

ORLANDO HOME & LEISURE

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HOLIDAY COOKING WITH
**WOLFGANG
PUCK**

BEST RESTAURANTS
2009 SILVER SPOON WINNERS

HOW TO HOST A
WINE TASTING





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PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREG JOHNSTON

In The Kitchen With
**WOLFGANG
PUCK**

For legendary chef Wolfgang Puck, the concept of cooking is merely a flash in the pan. He hit the ground cooking and never looked back.

The master chef shares his love of great food
– and great holiday recipes
– to help make your season sweeter.



Chef Wolfgang Puck (right) puts a contemporary twist on a classic dish with his Snake River Farms American Kobe beef over Wasabi mashed potatoes.

“People, sit down. Let’s talk, eat, enjoy!” Puck urges. “Live. Love. Eat.”

As we belly up to the bar, a group of gentlemen talk, laugh and hoist their wine, enjoying a moment of camaraderie. I’m still not sure if they know they’re sitting with a famous chef and the owner of the Grand Café, but, caught up in the moment, it doesn’t seem to matter to them. Wolfgang Puck is as jolly and welcoming as ole St. Nick himself – if a tad trimmer and more dapper. His Austrian accent grows even sexier as he talks passionately about food. Forget that this culinary magnate has multiple restaurants, cookbooks and cookware lines, frozen foods and soups on supermarket shelves and has catered the Oscars, Wolfgang Puck made his mark just by being nice.

In fact, he built his multimillion-dollar empire on being nice – not only toward guests, but also his employees. He affectionately refers to his business as a “family restaurant” and those who work with him, a “modern family.”

“I have to teach them, love and respect them, and nurture them, just like family,” Puck explains. “Many are part owners. I pay well, and I provide incentives and a level of independence to encourage them to stay on. And it works; I have ‘family’ members who’ve been with me for many years.”

I first met Puck a dozen years ago while attending Wolfgang Puck’s Grand Café’s grand opening. This day, he was just as charming, gracious and generous as he was back then. Success hasn’t changed Puck. If anything, it has opened doors to more opportunities to share his love of food.

His passion for life and food developed early. At 14, he worked in the kitchen every day with 3-star Chef Raymond Thuillier at the chic Oustau de Baumannière in Les-Baux-de-Provence, France.

“I saw for the first time someone cooking with passion and love, using fresh and amazing products, and I said, ‘That’s how I want to be when I grow up,’” he says. “I want to enjoy life and food with that much passion and to share it with the world.”

Arriving in the United States at age 24, after stints at Maxim’s in Paris and the Hotel de Paris in Monaco, Puck’s first stop was at La Tour in Indianapolis before moving to Los Angeles as chef and eventually co-owner of Ma Maison in Hollywood. That led to his creation of Spago on the Sunset Strip. Celebrities flocked to Spago for casual gourmet foods like pizza topped with salmon, helping spawn the California cuisine movement. It won Puck accolades from the James Beard Foundation as Outstanding Chef of the Year in 1991 and 1998 – making him the only chef to have won the honor twice.

A string of successful restaurants followed, including the four restaurants in Lake Buena Vista. There’s a Wolfgang Puck Express located in Downtown Disney Marketplace near the Rainforest Cafe. The Grand Café at Downtown Disney’s West Side is a three-tier dining experience: a fine dining establishment upstairs, with casual dining, a sushi bar and an Express café downstairs. Currently, Puck’s



group operates 17 restaurants nationwide plus 60 cafés, five of which are in Japan. Next year, there will be new openings in Las Vegas, Los Angeles and Singapore.

“To accomplish such a feat, I have to believe in my people... train them and trust them. I have a group of people who I can really count on, so I never have to worry,” Puck says proudly.

And the Grand Café staff was attentive and hospitable, not just to us, but to everyone in the restaurant during the five hours we were there.

“People, sit down. Let’s talk, eat, enjoy!” Puck urges. It’s an appropriate interview setting for the culinary master whose motto is “Live, Love, Eat.” We sip cold Acqua Panna and fresh-brewed iced tea, and nosh on perfectly presented small plates – seared filet of beef and radish sprouts with three kinds of sauces; sashimi and sushi platters; and hamachi skewers with spicy wakame seaweed salad with yellowtail.

Part of his success, Puck says, is that his menus are adapted to each restaurant’s location – more complex and leisurely for fine dining, simpler and quicker to serve locations near sports arenas or, as in Orlando, event centers. “But I also design tasting menus, which people like Leonardo DiCaprio appreciate, spending up to three hours leisurely dining with friends,” he explains.



A sample Puck holiday menu is far from turkey and green-bean casserole.

