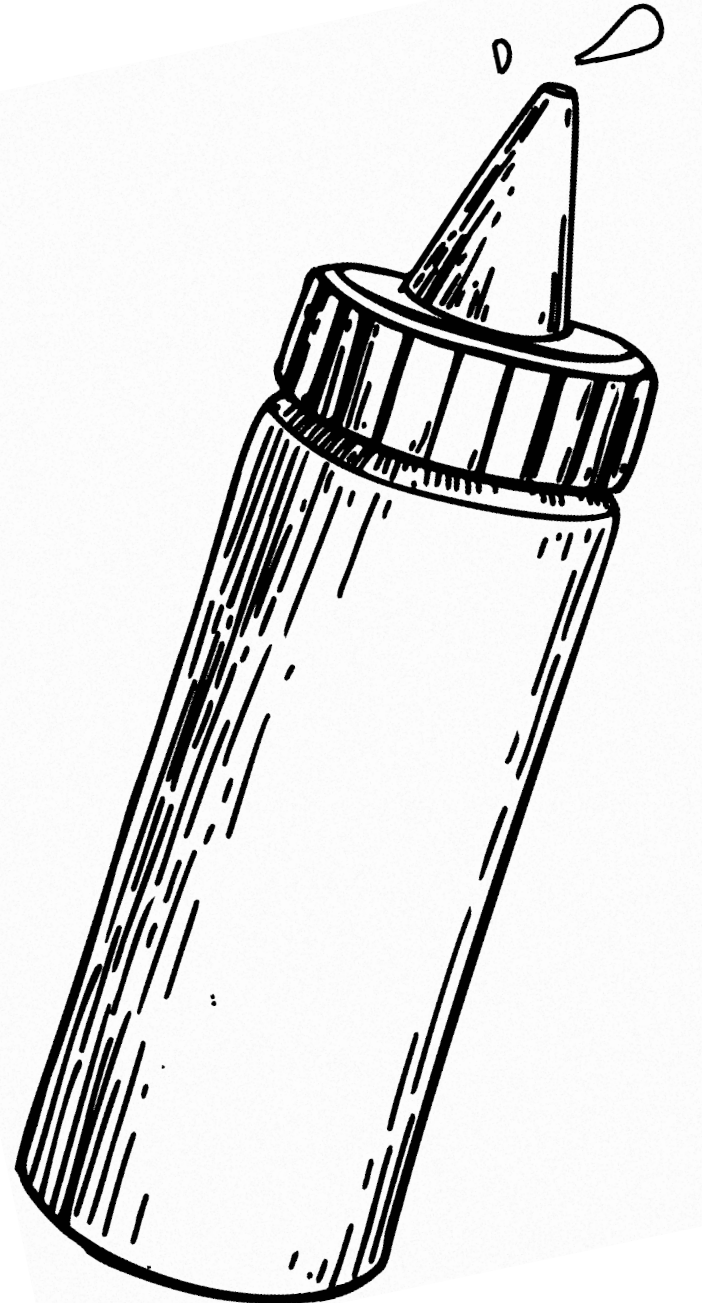


“Ouf!” Gérald would say each morning after he was finished. “That wasn’t so hard.” Or something like that.

Now, Gérald had a waitress at the restaurant. Her name was Sally.

Sally is New York’s greatest mussels’ waitress. Sally is the only waitress in the place. She is tiny and a black-haired beauty.

Sally grew up in Brooklyn, in this same neighborhood as Mussels In New York: Gravesend. That’s right next to Sheepshead Bay, where old-timers, and new-timers such as Gérald, take charter boats for a half-day to fish for mackerel, seabass, cod, the bottom-feeding sheepshead fish and porgies.



# Oh là là!

Gérald just loved to say that one: “porgies.”

Sally had lovely, tender muscles from carrying all those plates of mussels. Sally was always smiling.

She also was always smacking together her thumb and index finger of her left hand. *Smack. Smack.* It was cute. For some reason, that’s what some folks did in Brooklyn; like snapping their fingers.

Sally was always finding ways to get Gérald to put more mussels, and more fettuccine and more hot sauce, on her customers’ plates.

Sometimes, she would even kiss Gérald on the cheek for piling mussels and fettuccine and hot sauce on her plates. “*Oh là là,*” Gérald would say, and blush.

The customers at Mussels In New York just loved the beans out of Sally. She heaped piles of steamed mussels on



the plates she served.

Now, Gérald wasn't always happy to see mountains of mussels on his customers' plates.

