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JEAN-GEORGES
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CHEF TALK

JEAN-GEORGES VONGERICHTEN

chef voyager

Columbus Circle lies at the very fulcrum of Uptown New York, its densely populated avenues and cross streets converging at this bustling centre point. Dominated by an epic monument to the mighty voyager of the new world, Christopher Columbus, it is an apt location for the the headquarters of another intrepid explorer, innovator and pioneer of his craft – chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten. I sit down with the chef at his eponymous three Michelin starred restaurant Jean-Georges in the very shadow of the great Columbus globe – a fitting reflection of the chef's own daring spirit and internationalism.

Namai Bishop. —————>



Having grown up in a small village near Strasbourg in Alsace, he learned the essentials of French cooking as part of a work-study programme at Auberge de l'III, where he was apprentice to chef Paul Haeberlin, before going to work with master chef Louis Outhier at L'Oasis in the South of France then taking rank under the doyen of classic French cuisine Paul

Bocuse. Yet this small town Frenchman had a global vision and, yearning to travel to lands unknown, he set his compass firmly on Asia. It was here that he spent his formative years, exploring the delicacies of herbs, the power of spices and techniques that he went on to adopt in championing his own style of cooking.

"Back then, young chefs simply didn't travel to these places. I was hungry to explore and travelled all around Asia, including Shanghai, Japan and Thailand. I learned new flavours, novel techniques and how to work with spices like star anise, lemongrass, cardamom, cinnamon. In Thailand I learned about how they cook with stocks, using fish sauce and chilli. The fresh flavours, fragrant herbs, light oil-based sauces and flash cooking techniques were a radical departure from my food and training in France, where often I would be cooking down ingredients over two days or more!"

In his cuisine, Vong shuns traditional meat based stocks and heavy butter and cream based sauces. Instead, he incorporates Asian style cooking methods, using predominantly vegetable based stocks, fruit essences and herbal vinaigrettes, in order to achieve the signature intensity, yet lightness, of his dishes. Whilst these flavours and methods are now commonplace, Vong's early exposure produced groundbreaking menu creations by the young chef that are still evident in his work today.

"When I arrived in New York in 1986, there were classic French restaurants, or classic Italian eateries. Apart from Chinese, there were few Asian dining restaurants targeted at an international clientele, let alone any chefs that fused international flavours or techniques." Vong pioneered the fusion movement, broadening palates and blazed a trail for future generations.

"The world is my palate!" he exclaims. "I have my roots in France, but I don't go back other than to see family. This is my home and, like the urban environment I am now part of, I create melting pot cuisine – with foundation."

At his fine-dining restaurant, Jean-Georges, one of the food Meccas on the city's map, he deftly showcases his flavour flair. Vong explains, "I want the experiences and flavours of the world reflected on my plates".

The dining room at Jean-Georges captures the very essence of the food it serves, as well as the spirit of the man himself. On one side, the yellow cabs rush past incessantly along the main artery of this urban metropolis. The energy of the city outside clearly runs deep in the veins of this dynamic chef, who at almost

60 has a palpable, potent vivaciousness. "I run to work!" he exclaims. With a cheeky grin and a glint in his eye, the man certainly has spring in his step as he vigilantly mans his kitchen crew. His food bears a distinct vibrancy, spiced with exotic fruits, zesty Asian citrus, tangy sauces and fiery chillies – the cosmopolitan melting pot that epitomises this international city is absorbed into plates that showcase an array of exotic ingredients and daring flavour combinations.

On the other side of the airy dining room, floor to ceiling windows frame the leafy green of Central Park – a haven of peace, easing the customer into feeling at one with nature. So too the chef, who grew up on verdant plains, champions the use of fresh, seasonal produce and showcases them in simple dishes like Green Asparagus – one fresh ingredient, artfully prepared captures all the bountiful force of nature. "When I started out, my plates were complex, very busy. Now I've taken all the superfluousness away. I've stripped it back, laid it bare. This is a movement towards sourcing and freshness; I know where every single one of my ingredients comes from. I respect the seasons and work continuously on cooking techniques."

