

4 EDITION

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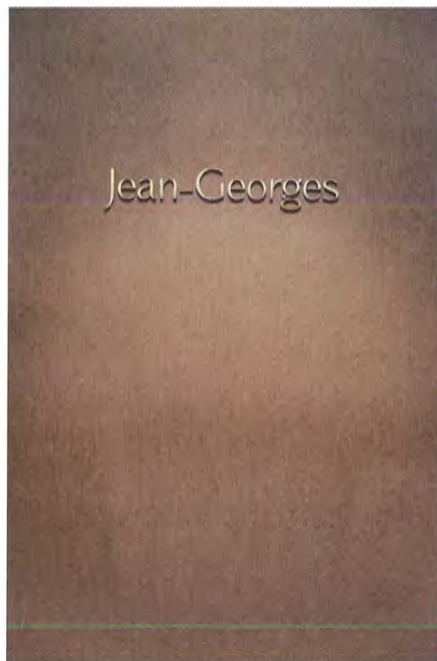




“I’M JUST WARMING UP!”

The self-professed ‘spring chicken’ remains at the top of his game.
Jean-Georges Vongerichten continues to be a dominant player in the restaurant
game by knowing just what his customers want, writes *Esther Sung*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATHAN RAWLINSON



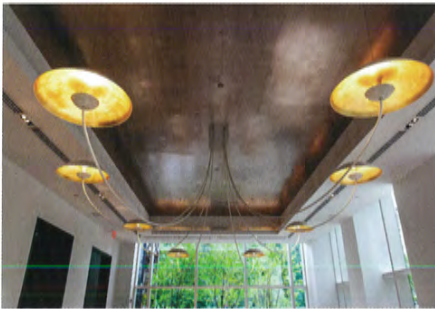
LEFT Jean-Georges' three-Michelin-star Manhattan restaurant is the jewel in his crown.

Jean-Georges Vongerichten's tenure as one of America's top chefs and restaurateurs—indeed, as one of the world's best—should come as no surprise. The consummate professional has 40 years' experience in high-stakes business, but there are no signs of him slowing down. Boundless energy, passion, and hard work combined, Vongerichten has built an international culinary empire made up of more than 20 restaurants around the world, spanning three continents, seven countries, and 10 cities. The eponymous restaurant is the jewel in his crown, having retained its three-Michelin-star rating for the tenth year in a row. And the crowds continue to gather at the ever popular ABC Kitchen and ABC Cocina. But he's not done yet.

As the eldest son, it was presumed he would follow in his father's footsteps and take over the family's heating business in Alsace, France. "I was the oldest of the boys and was the fourth generation to continue the company. And I hated every minute of it. I guess I was the black sheep," he says with a laugh. But fate had other plans. On his sixteenth birthday, the family dined at the famed three-Michelin-star Alsatian restaurant Auberge de l'Ill. "We were a big family so we never went to a restaurant often. I was there with my parents, and they didn't know what to do with me. [But]

between the food and the ballet of people walking around... I didn't know you could [make] a living with food." Simply put, "It was a total revelation for me." And he soon embarked on his journey, starting as an apprentice to chef Paul Haeberlin.

Vongerichten also worked under famed chefs Paul Bocuse and Louis Outhier before leaving Europe to open restaurants for Outhier in Southeast Asia. His arrival in Bangkok was a seminal moment in his career, and ultimately helped define his cooking. The significance can't be overstated. "When I arrived there, it was a transformation for me. I was 23, and it was my first chef assignment. I had 20 cooks, and I'd never really managed that before. I'd been a cook for seven years but never exposed to anything like it. It was a great exchange, and for me, a learning curve. Coming from Alsace, I'd never been exposed to certain ingredients. Working with galangal, ginger, coconut milk, coriander—it was like a dream, it was like discovering a treasure. At the time, not too many people were using these kind of ingredients. It was very rare to find ginger anywhere in 1980, so that really transformed my life. That really changed my palate." It would eventually be apparent in his restaurants Vong and Spice Market, but also at Jean-Georges and Perry St.



THIS PAGE Jean-George has built an impressive restaurant empire, spanning 10 cities around the world.

