

Philanthropy from the Kitchen

In New York and Los Angeles, two gatherings of culinary masters remind that the art of the chef is not only about the food—often, it's about giving back By Victoria Charters



Joachim Splichal's Berry Dessert. Image courtesy Patina Group.

Los Angeles: The 25th Annual American Wine & Food Festival Participating Chef: Wolfgang Puck, Wolfgang Puck Worldwide, Inc.

On the West Coast, a lineup of some of the nation's most prominent chefs converged upon Universal Studios, Hollywood on September 29th to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the American Wine & Food Festival. This star-studded gathering of internationally celebrated chefs and fine wine and spirit purveyors was open to the public and featured live music, a silent auction and an epicurean feast of signature dishes.

"We started this event in Los Angeles in 1982," recounts Wolfgang Puck, the event's creator and a major force behind it to this day. "We got together and said, 'why don't we create something where we have different chefs working together to support a charity?' We picked Meals on Wheels."



(Left): Wolfgang Puck outside his famed Spago Beverly Hills. Photo by Alex Berliner. (Right): Joachim Splichal. Image courtesy Patina Restaurant Group.



Wolfgang Puck's Tuna Tartare on Sesame Miso Cones. Photo by Steve Brinkman.

And 25 years later, Puck is still more than effervescent about his event. "It is the mother of all food and wine festivals," he says, citing the watershed nature of the dinner: "25 years ago people didn't talk about American food like they do now."

Since its inception in 1982, the Puck-Lazaroff Charitable Foundation, headed by Puck and designer Barbara Lazaroff, has supported the American Wine & Food Festival, raising more than \$13 million for the Los Angeles chapter of Meals on Wheels, an organization that serves thousands of meals each day to Los Angeles' home-bound, senior and disabled citizens.

Inspired by his mother Maria, a hotel chef, the Austrian-born Puck began his formal training to become a classically trained French chef at age 14. Los Angeles welcomed Puck in his twenties, when he became chef and part-owner of Ma Maison, a magnet for the rich and famous and, later, Spago. His first signature dishes—such as gourmet pizzas topped with smoked salmon and caviar and Sonoma baby lamb with braised greens and rosemary—put him on the map. Puck is part of a wave of chefs changing the way Americans eat by seeking out the highest quality ingredients and then combining formal French cooking techniques with Californian and Asian-fusion aesthetics.

Following the success of Ma Maison and Spago, Puck continued to open a string of signature restaurants in multiple cities—Chinois, Postrio, Granita, Cut, and the Wolfgang Puck American Grille.



Equally impressive is his extensive catering and events business, most notably the annual Governors Ball following the Academy Awards. A man with his finger in many pies, Puck has extended his culinary hand to casual, express restaurants; consumer products including packaged foods, beverages and cookware; book publishing; and an assortment of television, radio and internet programming.

Yet, in spite of his mammoth success, Puck explains that he still gets his primary inspiration from his ingredients. "I still go to the farmers' and fish markets to see what is there. I buy the best ingredients and enhance them with exciting flavors," he reveals. "We want people to live better; we buy humanely treated animals and organic produce."

So what of this year's incarnation of the American Wine & Food Festival? Guests were treated to a lively scene of food, chefs, vintners and Cirque du Soleil performers, all gathering on the stage that is the Universal Studios backlot. Puck's culinary contribution to the festivities this year included, as the chef fervently describes, "something with lamb, liberty duck and lobster chinois."

It's obvious that Puck loves what he does, and he loves this event. "I think for us it's a lot of chefs getting together. It's a lot of fun and always of the best quality," he explains.

For Puck, the event hits especially close to home.

"I really always tell people I was very lucky to come to this country with no money—no nothing," he says. "I remember checking into a hotel when I first came here and I couldn't check out because I had no credit card, no bank account, no money. I was successful, and it's our duty to give something back to the people who have less. Giving makes you feel better than getting."

New York: The 22nd Annual "Chefs Gone Wild" Participating Chef: Joachim Splichal, Patina Restaurant Group

A participant himself in the American Wine & Food Festival, Joachim Splichal, the founder of Patina Restaurant Group, is also a major force behind New York City's "Chefs Gone Wild", a similar dinner organized thousands of miles away to benefit New York's own Citymeals-on-Wheels.

In June, Splichal helped Citymeals-on-Wheels put on the 22nd annual incarnation of the event at Rockefeller Center. What started in 1984 with twelve chefs is now an all-out extravaganza—34 separate teams of chefs came out to contribute this year.

During this feast, more than 1,200 of New York's business leaders, social and cultural trendsetters and gourmands mingled with leading chefs, sampling their specialties. This year's creations indulged guests' taste buds with crisp produce and a healthy harvest of the nation's finest, freshest foods. After an evening of treats, sweets, and signature cocktails, guests enjoyed dancing under the stars



(Top): Joachim Splichal's Roasted Halibut Filet. Image courtesy Patina Group. (Above): Patina's cheese offerings. Image courtesy Patina Group.