THE JAMES BEARD FOUNDATION'S *Best of the Best*

A 25TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION OF AMERICA'S OUTSTANDING CHEFS

BY KIT WOHL

FOREWORD BY MARTHA STEWART

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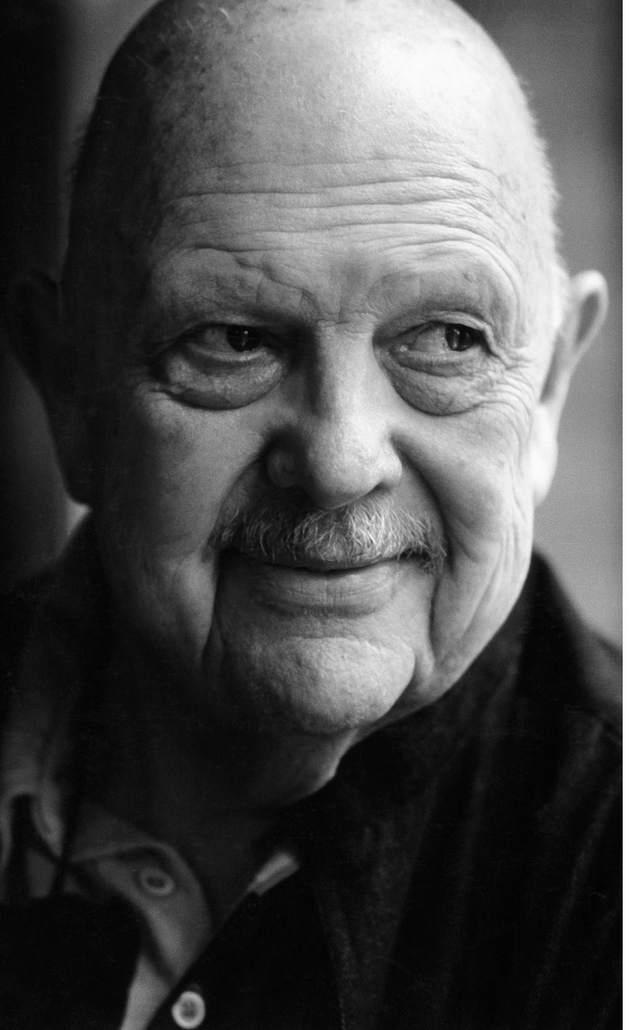


Foreword

MARTHA STEWART

Looking at the pictures and studying the recipes in this beautifully conceived, wonderfully photographed book, one gets an immediate sense of the scope, importance, and influence imposed on the American culinary taste by the many outstanding chefs who are featured. One also can understand more clearly how the "melting pot" that is America, the America that so thoroughly entranced the great James Beard with its incredible diversity and multiculturism, influenced the way these chefs cook.

There are twenty-one inspiring biographical monographs written by Kit Wohl about the twenty-one great chefs who have been selected as America's "Best of the Best." I was thrilled to realize that I have had each of these renowned chefs on my television shows. I have eaten their food more than once in my lifetime. And I know exactly why they were selected above all others as the "best": their talent as chefs, their acclaimed food, and their vast contributions to the American culinary landscape.

I remember every dish I ate at each of their restaurants, and the memories evoked by this book are lovely and deep. Each chef has been recognized for his or her contributions to the culinary traditions of America and for their originality, creativity, and individualism. Most are American, steeped in local culture but greatly devout in their belief that home grown and fresh is best and purity of ingredients essential for superior results, while others are European, or trained internationally.

How lucky we are to be the recipients of such wonderful recipes, all of which I plan to try in the very near future: Judy Rodgers' Zuni Bread Soup, Cavatelli with Pasta Enrico from Mario Batali, and even an intriguing dessert, the Limoncello Tiramisù, from Lidia Bastianich.

This book is not just a tribute to twenty-one great chefs and their histories. It is, most important, a book devoted to James Beard, a central figure in the acknowledgment and promotion of what we all nowadays call "American Cuisine." James Beard wrote more than thirty cookbooks, and he is credited with bringing French cooking to American cooks. He talked and gossiped and cooked his way through giant categories in the world of cuisine: breads, pasta, fish, barbecue, and casseroles, to name but a few.

I cherish many of his books, but my favorite is a tattered, worn-out first edition of *Beard on Bread* from 1973, which I still refer to for his Mother's Raisin Bread and a delectable Sally Lunn.

I remember meeting James Beard, a giant of a man with a large head, large hands, and a larger belly, at a foodie event hosted by Craig Claiborne and Pierre Franey. His jovial, loud, and boisterous personality was so awe inspiring, but even more so was the vastness of his knowledge, his collections of fine personal commentary, and recipes about the foods he was so passionate about.

The influence of James Beard is so widespread and his memory so very gracefully preserved, thanks to the James Beard Foundation, its good works, and the chefs and cooks everywhere who everyday practice what James Beard taught us so well.

1991 & 1998

WOLFGANG PUCK

CHAPTER *one*

WOLFGANG PUCK'S NAME MAY NOW EVOKE FOR MANY PEOPLE VISIONS OF HOLLYWOOD GLAMOUR, OF AMERICA'S FIRST REAL "CELEBRITY CHEF." But Spago, the restaurant that catapulted Puck to stardom, was never originally intended to be a particularly fancy or glamorous place.