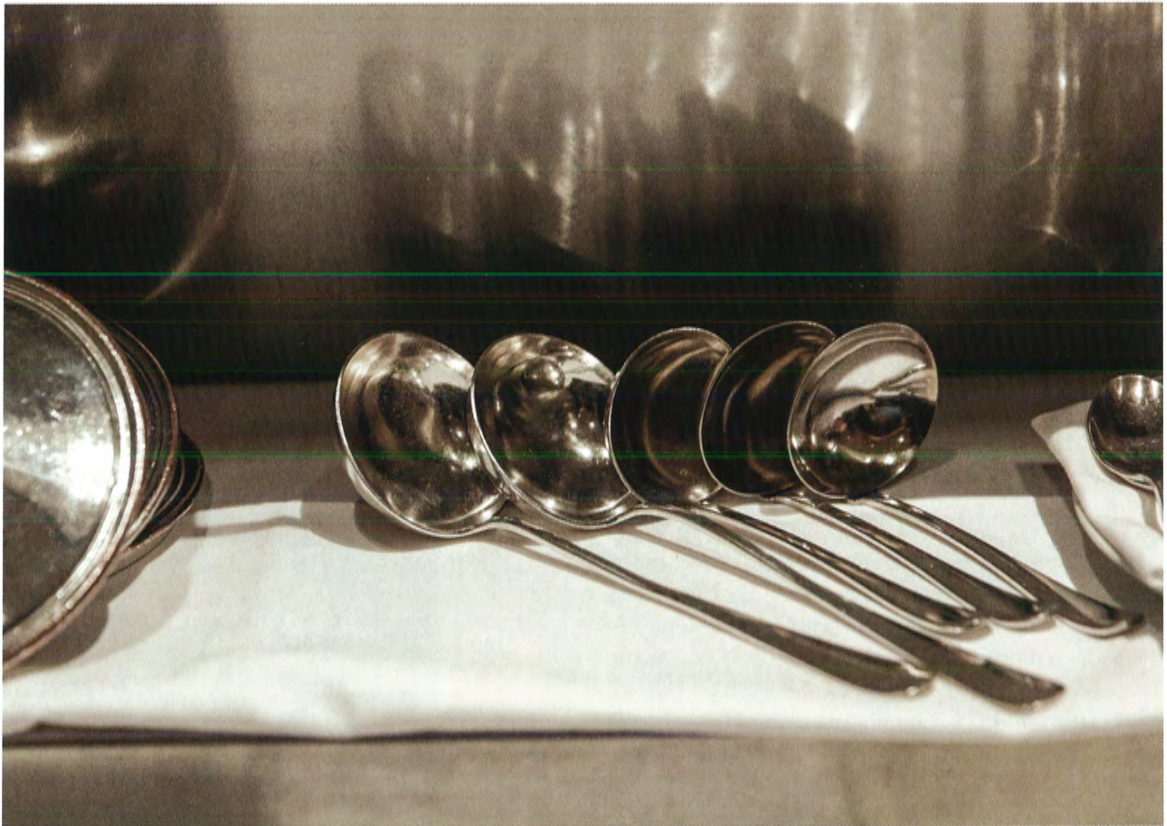
His wanderlust continues to inspire him. "I love to travel, because my inspiration comes from my travels. The world is so big—so many ingredients, especially herbs and spices—the combination of foods and flavors is endless." As the seasoned traveler that he is, Jean-Georges still yearns to see more of the world. "I've never been to Argentina or Peru. I don't know much about India. I want to go to Kazakhstan, and there are still a lot of things to see in China. There's so much to see, taste, and be inspired by. I never go somewhere without coming back with some inspiration, some spice, new technique, something super different."

The challenge remains: How to stay at the top once you've arrived? "You have to think about a high level of service, pampering the guests, but you have to try to surprise them with different flavors." But on the other hand, "Consistency is important; some people come back for one dish." Jean-Georges makes it clear that the key to success also come from others: "You have to drive the people around you. We don't do anything by ourselves. We're a team." But don't forget "you have to find the best quality ingredients and make them delicious!"

The restaurant business "is a simple business, if you know what to do." And just what is that mandate? "We have to meet the demands of the guests, and then deliver »



*"A customer who's more educated about food makes us better as a restaurateur.
We're living in a great time right now."*







LEFT Jean-George and his team execute dishes with great finesse and an appreciation of each ingredient.

« to the table the most interesting flavors and combinations so that they say, 'Wow, I'm coming back for this.' We are creating cravings that people come back for." Plainly put, "If tomorrow morning you wake up and don't remember what you had the night before, then I didn't do my job right."

Given that today's diners are very sophisticated and knowledgeable about food, to meet their demands raises the bar, not just for the chef, but for everyone involved. "People demand better food, healthier food. People want to trace the carrot—they want to know where it comes from. No one wants to eat something from a strange place. They want to know, and it's for the better because the farmer gets better, fishing gets better. *Everything* is better." Couple that with Vongerichten's uncanny and very timely ability to encapsulate food trends, and you can understand how he continues to stay relevant among his peers. "When I started ABC Kitchen, it was probably a good time to do farm to table. We are also a block away from Union Square Market, which is a big plus. We just walk over there by foot. It's as if the farmer comes to your door."