He was running a business, right?

"*Trop de moules*," the big guy would say. "Too many mussels, *oui*?"

He says to Sally in the kitchen, where steam from the boiling pots of pasta water made him sweat in summer and toasty in winter, "Sally, oh Sally, how are we going to make money if we give *everyone* extra mussels?"

Sally knew how. She gave her customers lots of fettuccine, lots of zee hot sauce, and plenty of Italian baguettes, the kind with the sesame seeds and warmed in the brick oven. She says, "This way, you always know they're going to come back."

Gérald smiles, like zee crack in zee mussels, and says, "Zis way, maybe we go broke, but everyone is happy. Sally, oh my Sally!"

If you're wondering about how the meanies fit into this story, this is where.

## THE MUSSELS THIEVES

So. One day, some crazy guy – everyone in the neighborhood called him Little Meanie – robbed the restaurant.

Yes! But of course! That same meanie from the parkway underpass.

Little Meanie came in late one night to use the restroom, then hid there until Gérald and Sally locked up. Then, near midnight, he took all zee mussels, and a few other things, too. Like four gallons of *zee hot zos*!

Oh my, the mussels!

Little Meanie let his partner, Big Meanie, into the restaurant, right through the front door.

The two baddies took three cases of root beer. Two cases of cream soda. A half-case of jumbo olive oil cans that were very expensive. They carried away the entire silvery cash register and the \$185 of bills and coins in it. *Brrring*!

Gérald remembers reading in the colorful New York newspapers about criminals and other bad guys (and gals) in what they call the 5 boroughs of the city. Manhattan, Brooklyn, The Bronx, Queens and Staten Island.

This Little Meanie was bad, mean, small, ugly and evil. *Brrring* it all back, you lower-case meanie!

His partner in mussels crime, Big Meanie, also was bad,

mean, big, ugly and evil.

Yes, the same one from the parkway mess in the underpass.

Big Meanie dragged the loot from the restaurant with two big sacks for the mussels and for the gallons of hot sauce. A wheelbarrow for all the rest.

The two meanies, wouldn't you know, lived right around the corner from the restaurant, in a dark alley with a tiny tin and cardboard shed at the end of it.

Both their hearts were black. What other color could they be?

Back at the restaurant the next morning, Gérald was opening for the day. "*Oh là là!*" he cried out. "*Zee muzzels! Zey are all gone.*" Gérald called the police on the pay telephone hanging on a wall near the entrance of Mussels In New York.

"*Zee hot zos*, it is gone, too," the owner of New York's greatest mussels joint said into the telephone.

The neighborhood police didn't seem to care that much. They had too much work handling another emergency. A policeman told Gérald on the phone, "Buddy, just around the corner from you, two sewers are blocked up. The alleyway is flooding."

Then, another voice spoke to our chef,

a policewoman. She said, "Hey are you the Mussels In New York guy? The sewers are backing up with mussel shells. What a mess!"

The police hung up on Gérald.

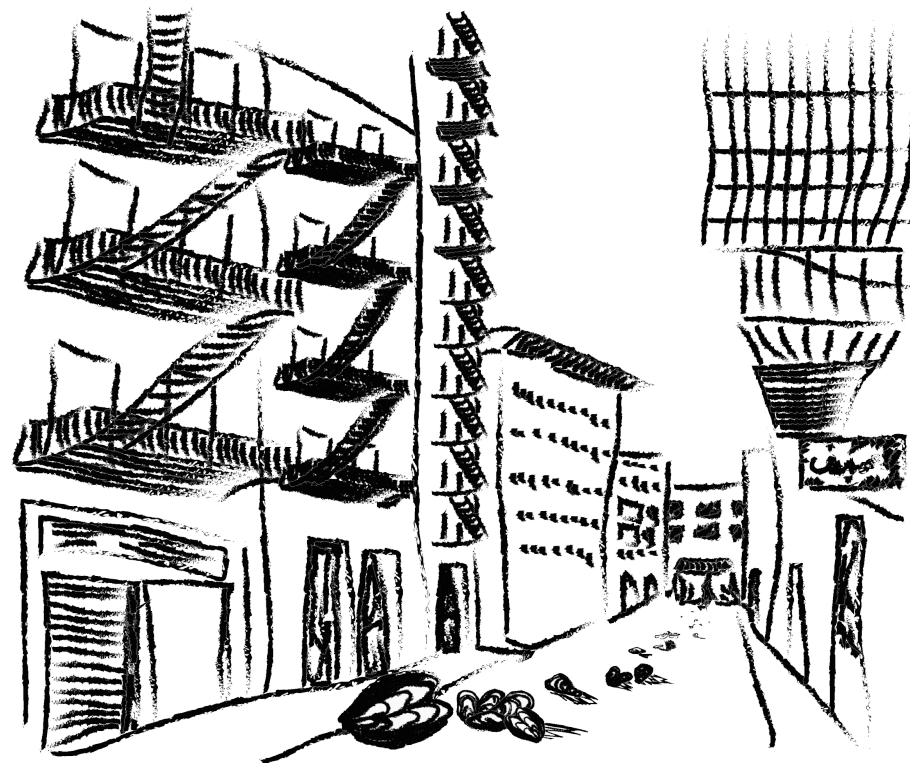
"*Mais oui,*" thought Gérald. "*Zey must be my muzzels.*" Gérald slid into his Belgian-French Congo *zee's* when he was feeling the heat. Otherwise, his pronunciation of English was pretty darn good.