Ask Puck today why Spago became such a success, and his first instinct is to deflect the credit to Hollywood itself. "'Swifty' Lazar, Orson Welles, they made it famous," he says, letting their names stand in for the throngs of Tinseltown powers who began flocking to Spago when it first opened in an unassuming location above the Sunset Strip in 1982.

Spago's success was based on more than just being a celebrity hangout, or on the gourmet pizza that won so much attention in the early days. Spago pioneered many restaurant concepts taken for granted in restaurants today: the "open kitchen,"—in Puck's case, a wood-burning pizza oven—became part of the dining excitement; an emphasis on cooking with locally produced, in-season ingredients; and the notion that "fine" dining didn't have to be a stuffy, formal experience but could instead be casual, relaxed, and fun. He was also a serious chef, possessing a lifetime of personal and top professional cooking experiences when he opened Spago at the age of thirty-two.

Puck grew up far from ostentation in a cottage with no television or radio in Sankt Veit an der Glan, a tiny village in southern Austria. He first learned cooking from his grandmother and his mother, Maria Puck, who was pastry chef and baker at the Hotel Linde in the lakeside resort town of Maria Wörth. "I used to go there with her every summer," Puck remembers, "and I would follow the chefs around. Against the wishes of my father, who thought cooking was not a man's job, I decided I wanted to become a pastry chef. But I couldn't find an apprenticeship."

When Puck was fourteen, the owner of the Hotel Linde found him an entry-level job at the Hotel Post in Villach. But the chef there didn't like his work and fired him after a month. Despondent and not wanting to go home a failure, the teenager sneaked back into the kitchen. With the aid of another cook, he hid and slept in the root cellar, peeling potatoes for his keep. The hotel's owner discovered him weeks later and found the persistent Puck another job at the Park Hotel. "I spent three years there, completing my apprenticeship, getting my certificate as a chef, and finishing first in my age group in a national culinary competition when I was sixteen."

Puck moved on as part of the kitchen team at Aux Trois Faisans in Dijon, France. "After a year, I found out I'd been working in a Michelin one-star restaurant," Puck says. "Then, I saw that some other restaurants had two and three stars, so I wrote to them asking for work."

Even though the legendary Paul Bocuse was among the chefs to whom Puck sent those letters, his response came from the great Raymond Thuillier, chef of L'Oustau de Baumanière in Les Baux, which is considered the three-star pinnacle of Provençal cuisine. "Thuillier was my mentor," Puck says. "I spent two-and-a-half years there and saw what it meant to be a chef doing your own style of cooking. Thuillier had only started to cook professionally when he was around fifty, so he didn't have the rigidity of many men his age in the kitchen. I really started to understand the potential that food had, and it was the first time I started to really like cooking. We used only fresh vegetables and everything was cooked to order. That's still how I believe a restaurant must work."

From there, Puck cooked in Paris for a while before heading back south to the two-star La Reserve in Beaulieu, where he served briefly as a *chef de partis* (line cook)—"very elegant, but run like an army." He left the country for lack of a green card leading to to a stint at the Hotel de Paris in Monte Carlo, where he was the number-one commis, or assistant chef, on the vegetable station. Puck's return to France was his "next big jump up" as *chef de partis* at the historic Maxim's in Paris, cooking a modernized style of classic French cuisine. Promoted to night chef, it was a lively time when guests included Brigitte Bardot, Jeanne Moreau, Sylvie Vartan, and Barbra Streisand.

Puck became executive chef at La Tour in Indianapolis, Indiana, a job that appealed to him not only as his stepping stone to America but also as a fan of car racing, fueled by his time in Monte Carlo. He admits that his approach was too revved-up for his first job as head of a restaurant kitchen. "I was so hyper then," he recalls. "I screamed and yelled constantly." He soon realized, however, that doing so wasn't the most productive way to manage an American kitchen brigade.

A year later, drawn by the excitement and opportunities of the West Coast, he moved to his employer's Los Angeles restaurant. Puck soon met restaurateur Patrick Terrail, whose Uncle Claude owned the four-century-old Tour d'Argent in Paris. Terrail had opened a bistro called Ma Maison, where Puck started cooking part-time. He quickly took over the kitchen, and, by June 1975, Puck became the co-owner. Both his cooking and his boyish charm soon had a following of Hollywood royalty like Billy Wilder, Jack Lemmon, and Orson Welles, who especially enjoyed sharing a glass of Mumm de Cramant Grand Cru Champagne with the likeable young chef to kick off lunch every day.

After six years at Ma Maison, Puck decided to open his own place, and so he ended the partnership with Terrail on July 4, 1981. "That was my Independence Day."

For his new restaurant, he settled on the name *Spago*, Mediterranean slang for "spaghetti," which had been suggested by Italian songwriter, producer, and recording artist Giorgio Moroder. "He was supposed to be the main investor for the restaurant and said that the name would be perfect because it also poetically referred to a string that never ends," Puck explains. "Morodoer never wound up giving us the money, but the name stuck anyway."

There was more to the Spago concept than the name. "I thought that Southern California reminded me of the Riviera or, even more, of Italy's Amalfi coast. Yet, at the time, people in the city still had the idea that fine dining meant eating in a formal French restaurant with starched white tablecloths and waiters in tuxedos." He set out to change the definition of a great meal. "I decided that rather than serving the kind of dishes you might get in Paris or Lyon, I wanted to grill food to order over oak wood or vine trimmings, like they did in the Mediterranean, without complicated sauces, and to keep everything simple." He had also recently seen a wood-fired pizza oven in a pizzeria where a friend was working. "I thought that would be a fun thing to have in an upscale restaurant."