"I feel like everybody's a food critic, especially in a city like New York," Vongerichten points out. "In the old days, it was only the opinion of one critic. Today, the public is your critic as well because they can express themselves on social

media. So you have to be on your toes and be delivering the best on a daily basis." But rather than dismiss foodies, he embraces them. "A customer who's more educated about food makes us better as a restaurateur. We're living in a great time right now."

At the end of the day, there's no reason for mediocrity. "I tell my chefs that the role of a chef is to take chicken and make it a new chicken, to transform the ingredients. Always looking for a new way of thinking."

Vongerichten's next project—ABC V—is highly anticipated. Reflecting his own personal eating habits, ABC V will be serving international vegetarian and vegan dishes. One can only imagine what else is in store for him. But one thing he makes very clear is that he has no plans to slow down any time soon. "It's fun, I'm just warming up! I hope I have another 40 years to go. I'm 57 but it doesn't matter. My mission is not done yet." In fact, when comparing himself to his 88-year-old mentor, Paul Bocuse, Vongerichten feels like 'a spring chicken'. So what does the future hold for him? "I've managed to please people, feed people, pamper people. I'll do it all my life until I can't do it anymore. With the energy I have now, maybe open a school, teach somebody. Right now, I have so much energy I'm going to do everything, everywhere!" ■