Gérald left the restaurant with a thick iron frying pan to hunt down his missing mussels. Oh, and to find *zee hot zos*, which you know by now is a recipe from his Papá's days at fast-food shacks in the Congo.

[Oh, you can see *Gérald's mussels and fettuccine recipe* – easy as 1-2-3 – at the end of this story. *Next to the asterisk.\**]

Around the corner from Mussels In New York, there were broken, black mussel shells everywhere. They were a trail to the dark alley.

Gérald entered the alley. He called out for the meanies to give up their "*muzzels and zee hot zos.*" By this time, the two mussel thieves were stuffed full of mussels and hot sauce. Fettuccine, too, of course. The two crooks couldn't move an inch, they were so stuffed.

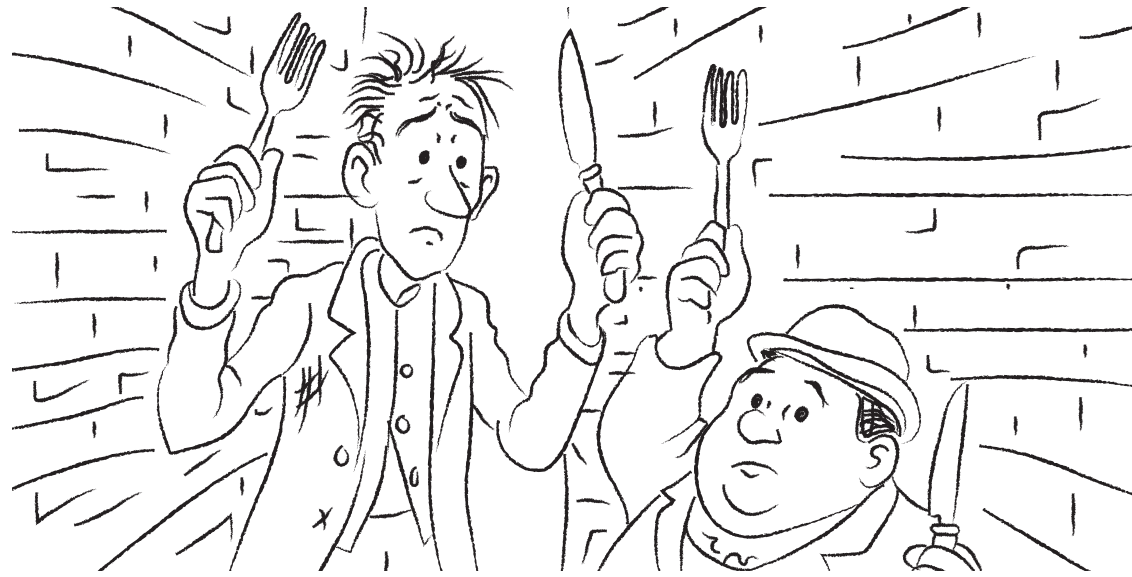




The police drove their patrol car right into the alley behind Gérard. Two of them jumped out with their nightsticks, actually, their morning-sticks, drawn out, ready for battle.

“Come out with your forks and knives up,” the police shouted into a cardboard shack at the end of the alley.

The two meanies tried to hide beneath stained and yucky



sheets of cardboard in the alley, but they were too stuffed to fit, even Little Meanie. So they decided to make a run for it. Or a roll for it.