Spago, which was designed by Puck's former wife Barbara Lazaroff, opened on January 16, 1982. They furnished the restaurant on a tight budget, with patio tables and chairs. "People smiled when they saw it and they immediately felt relaxed," Puck says. "All these people who were used to stuffy restaurants got the joke." But the food, though casual, was no joke; Puck concentrated on using the best ingredients he could find. "At that time, people were used to ordering fresh tomato salads all year round," Puck says. "But we would not sell a tomato salad in the wintertime." He was the first non-Asian chef to frequent the Japanese fish market for his seafood. He brought in the best fresh sand dabs from Monterey. A farmer in Sonoma raised lamb especially to Puck's specifications. He went to Chinatown to buy his chickens—and also bought a Chinese smoker to tea-smoke his ducks. Soon, Puck had cultivated a relationship that continues to this day with Chino Farm, considered one of the region's finest sources for seasonal vegetables and fruits. "The only thing completely serious at Spago was what was on the plate."

Puck's pizzas grabbed media attention and customer devotion. He didn't invent the idea of a crispy, cracker-thin crust, but that was just the sort that suited his light, inventive, California-style approach. His toppings introduced delicious new possibilities in savory pies: goat cheese, pesto, sun-dried tomatoes, fresh Santa Barbara shrimp, truffles, and fresh sausage made with the meat from those Sonoma lambs.

Not long after Spago had opened, he created one of its most famous pizzas as a last-minute act of whimsy. The actress Joan Collins had come in for a late dinner and ordered an appetizer of their house-smoked salmon. "We always served it traditional style, with toasted brioche, chopped sweet onion, capers, chives, and lemon wedges," Puck recalls. "But that night, we were so busy that we ran out of brioche, so I rolled out some pizza dough to give her instead. At the last minute, though, I decided to cover the hot-from-the-oven

pizza dough with some crème fraîche flavored with fresh dill, add some onions, draped the smoked salmon on top, and, because Joan loved caviar, put a big dollop of that in the center. Other guests started demanding it as soon as they saw it on the way to Joan's table."

Spago's smoked salmon pizza became an instant sensation. He gradually began building an empire of other restaurants and branded activities. Chinois on Main, his second restaurant, opened in Santa Monica in 1983 and kicked off fusion cuisine—another major food trend. The menu, from Puck and Ma Maison and Spago alumnus Kazuto Matsusaka, melded Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Korean influences with the chef's Californian and French training, and was served in a dining room created by Lazaroff as a bold fantasia of Asian design. After that came Postrio, located in San Francisco's Prescott Hotel. In 1992, Puck became the first name-brand chef to open a restaurant in Las Vegas with Spago in The Forum Shops at Caesars Palace. Five more restaurants followed at various locations.

Today, Puck has two dozen fine-dining restaurants; including Spago in Beverly Hills, Las Vegas, Maui, and Beaver Creek, Colorado; Chinois and his new ultra-elegant pan-Asian WP24, which opened in 2010 in the Ritz-Carlton in Los Angeles; and additional establishments in Singapore, Detroit, Minneapolis, Dallas, Atlantic City, and Washington, D.C. The elegant steakhouse CUT, an acclaimed new concept, debuted in the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in 2006, and now boasts three locations, with a fourth slated to open in London in 2011. And then there are multiple locations of the quick-casual Wolfgang Puck Express and Wolfgang Puck Bistro. Five million fresh and frozen Wolfgang Puck pizzas sold each year; twenty-six varieties of Wolfgang Puck canned soup are licensed to Campbell's; and Wolfgang Puck-branded cookware, small appliances, kitchen accessories, and tableware are sold on HSN.

Puck seems at times to be everywhere at once. His frequent appearances on ABC's *Good Morning America* have made him a regular since 1986. He hosted an Emmy Award–winning Food Network series in the early 2000s and is the author of six cookbooks.

How does he do it all and still maintain the level of quality and creativity for which he is renowned? Credit some of that success to the fact that he has mentored some of the most talented cooks in America, including Mark Peel, Nancy Silverton, Neal Fraser, Govind Armstrong, Michael Cimarusti, Josiah Citrin, and Quinn and Karen Hatfield, as well as Spago executive chef and corporate managing partner Lee Hefter, and executive pastry chef Sherry Yard.

"I'VE LEARNED THAT TO BE A SUCCESS AT ANYTHING," HE SAYS, "YOU'VE GOT TO FIND THE BEST PEOPLE, TRAIN THEM WELL, LET THEM KNOW WHAT YOU EXPECT, TREAT THEM WELL, AND THEN ALLOW THEM THE FREEDOM TO DO WHAT THEY DO BEST."

Puck has the seemingly boundless energy of a man who truly loves what he does. On weekdays, he can be found at Spago Beverly Hills. He is constantly on the move between the kitchen, working alongside his chefs, and the dining room, stopping by at tables and greeting guests. He cheerfully poses for photos and autographs cookbooks. Later he drives to Chinois or WP24 to make the same rounds. "By the time I get home, it can be after midnight," he admits. "But I tell everyone that twelve hours is only half a day. If you only work twelve hours, you're never going to be successful." On weekends, he may be participating in philanthropic activities, and Puck relishes time with older sons Cameron and Byron, and family life with his wife, Gelila, and their two young sons, Oliver and Alexander.

