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42° OF WOLFGANG PUCK

HE MIGHT JUST BE THE MOST POWERFUL CHEF IN AMERICA. AND FROM THE 42ND PARALLEL TO BEVERLY HILLS, THE DEGREES OF HIS INFLUENCE ARE VAST AND EVERLASTING

BY MARTIN BOOE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAL OWEN, LISA WYATT AND JESSICA BOONE

"People don't give us credit, really."

These are not the words of a man with an inferiority complex, but rather the perspective of someone who both witnessed and instigated the greatest tectonic shift in the American culinary landscape. And by "us," Wolfgang Puck means Southern California.

Puck is to Los Angeles' gastronomy what Frank Gehry is to its architecture and David Hockney is to its art. And just as up-and-coming French chefs clamor to apprentice in the kitchens of Michelin-starred chefs, most of our imminent chefs who've become institutions unto themselves, have, at one time or another, worked at Puck's side.

If "we" don't get enough credit, it may be because the ripple effect of Puck's influence is so vast that it escapes notice.

Born in Austria, Puck headed for the 42nd parallel to gain experience in such three-star French restaurants as the Hotel de Paris in Monaco, Maxim's in Paris and L'Oustau de Baumanière in Provence. After a stint in Indianapolis, Puck ventured to Los Angeles, where he became chef and part owner of Ma Maison in 1975, when Los Angeles was, culinarily speaking, still the Wild West. At the time, the best the city offered was the staid continental fare characteristic of the better hotels. But Puck set out to do something different. It is worth noting that he recruited investors for Spago from the classes he gave while he worked at Ma Maison, at a time when the idea of cooking classes was completely novel. He envisioned Spago, he says, "as the perfect combination of comfort and innovation."

He doesn't like the label, but Puck was our first "celebrity chef," heralding the dawn of chef as rock star with his inaugural appearances on Good Morning America in the early 1980s. With his second restaurant, Chinois, he helped to launch the Asian fusion cooking trend that has maintained a grip on fine dining ever since.

And then there is the rest of his empire: Spago Las Vegas and Maui, Wolfgang Puck Grills, Wolfgang Puck Cafés and Express, Chinois and others, plus product lines, packaged foods... "I tell every chef, if you really want to be successful in the long run, you have to mix business and creativity," Puck says. "Cooking alone is not good enough."

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY ALEXANDRIA ABRAMIAN-MOTT, GARY BAUM,
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IRON CHEF WARRIOR

It took a lot to trump bacon-flavored ice cream, but Grace chef/owner and former Puck protégé Neal Fraser defeated *Iron Chef's* Cat Cora in a pitched pork fight in January, becoming California's first chef ever to win the televised kitchen brawl. 7360 Beverly Blvd., L.A., 323.934.4400



Neal Fraser at Grace