Those two blackhearts rolled themselves right down the alley like stuffed bowling balls. With lots of *zee* hot sauce greasing the way. The two scoundrels were headed straight toward Gérard and the police.

## BOOM-ZEE-BOOM!

Gérard wound up his frying pan and took a swing. “*Boom-zee-boom!*”

Our chef, when he felt his mussels threatened, could work his muscles to a top-power rating. Like a roaring sports car.

The two meanies went rolling through mussel shells and blistering hot sauce, sliding all the way to New York’s greatest mussels restaurant just around the corner.

What a trip that was! Talk about muscle justice with sauce.

Gérard’s muscle message that day is why his customers call him by the nickname Muscles to this day.

Those two thieves were muscled, sliding and sluicing a half-block away, straight into the kitchen of Mussels In New York. They landed at the foot of the big brick oven.

If only his Papá could see him now!

Back in Brooklyn after the eventful evening and dawn of the bad guys’ break-in, when the police sirens flashed red into the Mussels In New York kitchen, Gérard saw green.

He had an idea.

In court downtown, those meanies made what the newspapers call a probation pact with a Brooklyn judge. Guess who vouched for them and hired them?

That is an easy answer. Our chef did!

The two meanies now show up for their Mussels In New York shifts almost every day but for Tuesdays, which is the chef's day off usually. They are right now washing dishes, mopping the tiled restaurant's floors, scrubbing mussels for Gérald. Helping Sally clear the plates and utensils, wiping clean the tables.

Those lower-case, eensy-meanies are earning Upper-Case Meanie status. A Mussels & Muscles Miracle!

The two of them are now ex-Meanies and they are really, really glad for the work. And for their meals each evening before the two start their shifts.

Who wouldn't be glad? Mussels and pasta and hot sauce and toasty Italian bread!

Those two guys are much nicer than they were, even to one another, mostly because they get to eat New York's greatest mussels, and sometimes, clams or calamari or shrimp.

Yes, with *zee* hot sauce and all the trimmings.

They never turn down that meal. They get honest shellfish in return for restaurant work. Eat!

Oh, and guess what, the two ex-Meanies adore Sally. Who wouldn't?

Gérald says their hearts grew an inch or two as they scrubbed and toiled each day.

A busy night's restaurant work at Mussels In New York does wonders for character, and these two characters needed that.

Chef Gérald tells Sally one evening when the place is closing, "I *zink zee* hot *zos* helps those guys *zee* most." He says that with a wink.

## ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE

Gérald took charge of the Meanies' Chevy Corvette, buffed out the scratches and took turns with Sally and with Mr. Big ex-Meanie and Mr. Little ex-Meanie driving it.

Gérald's father would be proud to see that, our chef knew. Gérald could feel his Papá deep down in his muscles, most strongly in that chest muscle that is *le coeur*, the heart.

Gérald missed his father no end. He thought Papá was still in the Congo working as a roadside cook at his own mussels shack.

Somehow, our upper-case Chef just knew, if he could track down his father in Africa, well then, he could locate his sister and Mamá in Belgium and reunite the family.

He even thinks, but doesn't tell Sally just yet, the whole family could move to Brooklyn and live in one of the two apartments above Mussels In New York. That would be a happy day!