The first James Beard Foundation Outstanding Chef honoree—and the only person to be awarded that honor twice—played a major role in the California culinary revolution, and has turned into an American celebration of health-conscious, sustainable, and delicious dining habits. He has done it all by following a recipe for success that is disarming in its directness and modesty: "Do what you love. Work hard. Be patient. And, with a little luck, you could succeed."

LOBSTER SHANGHAI STYLE *with* CRISPY SPINACH

1 piece fresh ginger, approximately 1 inch
2 garlic cloves, minced
¾ cup plum wine or port, divided
2 tablespoons rice vinegar
2 tablespoons peanut oil
One 2-pound lobster, split lengthwise
2 tablespoons unsalted butter, divided
4 scallions, cut into ⅜-inch slices
1 to 2 teaspoons curry powder
½ cup fish stock
¼ cup dry white wine
1 tablespoon Chinese black vinegar or balsamic vinegar
½ teaspoon dried hot chili flakes
½ cup heavy cream
Salt
Freshly ground black pepper

12 large spinach leaves
Peanut oil, for frying

1. Preheat the oven to 500°F.

2. Peel the ginger, reserving the peels, and cut it into thin strips. Cut the peels into coarse strips. In a small saucepan, cook the ginger and garlic with ½ cup of the plum wine and the rice wine vinegar until 1 tablespoon of liquid remains. Remove from the heat.

3. Place a heavy, heatproof 12-inch skillet over high heat. Add the oil, then carefully add the lobster halves, meat-side down. Cook for 3 minutes. Turn the lobsters over and add 1 tablespoon of the butter. Continue to sauté until the lobster shells get red and the butter is nutty red. Transfer the lobsters to the oven for about 10 minutes, or until the meat is just cooked. Remove from the oven, remove the lobsters from the skillet, and keep warm.

4. Add the scallions, ginger peels, and curry powder to the skillet. Over high heat, sauté the mixture for 10 to 15 seconds, then whisk in the remaining plum wine, stock, white wine, black vinegar, and chili flakes. Reduce the liquid to ½ cup. Add the cream and reduce it by half. Add any liquid from the julienne of ginger, then whisk in the remaining 1 tablespoon butter. Season the sauce with salt and pepper.

5. Wash the spinach, cut off the stems, and dry the leaves well. In a large pot, heat the oil to 375°F and fry the spinach until crisp. Remove to paper towels to drain. Salt lightly.

6. Crack the lobster claws with the back of a large chef's knife. Arrange the lobster halves on a warm platter, meat-side down. Strain the sauce over the lobster, then sprinkle the sweet ginger on top. Garnish with the spinach leaves.

SERVES 2

2002

LIDIA MATTICCHIO BASTIANICH

CHAPTER *thirteen*

LIDIA MATTICCHIO BASTIANICH IS A LADY TO BE RECKONED WITH. HER LIFE IS A STORY OF AN ITALIAN-BORN IMMIGRANT EMBRACING A FOREIGN LAND, AND THEN ACHIEVING FAME AND ADULATION. The young girl who came here from post–World War II Italy brought with her an appreciation of regional Italian cooking and culture. Her culinary knowledge is a gift that she now shares with millions of Americans through her Emmy-nominated television series and best-selling books.

Bastianich is the matriarch of a business built on passion. She is a restaurateur, chef, television celebrity, and has even been the Grand Marshal of the Columbus Day Parade in New York City. But the titles that matter most to her are daughter, mother, and grandmother. "My mother lives with me; she's ninety. My daughter lives two blocks away. She has two kids. My son has three kids. There's always four generations at my house and, of course, they always ask, 'What are we going to eat?'"

Her two children also play an integral role in the Bastianich businesses and participate in expanding the family empire. She partnered with son Joseph in opening his first restaurant, Becco, in Manhattan. He also operates three Bastianich wineries in Italy: Bastianich winery in Friuli, La Mozza vineyards in Tuscany, and Agricola Brandini in Piedmont. Joe also co-wrote two award-winning books and received two James Beard awards himself, one for wine and the other in partnership with Mario Batali for Babbo, as restaurant of the year. Lidia and Joe are also partners in Lidia's Italy restaurants in Kansas City and Pittsburgh.

Bastianich's daughter, Tanya Bastianich Manuali, holds a doctorate in Renaissance history from Oxford, and partners with her mother in Esperienze Italiane, a travel agency specializing in food, wine, and art tours. They work together on the television series, books, and a product line. "We're all together in business and it's a family business," Bastianich explains.

Lidia's voyage from Italy to the United States was difficult. She was born in 1947 in Istria, a peninsula now part of Croatia, about ninety miles northeast of Venice, an area that fell under communist rule after the war. She fled with her parents and her brother, Franco, to Trieste, Italy, and lived for two years with other displaced families in a refugee camp at the site of a former Nazi concentration camp. "It was really hard," she says. "There weren't any jobs, and there wasn't enough of anything to go around. So my family thought that the best thing would be for us to come to the New World."

A special provision for political refugees allowed the family to emigrate to the United States in 1958 with the help of Catholic Charities in New York. "We had no one. They found a home for us. They found a job for my father."

The family settled in North Bergen, New Jersey, and Bastianich began working in bakeries and restaurants to pay for her education. Although she was studying science, theology, and chemistry with hopes of pursuing a medical career, cooking changed that future.

The mainly self-taught dynamo opened her first restaurant with no prior business experience. As a restaurant chef, Bastianich became one of the first women to break into what had been traditionally a male field.