Just adjacent to the fine dining room is the open plan kitchen that services the fine dining restaurant: "We're Cooking on Broadway!" he told me triumphantly. Below it lies another kitchen, a veritable control-room that caters to the adjoining casual style eatery with its comprehensive all-day menu, as well as to all the room service needs of the entire 52-storey hotel – a vast operation. Vong certainly has his plate full, but with true Herculean might, he rises to the challenge with unabating persistence and unwavering ambition.

Nor does Vong deviate from his quest for perfection: at the fine dining section of the restaurant a comprehensive range of highly complex dishes appears on the menu. A choice of a la carte or tasting menus often sees the same base ingredients, worked in a variety of ways to create vastly varied flavours and textures. A caviar starter comes either on a zesty gelée tempered with smooth crème fraîche, or on a crunchy egg yolk toast with earthy herbs. Similarly, the foie gras terrine with crisp strawberry granola and sticky balsamic and sorrel, its berry red tones vibrant on a dense black ceramic dish, is contrasted with a caramelised preparation, served with a black olive seasoning, brioche and, for sweetness, the unconventional use of lychee. An accomplished dish of yellowfin tuna, avocado with spicy radish and ginger marinade is a homage to his Asian experience, its ribbons of silky fish entwined as masterfully as a woven tapestry encountered on his silk-route, and served with simple wooden chopsticks. Asparagus comes as a fresh summer salad with seasonal avocado, flecked with mauve petals, sorrel and dusted with a sprinkling of crunchy sesame, or on the alternate menu, steamed with slippery morels in an unctuous cream sauce and asparagus jus. Maine





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Lobster is again served two ways, roasted with an ochre coloured garlic-chilli sauce, heart of artichoke and pine seasoning, and a more robust version, sautéed with rich ramp butter, served with fava bean, morels and potato gnocchi. Looking around the packed dining room at couples who had opted for contrasting menus, it clearly was proving an entertaining game of taste comparison!

It was not until the final savoury course of the epic 9-dish tasting menu I sampled, that there was the appearance of any form of meat. When it did appear, the rack of lamb was perfectly roasted, its pink flesh laced with a jalapeño sweet pea purée topped with mint crumbs. On the contrasting tasting menu, a char grilled squab, succulent on the inside had a dense crust of Nasturium served with jade coloured crushed snow peas. In both dishes, the sweetness of the peas perfectly framed the iron richness of the meat. Paired with a McLaren Vale Australian Mitolo Shiraz 2010, the spicy notes proved a firm match. In fact, it was the first time a red wine was served during the entire dinner, with most dishes calling for white wines. The selection was nonetheless complex and eclectic, and as with the man himself, global in range. The list spanned continents, from Austrian and Australian, a volcanic Assyrtiko from Santorini Greece, a buttery Meursault 2009, a zingy Pinot Gris from Vong's own neighbourhood Alsace, to a local New York State riesling. With lower alcohol levels, often vibrant minerality and elegant finish, the whites paired well with the Asian spices as well as classic preparations. Where Asian flavours called for a more traditional wine pairing, a smooth Yamahai Junmai sake was served; a fine choice that set off the sherbet zest of the yuzu and jalapeño sea urchin perfectly. Fresh and lean, the flavours were practically jumping off the plate, as fresh as the fish being served. Indeed, the chef was keen to point out the meticulous sourcing of his ingredients, including seafood garnered from small, day boats, ensuring swift delivery without lengthy storage on ice. The quality levels are

uncompromising and service as cool as the dining room – managed by front of house manager, his brother (“My eyes and my ears” he told me) and himself, throughout the dinner, all with a firm command.