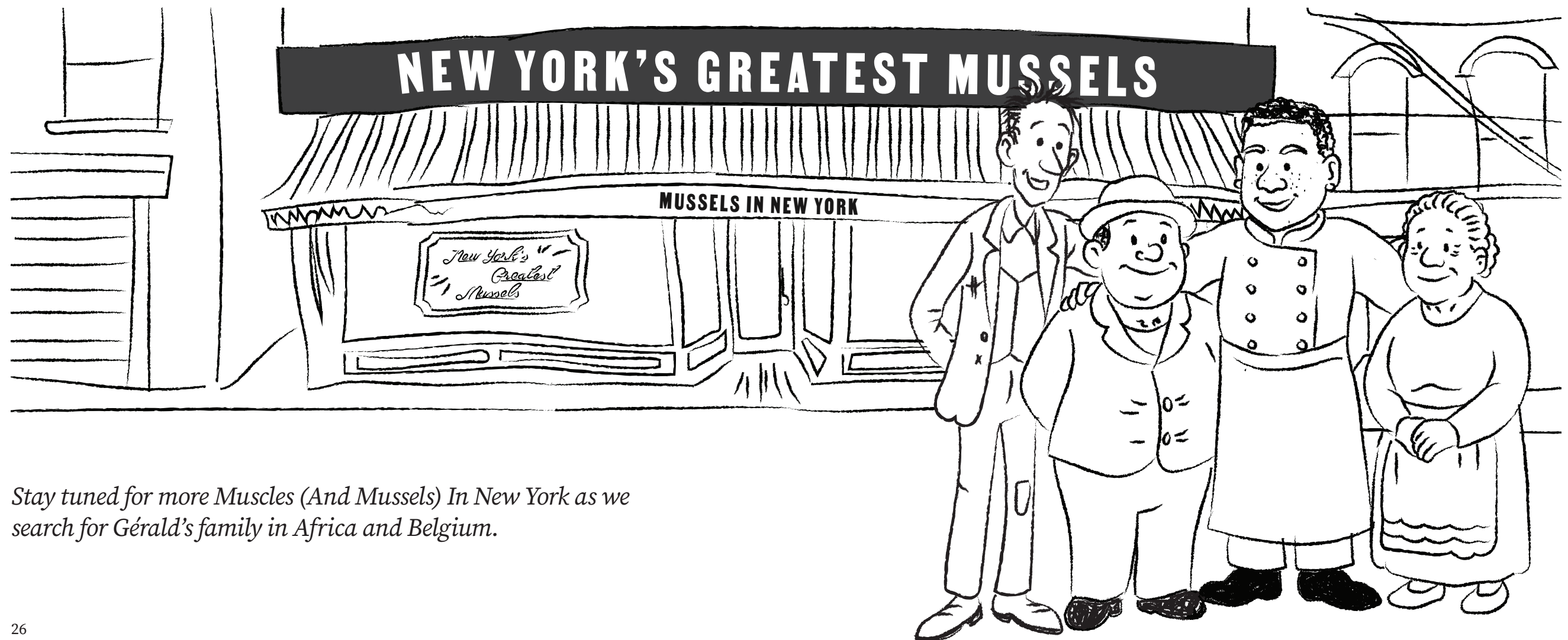


Gérald has *zee* mussels and the muscles. He has the kindest waitress in New York, Sally. There are our two Brooklyn Beanies, as Sally now calls them.

Most especially, everyone, the Beanies and the customers and the mussels-loving neighborhood police, and Gérald and Sally, they all have *zee* hot *zos*.

Our chef, feeding his luscious mussels into that big brick oven, whispers to himself every day, 'Now let's add the rest of our family. Oh please.'

## ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE, YES?



*Stay tuned for more Muscles (And Mussels) In New York as we search for Gérald's family in Africa and Belgium.*

# THE RECIPE\*

The No. 1 thing is to make this your own recipe!

## Zee Easy Steamed Mussels



### ingredients list

- Lots of mussels (always clean and scrub them, using your muscles)
- Olive oil
- A lot of garlic, mashed
- Coconut milk, maybe a quarter cup
- Fresh tomatoes (for the broth and zee hot zos)
- A little lemon juice (for the broth)
- Cilantro or parsley leaves, or both, shredded
- Pepper (for the broth and zee hot zos)
- A tiny spray of curry powder
- A thimble or two of toasted cumin seeds
- A pinch of salt
- One quarter of a small red onion, diced (for zee hot zos)
- A splash of cheap beer (for the broth)
- Red pepper flakes (for zee hot zos)
- One piece of fresh ginger (for zee hot zos)

**Pour a quarter-cup** of olive oil in a big iron pot, heat the oil on a low flame, then throw in the garlic. Throw in a fresh tomato or two, diced. Sprinkle in the salt. Then, add zee **mussels**, sprinkle in some water after a minute or two, and stir with a big, fat wooden spoon until the steam opens up zee mussels and makes them smile. Splash in a few ounces of cheap beer. Stir with a big fat wooden spoon.

Squeeze in a little lemon. Add that quarter-cup of coconut milk – or don't if you like zee mussels with just zee tomato.