Bastianich had two successful restaurants in Queens, New York, by 1971, but closed those restaurants to concentrate on one operation. A $750,000 renovation in 1981 turned a Manhattan brownstone into Felidia Ristorante, which featured Bastianich's beloved regional Italian foods. Felidia Ristorante gave Bastianich the chance to reach back to her childhood for cooking memories of her tight-knit family. Food was always the center of her existence and tied her to her grandparents' farm on the outskirts of Istria.

"Understanding food from the ground is the essence of the food and the flavors. It's not about me inventing. Nature does that. It's about me exalting it and having the good sense to harvest it at the perfect time, the perfect maturity, to serve it at the perfect temperature—not cold from the refrigerator, when all the flavors are locked. That's what nature has taught me. Going up on a cherry tree and just picking the ripest cherries, the ones that had a little nip from a bird. I knew that that was the sweetest one because the birds knew better. We climbed fig trees and when the figs were kind of

drooping and had little stretch marks with just a drop of honey coming out of the end, we just knew that those were the best ones. These are the flavors I always try to recapture or refine." She explains, "I've brought these memories with me to America and they linger on. It is a way of connecting with my roots, and being a part of the family left behind. Food is such a communicator, such an important part of me, of my story. And I continue to communicate with it."

Felidia Ristorante opened to widespread critical acclaim and quickly received a three-star review from the *New York Times*. "I just did what we cook at home and people loved it," she says, with characteristic modesty. The authentic flavors from her native region changed New Yorkers' views of Italian cuisine. At the same time, it enabled Bastianich to establish a flourishing food and entertainment business. "I am the perfect example," she says, "that if you give somebody a chance, especially here in America, one can find the way."

Her businesses have also been built through friendships. James Beard often dined at Felidia after the restaurant's opening. "I would cook for him, and serve him. We would sit at the table together," Bastianich remembers. She is still fascinated by just how big he was, how hungry he was, and his vast knowledge. "He was instrumental in mobilizing, if you will, the whole movement of food enjoyment, cooking, and sharing." When he died and the idea emerged of keeping his memory and his home alive, Bastianich contributed to the James Beard Foundation and continues to support the organization.

Julia Child gave Bastianich her first national television exposure. She was introduced as part of the 1993 series "Julia Child: Cooking with Master Chefs," taped in Child's kitchen, an experience that twice provided Bastianich lessons in media presentation. "She spoke to engage the audience," Lidia observed. "It wasn't about her."

The setting and the style was a formula Bastianich adopted for her own PBS programs. She also attributes some of her mannerisms on TV and techniques in book writing to Child. As a result, she's natural and warm, and makes the viewer or reader feel welcome to drop into her kitchen for a cappuccino and to chat about dinner. Bastianich's instructions are clear and thoughtful, and her teaching focuses on the process: "It is about people successfully using the recipes."

But cooking is not just a process to Bastianich.

"FOOD IS A WAY OF CONNECTING WITH THE PEOPLE WHO SURROUND US. THROUGH IT, WE COMMUNICATE EMOTIONS LIKE LOVE, COMPASSION, AND UNDERSTANDING, AND THERE IS NO BETTER OPPORTUNITY TO COMMUNICATE WITH OUR CHILDREN THAN AT THE TABLE.

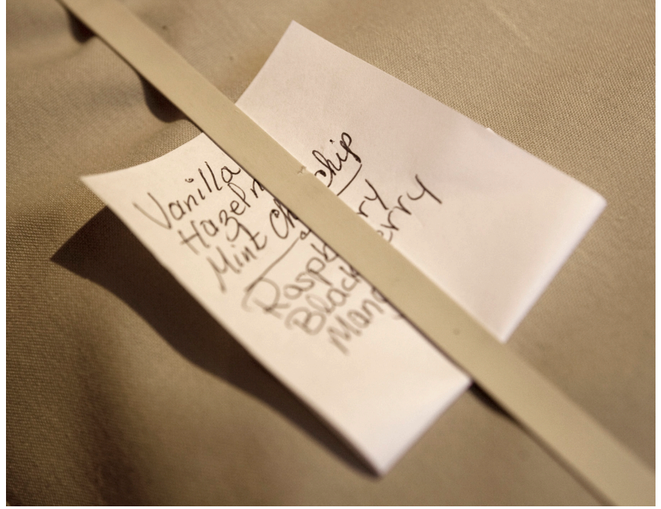
It's where we can discuss our values as individuals, as a family, and as a part of the world."

Bastianich believes that today's cooks could learn from the way previous generations subsisted. "As overconsumption and greed have come to haunt us, now is a time for reflection. We should be looking back at the generations before us to understand their approach to the table. Growing food, shepherding animals, foraging for the gifts of nature are all part of respecting food. Nothing needs to be wasted." She adds, "Respect for the food we prepare also leads to a more sensible and balanced intake of proteins, legumes, and vegetables. So waste not, want not, and make it delicious!"

Bastianich often returns to Italy to research recipes, cooking techniques, and ingredients to broaden her knowledge. "My recipes are all part of the Italian patrimony. And my trips to Italy, every single time, reveal to me mounds of recipes. There's plenty to be had there," she notes.

Recently, she joined her son and Mario Batali in the Eataly venture, heading up the cooking school there—La Scuola di Eataly.

The proud grandmother of five believes that it's not only the food on the table that makes the meal; people who join around the table bring the meal to life. *Tutti a tavola a mangiare!*—Everybody to the table to eat!—is a refrain that has been repeated in Italian households for centuries.