Vong certainly runs a tight ship. With an ever growing empire of international restaurants, Vong heads a dedicated crew of over 5,000 staff worldwide drawn from over 22 nationalities. He says of his loyal staff “When you train a chef and invest time and energy in them, it makes sense that we take the opportunity to work together going forward. I give them a piece of the action, we open an enterprise together. That way young chefs have a chance to flourish. I have a wide range of culinary concepts and restaurants worldwide where many chefs can play a part – and we are growing all the time.” An able captain, he manages to navigate with steady balance this vast spectrum of restaurants.

On NYC's fashionable Upper East Side, Vong has one of his most popular outposts at the insider's haunt The Mark hotel. The Mark Restaurant by Jean-Georges, is perhaps one of Manhattan's most glamorous dining spots where, once again, the kitchen caters to all room service requests as well as an all day menu served to tables either in the bustling main room or under the bright glass roofed atrium. The uplifting atmosphere is a reflection of the light and vibrant food with an emphasis on healthy Mediterranean cuisine. On the summer lunch menu, a slow poached salmon with crisp Boston lettuce and a fresh vibrant carrot-ginger dressing, and a “simply cooked” section of grills and steamed mains, keeps the ladies a svelte size zero. A twist on the cobb salad, with chopped avocado, apple pecan and blue cheese as well as a dish of NY institution “Russ and Daughters” smoked salmon with fresh horseradish both reference Manhattan's deli classics with a light, European sensibility. Vong balances his French, American and Indonesian flavours with panache, here throwing in a creamy touch of tofu, there using US Napa cabbage



and playing on French classics like the Croque Monsieur with ham from local NY State "Flying Pigs Farm" married with French Comte. House made sodas capture the full range of influences here, from US staple ginger ale, a citron pressé style lemonade and Asian inspired cherry yuzu. It's no wonder this is a 24-hour success story, with Wall street deals penned daily over power breakfasts, celebrities huddling over lingering lunches and the glitterati scrambling nightly for its dynamic dinner dining.



Image © Francesca Tonelli

His most recent hotel restaurant opening is at the swish Four Seasons in Dubai, adding to an already heaving stable of fine establishments worldwide that spans the globe from Miami to Mexico, Shanghai (three restaurants here no less) to St Barts where Sand Bar on the Rocks, at the magical Eden Rock Hotel, is the dining room of choice for an international bevy of sophisticates and mega-yachts tycoons. The range of his restaurants is wide, not just geographically but also in its clientele and style, with names that hint at the varied offerings, from market-style "Mercato" and "Market", steakhouses "Prime" in Arizona and Las Vegas, "Suviche" to "Seared". Vong has even ventured as far as Tokyo's Roppongi Hills to open the authentic Japanese JG Tokyo, a mere 14-seat counter where the power of the plates belies the restaurants diminutive scale.

Other notable restaurants include the legendary Pump Room at hotel supremo Schrager's Public hotel in Chicago, a place of legendary decadence and intrigue. Vong has literally pumped new life at the Pump room, creating a menu of reinvented classics beautifully presented – the spot light never dims here. Vong was also the tidal force behind Starwood Hotels' Spice Market chain, born of his atmospheric, film-set worthy Asian eatery in Manhattan that he still runs. Whilst that relationship has since ended, his portfolio of "collaborations" as he refers to them is on an upward course. When I ask him what his motivation is for his ever growing global presence he tells me "I only want to open restaurants where I can learn something from the locality. For example when I come back from my restaurants in Shanghai I want to come back with 20 new ideas!". His quest to expand his boundaries appears boundless.

As well as the host of hotel and international establishments in his portfolio, Vong is passionate about his own set of restaurants. It is at these that chef Vong's range, innovation and true spirit is perhaps most tangible.