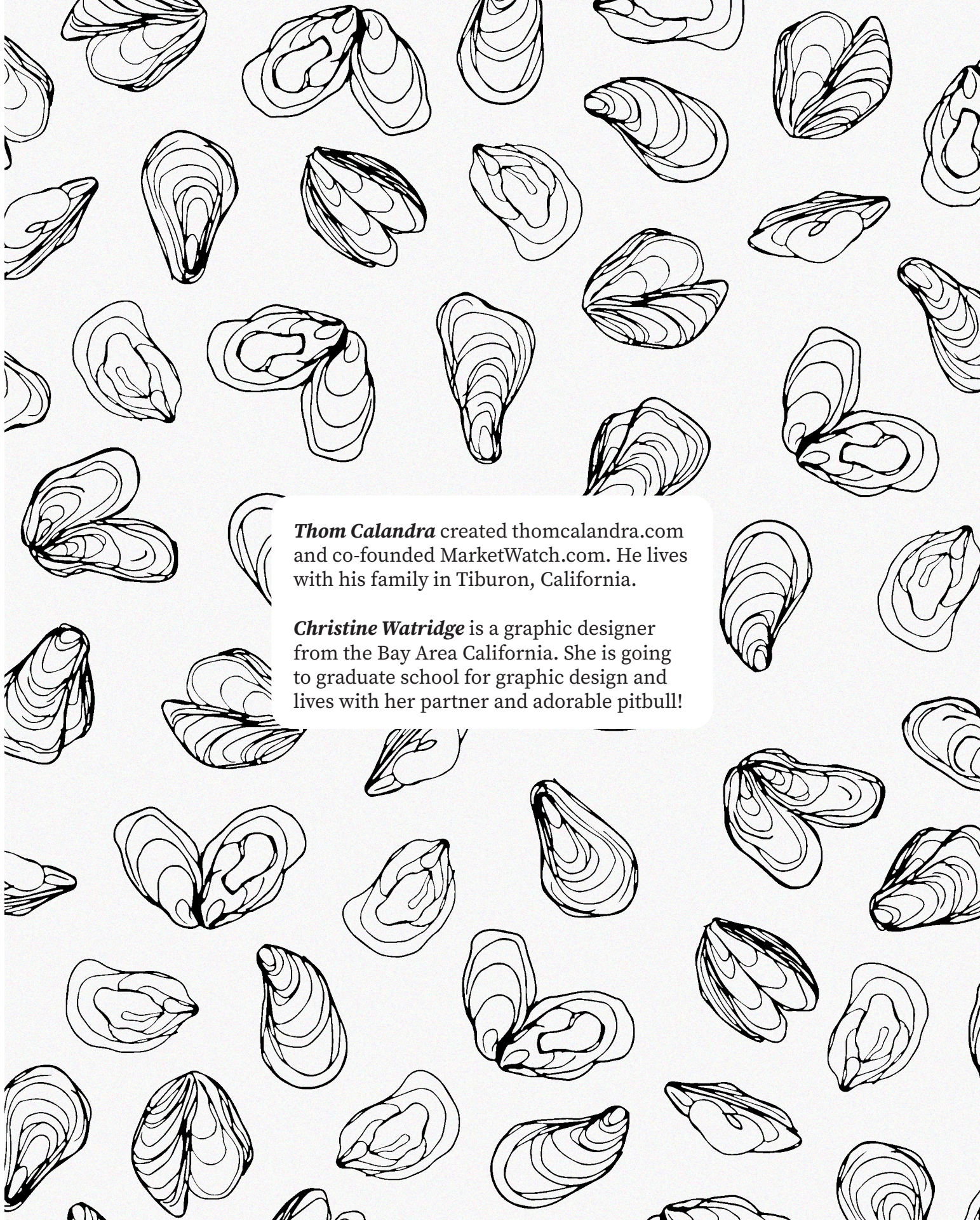
The curry powder, the pepper, the cumin seeds, use these sparingly to your own taste. Or not at all. Allow zee mussels in the broth to simmer at slightly higher heat. All of this is quick, maybe a few minutes.

**Zee hot sauce** (Everyone has their own secret sauce! Gérald uses fresh tomatoes, red pepper flakes, the finely chopped red onion, a few peppercorns, a squeeze of lemon, a squirt of olive oil, a small piece of finely chopped ginger, all blended or stirred by hand and served on the side – simple. No vinegar needed here.)

**A pound or two** of fettuccine, or linguine if you prefer, or even spaghetti if you really must. Don't overcook the pasta. Mix the pasta into the mussels and broth, sprinkle in the roughly chopped parsley or cilantro and stir again with that big wooden spoon. Serve steaming hot with Italian bread, the kind with the sesame seeds. Voilá!



# The End.



**Thom Calandra** created [thomcalandra.com](http://thomcalandra.com) and co-founded [MarketWatch.com](http://MarketWatch.com). He lives with his family in Tiburon, California.

**Christine Watridge** is a graphic designer from the Bay Area California. She is going to graduate school for graphic design and lives with her partner and adorable pitbull!