PACCHERI *with* ANNA SANTORO'S PESTO TRAPANESE

Paccheri al Pesto Trapanese di Anna Santoro

- 2½ cups very ripe cherry tomatoes (about 12 ounces)
- ⅓ cup whole almonds, lightly toasted
- 12 large fresh whole basil leaves
- 1 plump garlic clove, crushed and peeled
- ¼ teaspoon pepperoncini flakes
- ½ teaspoon coarse sea salt or kosher salt, plus salt for cooking pasta
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus more if needed
- 1 pound paccheri pasta
- 1 pound small shrimp, peeled and deveined
- ½ cup grated fresh Grana Padano or Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

1. To the bowl of a food processor or blender jar, add the tomatoes, almonds, basil, garlic, pepperoncini, and salt. Purée, scraping down the sides. With the machine running, stream in the oil, emulsifying the purée into a thick pesto. Adjust the seasoning.

2. Cook the paccheri according to the package directions.

3. When the pasta is al dente, add the shrimp, stir, and turn off the heat. Let stand for 1 minute. Drain the paccheri, reserving ½ cup of the cooking water. Return the pasta and shrimp to the pot and fold in the pesto until all the pasta is coated with the pesto. Optionally, drizzle in extra-virgin olive oil and some of the reserved pasta water, if needed. Sprinkle with the cheese and toss. Serve immediately in warmed bowls.

SERVES 4 TO 6

2010

TOM COLICCHIO

CHAPTER *twenty-one*

PLEASE DO NOT LABEL TOM COLICCHIO A CELEBRITY CHEF. HE'LL OBJECT. "BRAD PITT ISN'T CALLED A CELEBRITY ACTOR," HE POINTS OUT. "I'M NOT A CELEBRITY. I'M A CHEF." That is Colicchio's calling, and he is content, comfortable, and successful in his role as chef and the conjurer behind the magic of the Craft group of restaurants.

He's also husband and father, son and brother, child-hunger activist, guitar collector, and a saltwater fly fisherman. At the same time, he's head judge on Bravo's hit reality cooking series *Top Chef*. Being voted one of the "Sexiest Men Alive" by *People* magazine, along with Brad Pitt, just makes him laugh. Colicchio laughs about rock-star chefs. "Let me tell you—I know a few rock stars. I've hung out with a few rock stars. Chefs are definitely not rock stars."

Creating a trend wasn't the objective in 2001 when Colicchio left Manhattan's successful Gramercy Tavern, where he was the founding chef and co-owner. Why did he leave behind a sure thing for the risky business of opening a new kind of restaurant? There were some notions about cooking and dining that he wanted to work out. Colicchio's nature is to constantly push forward. There was no reason to change Gramercy Tavern, where he remained for three years after opening Craft. "I'm still proud to have been associated with it. It's a great restaurant," he says.

He opened Craft just a block away. The restaurant is based on creating a dramatic, pared-down version of what Colicchio had spent his career developing. He envisioned simple, good-quality, straightforward dishes that he now calls "contemporary American." Craft, the restaurant, underlines his strong belief that cooking is a craft.

"IT'S NOT ABOUT THE ARTISTRY. IT'S ABOUT CRAFTSMANSHIP. IT'S NOT ABOUT COMBINING INGREDIENTS OR ADDING A BUNCH OF INGREDIENTS. IT'S ABOUT FINDING THE PERFECT SEASONAL INGREDIENT AND ENHANCING IT," COLICCHIO EMPHASIZES.

He realized over time that he had been removing ingredients from recipes. It was a revelation. "As chefs, we each have a repertoire of dishes we carry around like security blankets. When spring comes along, we tend to dust off our spring recipes. When a chef is experienced, and cooking really well, there's a level of confidence. I didn't need the bells and whistles anymore," he says. In Colicchio's kitchen, garnishes and a lot of sauces are unnecessary.

His take on cooking is: "Showcase the product and really showcase what that ingredient is about. Cook it simply and put it on a plate without garnishing it to death, without having five or six components to a dish. That was really how it started. It's fine dining stripped down. It's an evolution. It's always about something I find interesting."

For Colicchio, it's also about challenging himself and figuring out what he feels like doing. As he admits, "It is never about creating a trend or creating a concept. For me, it's always about what do I feel like eating—what do I feel like doing right now in my career?"

His career began with an early interest in food and cooking at home that led to his father's suggestion that Colicchio consider becoming a chef. "It was important to my father that his three sons do something they really loved," he explains. "Success was secondary. I think it was the only time I listened to my dad." One brother became a top international accountant and the other a revered Linden, New Jersey, basketball coach.

Colicchio read everything that he could about cooking, and discovered Jacques Pépin's *La Technique* at home. He remembers, "My dad was a corrections officer, so it may have come from the jail library. In the last paragraph of the introduction, it reads, 'Don't look at this as a cookbook. Look at this as an apprenticeship.' So, I figured, 'Why do I have to go to culinary school to learn how to cook?'"

He decided he could learn how to cook on the job, so Colicchio worked his way through Pépin's legendary illustrated manual *La Méthode*. At the age of seventeen, he toughed his way through the kitchen at Evelyn's Seafood Restaurant in his hometown, Elizabeth, New Jersey. He eventually followed a traditional culinary training path at various restaurants, including a turn in France. Colicchio worked at the Michelin two-starred Hôtel de France in Auch, Gascony, with the father of Ariane Daguin (owner of D'Artagnan).