"I want to be an architect" he told me. Its a literal reference to Vong's passion for design and construction, but also references his vision for an all encompassing restaurant model, built with firm ethical foundations and moral structure. Case in point, his restaurant ABC, where Vong has personally curated everything, literally from the ground up. The reclaimed concrete slabs, the exposed brick and uniquely quirky furniture reflect the ethos of the cuisine served here. Raw, unadulterated, natural and market-sourced. "I bought the cutlery on e-bay!" he laughs. "There is so much consumerism, we wanted to strip things back, to get back to basics, where literally each fork is as unique as the ingredients we serve on them." This restaurant is about celebrating the authentic, the diverse. ■—————>

Once again, the locale of the restaurant is a direct reflection of the food philosophy – located just steps away from Union Square, the area is home to the revered weekly farmers' market that showcases the artisans and agriculturalists of the region. At the restaurant, most ingredients used are exclusively from a 150 mile parameter of New York State and all are 100% organic with a wine list that is exclusively organic or biodynamic, a large portion of which is served by the glass. The wine list alone demonstrates all of the elements of the entire restaurant's philosophy: a weekly wine special, as selected in turn by the staff themselves (collaborative yet individual working environment) showcases small producers (community support) and unique methods of production (reviving and supporting artisans) and sold at



Image © Francesco Tonelli

a lower price point (inclusive, accessible luxury). There is even the option on the list to add a service charge for charitable purposes, another emotional and social connection Vong makes with his customer and beyond.

Dishes showcase heritage varietals with florid names, such as wood oven roasted fiddlehead ferns, served with spring garlic and lemon. Old fashioned methods are revived with homemade yogurt served with fleshy fresh-picked beets, roasted until pulpy. Also house made is the ricotta, served with rhubarb compote and a generous slab of charred bread, courtesy of much-loved NY institution Sullivan Street bakery. A flurry of appetisers, many vegetarian, include avocado salad with simply roast carrot, its sweet dense flesh lifted with the crunch of seeds and moistened with sour cream and citrus. Pretzel dusted calamari, marinara and mustard aioli once again showcases the chef's eclectic food influences, whilst giving a cheeky salute to that NY street food classic. Plates are designed for sharing, with generous whole wheat pizzas as well as main courses that include the popular black sea bass with chillies, herbs, baby potatoes and market fresh spinach, as well as an array of sides like swiss chard, balsamic and parsley. With the extensive menu, Vong demonstrates the wide range of fresh produce readily available in the region as well as the sheer diversity of the chef: from

three star Michelin to delicious comfort foods within a matter of city blocks; its a short distance but a world away from its uptown sibling.

Another radical departure from uptown bling is ABC Kitchen's décor. Housed in a classic New York factory-style building on the ground floor of a landmark family run interior design store, its own interior uses a mix of 3rdtime reclaimed materials, antique wrought iron chandeliers, bleached wooden floors and the 16th century timber boards, once used on trading ships, frame the room – a romantic reference again to this chef-explorer's voyaging heritage. Sculptural birds add a sense of otherworldliness, a rustic, rural chic-au-naturel – perhaps a hint at the magical world Vong hopes to conjure with his vision of Utopia.

Yet this is no boho affair. The dining room buzzes with New York's most sophisticated diners, eager for a taste of authenticity, simplicity and purity in a city that so often is chocked with choice and crammed with complexity. Vong offers a refreshing haven of health, a holistic lifestyle environ. This is 'intelligent eating', supporting local artisans, upholding traditional agriculture, farms and produce; this is food to nourish the soul as well as the body. Right down to the uniforms, this is not about big brands, fashionable labels or sharp design – this approach harks back to individualism, and staff are encouraged to dress down in smart yet casual attire. Even the staff training is a reflection of honing individual skills – when I visited, my waiter was shadowed by a young trainee, who by the end of the meal was encouraged to engage with customers with friendly suggestions and personal, intuitive service. In an impersonal, bustling city where time is money and the energy never settles, this focus on the individual, on old fashioned values, the sense of community and common food and lifestyle values was as refreshing as the hand pressed cocktails on offer! Its no wonder then to learn that his dream is taking this lifestyle concept even further with visions to convert the building to an all-encompassing destination that will span hotel, dining and even yoga space. It's the spirit of hospitality seems to be the main draw for Vong now. He wants to expand his culinary architecture to house his entire lifestyle philosophy and sense of hospitality.