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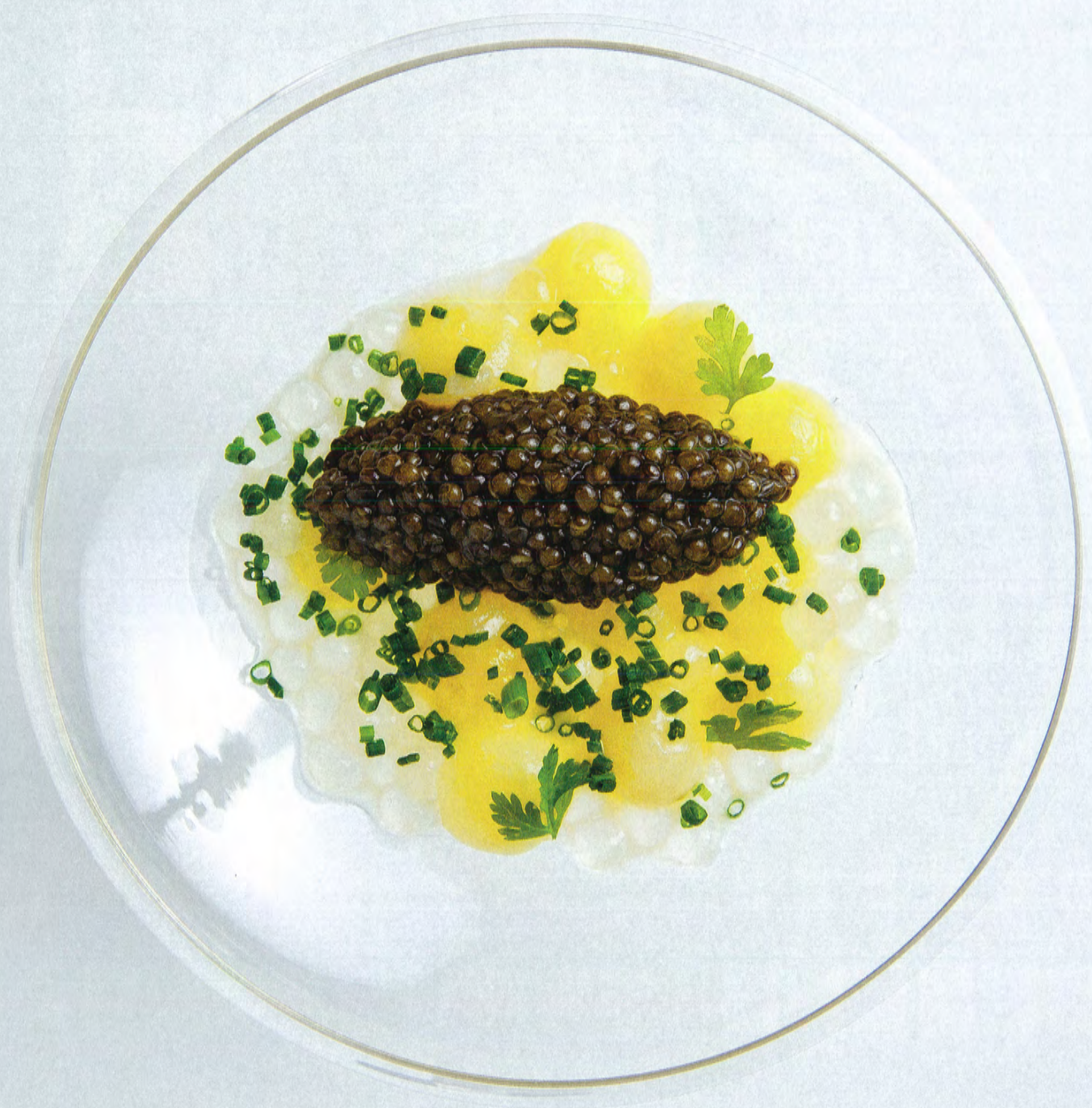
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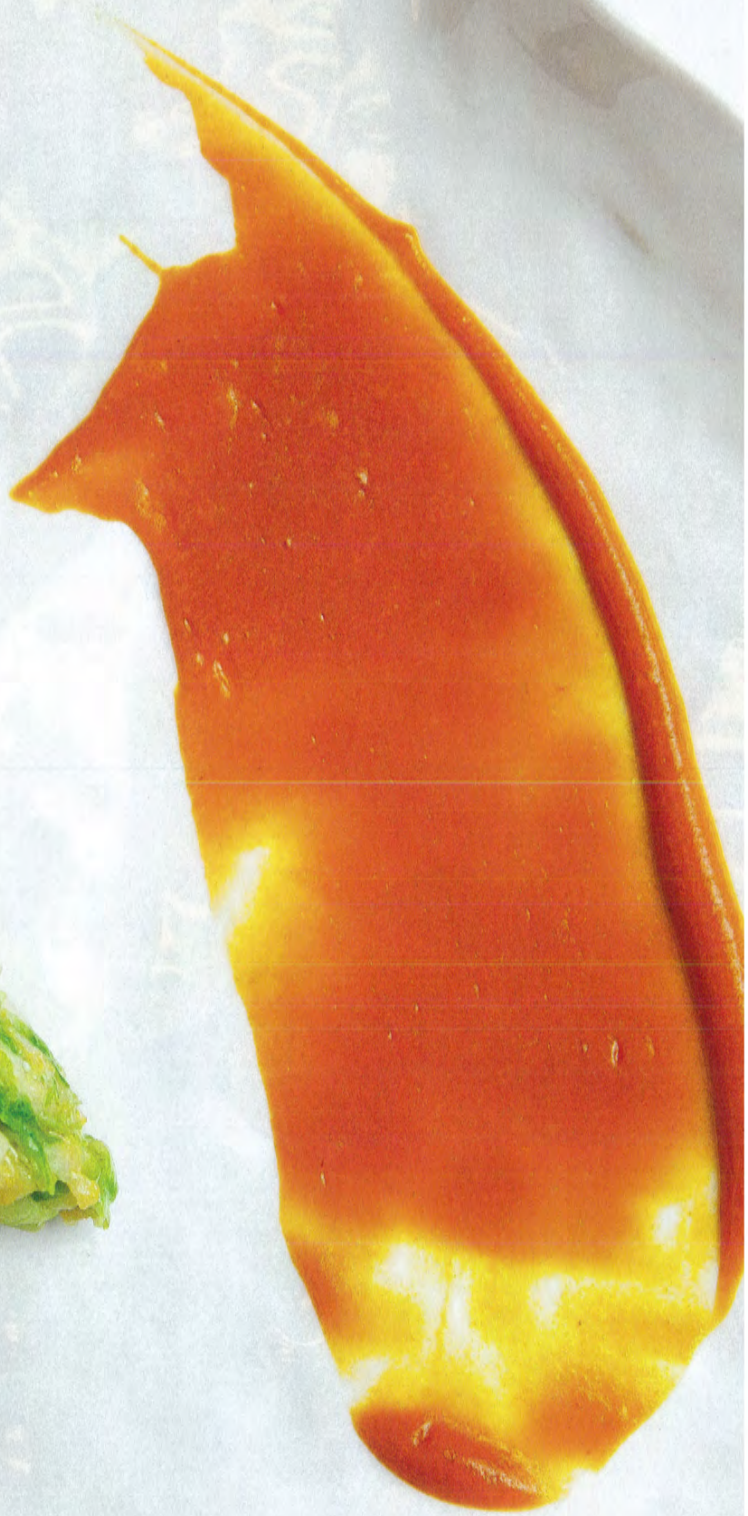
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