By his mid-twenties, Colicchio realized he needed to develop his personal style. "For too long I was just reading books and emulating other chefs' cooking," he says. He didn't have a mentor, partly because he didn't stay at any one restaurant long enough, he says. Strategic about his new targets within New York City, he worked briefly for Alfred Portale at the Gotham Bar and Grill, and then was recruited by the Quilted Giraffe in Manhattan. He ended up working at Rakel with Thomas Keller. "I was there right after they opened up, and I was a sous-chef when I left for Mondrian," Colicchio recalls.

In 1991, as executive chef of Mondrian, *Food & Wine* magazine named him as one of the top ten "Best New Chefs" in the United States, and the *New York Times* gave the restaurant three stars.

Colicchio and partner Danny Meyer opened Gramercy Tavern in 1994, and in 1996, Ruth Reichl of the *New York Times* awarded the restaurant three stars, noting that Colicchio was "cooking with extraordinary confidence, creating dishes characterized by bold flavors and unusual harmonies." His cooking at Gramercy Tavern won major recognition and he earned the James Beard Foundation Award for Best Chef: New York in 2000.

Colicchio opened Craft a year later to praise and another three-star *New York Times* review. He retained his ownership of Gramercy until 2006, when he decided to sell his share to concentrate his efforts on Craft.

Moving ahead at Craft with new ideas that extended to plating and the dining room, Colicchio felt that the idea of sharing food and the action of passing food around a table was missing in restaurants. He wasn't targeting a certain demographic with this concept; he just knew it seemed a natural way to eat. "How do you eat at home?" he asks. "Food is put on the table. You pass it around and everyone helps himself. Family style, on platters, creates the interaction." Aware that some people prefer to be more casual, and others more formal, Craft's dining room has two sides, accommodating different comfort zones.

Colicchio's sense of hospitality comes from a desire to make people happy. "That's what we do in this business," he says.

When Sisha Ortuzar, with whom Colicchio worked at Gramercy Tavern, suggested they open a sandwich place, Colicchio's wife thought up the name 'wichcraft. Rooted in the same food and hospitality philosophies as Craft, 'wichcraft eateries have grown to multiple locations. Ortuzar is a partner in the endeavor, and is executive chef at the latest fine-dining establishment, Riverpark. The Colicchio-Ortuzar relationship is symbiotic. "He has the kitchen. It's his house," Colicchio says. While the menu is Ortuzar's, the style reflects the Colicchio way.

Colicchio's growing restaurant collection has now expanded to include four locations of Craft, two of Craftbar, two of Craftsteak, thirteen of 'wichcraft, and Colicchio & Sons (in the former Craftsteak New York location), named in honor of his three sons. In addition, he is also part owner of Riverpark, also in New York City.

He took a big risk in becoming more entrepreneurial. "We have a lot of young chefs looking for that next position, and if you don't provide the opportunity, they'll go someplace else." Described as a strong leader, fair-minded, loyal, and stubborn, Colicchio's a teddy bear at heart, confides a staff member. He doesn't like the drama of a yelling chef or manager. "Frankly, I don't think it ever works. People shouldn't stand for it," he emphasizes. The success of the Craft restaurant group is due in part to Colicchio's willingness to accept advice from talented and savvy business colleagues to negotiate deals and numbers and keep operations running smoothly. He relied on an experienced backer, Robert Scott, who, before retiring, was the president of Morgan Stanley. Jeffrey Zurofsky and Katie Griecoare are also longtime team members and partners.

When he feels that the business side is taking up too much of his brain, Colicchio steps back and does an occasional "Tom: Tuesday Dinner," presiding in the open kitchen of the private dining room adjacent to Craft, serving a multicourse sampling of the things that he's been considering. As Colicchio puts it, "Half my time, I'm

thinking about business, and the other half, I'm thinking about food and different combinations—so the creative side of my brain is working."

He says he didn't get into the business to write books and do television, but they became challenges. "The idea of being a chef is expanding and changing," he says. When Bravo approached him about doing *Top Chef,* he turned it down three times before agreeing to do the show. He had no aspirations of becoming a celebrity. His wife, Lori Silverbush, is an award-winning film producer, so he is aware of what editing can do to a program. Once he signed on as head judge, though, he was astonished by the show's success. When Eric Ripert, chef/owner of Manhattan's Le Bernadin offered to be on the show, and then Alfred Portale was a guest, Colicchio knew it was a hit.

His colleagues are important to him and he maintains close friendships. Colicchio admits, "I'm always excited when someone like Keller or Portale is in my restaurant. The opinion of my peers is very important to me." He jokes about being honored as the James Beard Foundation's 2010 Outstanding Chef. "I don't know how many times they were going to nominate me in this category before they got tired of me," he says. "They finally decided, 'Just give it to him so we can get rid of him.'"

There's a serious side to Colicchio, though. "The power of food goes far beyond our taste buds," he believes. One episode of *Top Chef* during the 2009 season focused on demonstrating to kids the importance of food and healthy cooking. Colicchio feels it's imperative to raise the public's awareness of the fact that many children do not have access to regular, nutritious meals. His mother's work with school lunch programs made an indelible impression, so he's knowledgeable about the link between healthy, well-nourished children and school work. "Even if it is only one good, healthy meal a day at school, we must be committed to providing that, as a minimum. Many schools are putting out food that has had all of the nutrition processed out of it," he says.