As he told me "With a restaurant, you close the doors at midnight – the experience is over. But in a hotel the interaction continues. I want that continued contact with my guests, they eat, they stay, they have a night cap, they wake and have breakfast again with you, re-engage and connect on a more profound level. This is why I want to explore the hotel, spa, restaurant project."

Whilst some chefs have been criticised for jumping onto the band wagon of organics, food miles and locality, there can be no mistaking Vong's sincerity. Having grown up on a farm, his experience was firmly rooted in the earth and raw, natural ingredients. The humble cabbage was a staple on his dining table, certainly when the family



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could not afford more elaborate dishes. As is increasingly prevalent amongst some of NY's most celebrated and innovative chef's like Daniel Humm, it is these single note, humble ingredients that are now being elevated to principal elements on a plate. Increasingly for these chefs, it is about seasonality, locality, purity and honesty. It is these principles that this veteran of innovative cuisine is now heralding. This worldly chef's latest vision is firmly rooted on the very foundations of his past.

What makes Vong one of the most interesting chefs of our time, is his ceaseless dynamism and unwavering sense of adventure. For over 40 years the man has been exploring his craft, creating novel concepts, refining techniques and consistently pushing boundaries. Whilst for many chefs it would be enough to sit firm on not just one but an array of stellar fine-dining establishments, Vong has explored the other end of the spectrum with his humble 100% organic eatery. In true Vong style, he is about to push the boundaries even further and launch a radical new concept: ABC3, an all vegetarian and vegan restaurant.

A concept often perceived as limited in scope and drab, Vong's mission this time is to challenge perceptions of this somewhat misunderstood cuisine, and give us a renewed appreciation of vegetarian food flavours and textures. Having conquered lovers of fine dining, Vong goes beyond just asking 'what do we want to eat now?' (and delivering it with aplomb) and takes the step of exploring how we should responsibly approach food in the current social and economic context.


"On the farm where I grew up, we ate 70% vegetables. Protein was expensive. It takes just two weeks to grow a radish, yet two years to raise cattle. Look at the 1980s and 1990s and you will see that proteins

dominated the plate, with vegetables relegated to a mere side-dish. Going forward I want to reverse that. There is so much space in this world to grow fresh vegetables, there is no need for food shortages or ingredients poverty." Vong's poignant message is as much about ethics and social responsibility as flavour and technique.

"People care about where their food comes from. They are increasingly educated about food choices and they don't mind paying a bit more for quality. That in turn will help small producers to thrive and offer better products and better value."

Once again, Vong is at the helm of a new movement. Working with nutritionalists, he will be looking at the very essence of the ingredients – in terms of health properties, taste and provenance. He tells me there will be three sections to the menu: raw sprouted grains, a vegan section and a vegetable selection, featuring internationally inspired dishes such as rich tagines, garlic-infused baba ghanoush and wok-fried plates.

No doubt Vong will continue to challenge and change perceptions of the food we eat. Indeed, New York Magazine famously wrote that, in the past two decades, no single chef has had more influence on the way New Yorkers dine out—or on the way other chefs cook and other restaurants look. "He invented America's answer to nouvelle cuisine," says Mario Batali. "When I first came to New York, his book *Simple Cuisine* was the holy grail for young chefs." That book, published in 1990, is still a well-thumbed culinary bible amongst many young chefs. A prolific writer, he followed that up with several publications including *Cooking at Home with a Four Star Chef*, in 1998, for which he won the prestigious Best Cookbook Award from the distinguished James Beard Foundation and another home-cooking book, *'Home Cooking with Jean-Georges'*. *'Simple to Spectacular'* published in 2000 was followed in October 2007 with an ode to his beloved Indonesia with *'Asian Flavors of Jean-Georges'*, featuring recipes from his hugely popular restaurants *Spice Market*, *Vong*, and *66*. Most recently, Vong released *'My Favorite Simple Recipes'* in which he shares the recipes for easy, quick and seasonal family favourites, including *Crab Toasts with Sriracha Mayonnaise*, *Watermelon and Blue Cheese Salad*, *Lamb Chops with Smoked Chile Glaze served with Warm Fava Beans*, and his take on the classic *Tarte Tatin*.