Colicchio was an executive producer and Silverbrush was one of the directors and producers of *Hungry in America*, a documentary film that takes a hard look at why one in six Americans is a hungry adult, and why one in four is a hungry child. Colicchio feels so strongly about the subject that he testified on the issue before the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010. "In particular, eradicating child hunger is a personal passion of mine—to help make a difference toward this cause," he says. His restaurants give back to the community by supporting charities including Children of Bellevue, City Meals On Wheels, City Harvest, the Food Bank for New York City, and GrowNYC.

Colicchio has been honored five times by the James Beard Foundation, and has written three cookbooks. The first, *Think Like a Chef* (2000) won the James Beard Foundation Cookbook General Award in 2001. His second cookbook is *Craft of Cooking* (2003). The third is a sandwich book, *'wichcraft: Craft a Sandwich into a Meal—and a Meal into a Sandwich* (2009), each published by Clarkson Potter/Publishers. But awards, accolades, and media exposure, while gratifying, are not the most important things in his life.

"You start having children at a late age and you start thinking of legacy. You start thinking about how you want to be known," the chef explains. "Someone asked me last year, 'How do you want to be known? Do you want to be known as a chef? A restaurateur? As a TV guy?' And I don't want to be known as a TV guy. I'm a chef and restaurateur. So it just got me thinking." He's working hard to capture personal time with his family, and for himself. Colicchio named one of his restaurants Colicchio & Sons, but he doesn't expect his three sons to follow in his footsteps, unless it's out of a love for the business. "I'm just like my father in that regard. I just want them to be happy in what they are doing." He's happy doing exactly what his father had wished for him.

SEA URCHIN *and* CRAB FONDUE

POTATO PURÉE

Salt

2 medium Yukon Gold potatoes

¼ cup heavy cream

½ cup butter

Freshly ground black pepper

SEA URCHIN AND CRAB FONDUE

¾ cup plus 1 tablespoon butter, softened

2 shallots, minced

¼ cup white wine

12 ounces lump crabmeat

16 sea urchin tongues

2 tomatoes, peeled, seeded, and cut in ¼-inch dice

¼ cup minced fresh chives

2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice, plus extra for garnish

Pinch curry powder

Chopped fresh chives, for garnish

To make the potato purée

1. In a medium saucepan over high heat, bring salted water to a boil. Add the potatoes and boil until tender, 20 to 25 minutes. Peel the potatoes and transfer to a food processor or blender. Add the cream and butter and purée until smooth. Season with salt and pepper. Reserve and keep warm.

To make the fondue

1. In a small saucepan over medium heat, bring 1 cup of water to a simmer. Whisk ¾ cup of the butter into the saucepan, 1 tablespoon at a time. Reserve and keep warm.

2. To a medium saucepan over low heat, add the remaining 1 tablespoon butter, warming until it slides across the pan. Add the shallots and cook until they are soft and translucent. Add the wine and reduce by half. Whisk in the reserved butter mixture. Add the crabmeat and sea urchin, stirring continuously until warm. Add the tomatoes, chives, and lemon juice. Season with salt and pepper.

To plate

1. Divide the potato purée among four bowls. Spoon ¼ cup sea urchin–crab mixture over the potato purée in each bowl. Garnish with lemon juice, curry, salt, pepper, and chives.

SERVES 4

WITH SIGNATURE RECIPES
from WOLFGANG PUCK, ALICE WATERS, LARRY FORGIONE, DANIEL BOULUD, RICK BAYLESS, JEREMIAH TOWER, THOMAS KELLER, JEAN-GEORGES VONGERICHTEN, CHARLIE TROTTER, DAVID BOULEY, PATRICK O'CONNELL, LIDIA BASTIANICH, ERIC RIPERT, JUDY RODGERS, MARIO BATALI, ALFRED PORTALE, MICHEL RICHARD, GRANT ACHATZ, DAN BARBER, *and* TOM COLICCHIO.

SELECTED RECIPES

Pan-Roasted Chicken Breast with Herb Jus and Creamed Hash Brown Potatoes
Larry Forgione, 1993

Smoky Peanut Mole with Grilled Quail
Rick Bayless, 1995

Salmon "Bacon," Lettuce, and Tomato Sandwich
Judy Rodgers, 2004

Chestnut Ravioli with Wild Hare Ragu
Mario Batali, 2005

Spice Roasted Lobster with Buttermilk Chutney
Tom Colicchio, 2010

JAMES BEARD: BEST OF THE BEST

By Kit Wohl, Foreward by Martha Stewart
Photographs by Susie Cushner

An inspiration for an entire generation of American chefs, James Beard was the host of the first television food show, a restaurant chef, a cooking instructor, a food writer, an industry consultant, and an early champion of the artisanal and local foods movement. In 1990, the James Beard Foundation established the James Beard Awards, given out each year, to recognize excellence in food, beverage, and related industries. This collectable volume features profiles of the recipients of the prestigious Outstanding Chef Award, along with stunning photography. From Wolfgang Puck to Tom Colicchio, learn about the culinary philosophy and passion behind each prizewinner's path to the kitchen—then cook a few choice dishes that exemplify each chef's style!

KIT WOHL is a photographer, fine artist, graphic artist, and author of six cookbooks that celebrate the cuisine of her native New Orleans.

SUSIE CUSHNER is a New York-based photographer whose work has appeared in Audubon, Country Living, and InStyle.

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