After an epic 42 years as a chef, Jean-Georges Vongerichten has navigated the often tempestuous waters of food fads, innovative techniques and trends – from molecular gastronomy to nouvelle cuisine, there is little that he hasn't tackled on his extensive global odyssey. This is a man who has honed his skills to the maximum, conquered culinary stars and captured all major plaudits. Now, after over four decades, he shows no sign of slowing his culinary conquests, and with his latest daring endeavour in pursuit of purity, Vong the Vanquisher has his sights set on new horizons. 



Char grilled squab, crushed sweet peas and nasturtium vinaigrette

By Jean-Georges Vongerichten / Serves 1

INGREDIENTS

MARINADE

200g molasses
40g sherry vinegar
64g soy sauce
5g sesame oil
2g garlic, worked to a paste with the flat of a knife
40g black pepper, light toasted, ground fine
12g star anise, lightly toasted, ground fine
24g coriander, ground fine
8g fennel seed, ground fine

8g sumac, ground fine
12g cumin, toasted, ground fine
4g dried Mexican oregano, ground fine
3g black cardamom seeds, ground fine

SQUAB

½ ea squab deboned
50g marinade
Salt

VINAIGRETTE BASE

325g spring onion, peeled and sliced thin
65g scallion whites, washed, dried, cut into ¼" pieces
150g evo
1g green thai chili
1½ lime peel, pith completely removed
9g salt
250g Fiji H2o
8g Telephone Brand agar agar
85g fresh lime juice

80g Champagne vinegar
14g salt
20g chili paste
½g guar

GREEN CHILI PASTE

800g green finger chilies, ½ seeded, stemmed
40g orange (thick skinned) peel, all pith removed
80g salt
10g salt
5g pink grapefruit (thick

skinned) zest; very gently with microplane

NASTURTIUM VINAIGRETTE

275g vinaigrette base
9g orange and red nasturtiums, stems removed
¼g saffron
15g blowtorch charred red finger chilies from the stem side, peeled and stemmed

PEAS

15g butter
75g baby sweet peas, frozen
3g Serrano chili chopped
Pinch lemon thyme leaves
2g salt

TO SERVE

50g nasturtium vinaigrette
4ea nasturtium petals
5ea chive flowers
5ea brassica flowers

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METHOD

MARINADE

Combine the ingredients and mix well.

SQUAB

- Season the squab with salt and coat on both sides with the marinade.
- When ready to cook, place on a hot charcoal grill, skin side down, until crunchy and blackened; turn squab over and cook to temp.

VINAIGRETTE BASE

- Combine spring onion, scallion, olive oil, chili, lime peel and salt in a pot and cook, covered, until onions/scallions are completely tender without any color. Spread into a hotel pan and leave to cool.
- In a small pot, whisk agar agar into the water and bring to a simmer. Let simmer for exactly 1 minute, then mix with the lime juice, Champagne vinegar, salt, chili paste and guar gum thoroughly. Pour into a hotel pan and leave to cool.
- Combine all in the blender and purée until completely smooth. Cool over ice.

GREEN CHILI PASTE

- Combine green chilies, orange peel and 80g salt in a blender and process to medium smooth.
- Put the mixture into a very narrow container and double wrap with plastic wrap. Let sit at room temp for 24 hours.
- Pour into a chinois and let drain for exactly 30 minutes. (Reserve juice for another use).
- Remove paste and season with the remaining salt and grapefruit zest.

NASTURTIUM VINAIGRETTE

Purée until smooth and pass through a non-stick chinois.

PEAS

- Process the frozen, sweet peas in food processor to a medium mash.
- Place the processed peas in a pot with the remaining ingredients, stirring to combine, and cook until peas are tender.

TO SERVE

When ready, place the squab on a hot charcoal grill, skin side down, until crunchy and blackened; turn squab over and cook to temp. Plate as shown.