Spending time together over food is part of Puck's home life in Los Angeles, too. Cooking is a family affair in the Puck household: his wife, Gelila, and four sons all share his passion for cooking. He arranges his schedule to ensure he has time for dinner at the family table. Sundays are spent making pancakes together, then a trip to the local farmers market with the kids so they can get fresh items for lunch or dinner that they prepare together. His oldest, Cameron (15), is considering culinary school. But papa's conglomerate isn't going to just be handed over.

"I'd love for my business to pass on if any of my children are interested. But they have to know it and learn it from the ground up just like anyone else," he says.

The family often visits his home country of Austria, but he's too busy to go during the holidays. For many years, Puck hosted Christmas dinner for an eclectic group of folk, with the likes of Vincent Price and other notable actors and film directors. These days he chooses a slower pace, traveling with his family to Vail, Colo., for the holidays. While he's intimately involved with the food at his restaurant there, it's a lot less work and he says, much more enjoyable.

Traditional Christmas staples include a pumpkin or chestnut soup, and either a small goose or venison entree. The leg of a small goose is deboned and stuffed with chestnuts and bread brioche, like an Austrian dumpling, then served with braised red cabbage. Melted sugar is mixed with a little cinnamon, vinegar, red wine and orange juice, as well as some apple slices, a sweet and sour tradition from St. Veit, Austria, where Puck grew up. If the choice is venison, Puck slowly braises a shoulder cut with chestnuts and a red-wine reduction later mixed to a cranberry-like marmalade.

A sample Puck holiday menu is far from turkey and green-bean casserole and reads more like this: Oysters and smoked salmon with potato pancakes, followed by a chestnut or pumpkin soup. An optional pasta course served after the soup might be fresh tortellini stuffed with pumpkin and bathed in a sage butter sauce. The main entrée would be the venison, goose or a lobster pot pie, followed by a tray of assorted cheeses. For dessert: A Bûche de Noël, or a Yule log, chocolate cake rolled with hazelnut cream and decorated with meringue.

As I share my own personal challenges cooking chicken to perfection in a pan, let alone venison or a small goose, Puck takes the challenge and leads me right into the kitchen. "We're gonna teach you to cook some chicken," he promises.

First, he demonstrates the quickest and easiest way to debone a whole hen. After removing the wings, Puck cuts down the spine, through the wishbone, then flips it over to cut along the back. He pulls the leg joint out to create two halves. Deboning decreases cooking time. We gently lift the skin from the flesh to create a pocket where we stuff chopped fresh herbs – basil, rosemary, fresh parsley, garlic – then we sprinkle it with fresh ground kosher sea salt.

A layer of good olive oil is added to a large, thick stainless-steel skillet – uncoated he stresses – and we wait for it to steam over full flame. Having a good layer of oil and waiting for it to be hot enough to steam help prevent spattering. Skin side down, I gently lay half the chicken in the pan, from back to front, then reduce the gas burner to medium. Searing the chicken on one side until it's brown and crispy locks in the juices. Depending on the heat and the size of the chicken, this can take up to several minutes. Once the chicken is brown, I assume it's time to turn it over, but Puck stops me: "No, no! The secret is not turning it over."

Instead, the whole pan goes right into an oven preheated to 500 degrees Fahrenheit where it will cook another 20 minutes or so, maybe less.

After removing it from the oven, he shows me how to test for doneness, poking it with a finger: If it's resilient and bounces back without leaving an impression when you press your finger on the core of the meat, it's done.

Puck returns the skillet to the burner and now turns over the chicken for a very quick flash fry on the other side. Then it's removed and set aside.



"We're gonna teach you to cook some chicken," Puck says to Senior Editor Leigh Duncan (above) as he demonstrates his 90-10 rule for superbly juicy, picture-perfect chicken (opposite page).



In the same skillet, he blends chicken stock, white wine, ground mustard, cream, diced parsley and sea salt, adjusting the stock and cream as needed for taste and consistency. As he's stirring, he offers another easy alternative sauce for the holidays: Deglaze the pan with fresh apple juice, then add a little cream or broth and some salt and pepper.

Puck says the same method of cooking also works for fresh fish: "When you cook on one side 90 percent of the time, you get excellent results – very flaky, moist fish."

When our sauce is ready, he places a fulsome scoop on a stark white plate, then layers the chicken on top. Good chicken, he says, really doesn't need sauce. Then he surrounds it with sautéed mixed vegetables for color and presentation.

The chicken is so tender and juicy you can practically cut it with a fork. Like kids waiting to open Christmas presents, we give in and pick up cut pieces right off the plate, juices running down our arms.

Could it really be that simple? I put it to the test the following weekend and easily got the same juicy result. Ninety percent on one side, then finishing in the oven dramatically enhances tenderness and juiciness.

Fresh herbs make a huge difference when cooking, and that's all you'll find in Puck's kitchen. His other essentials? "Really good olive oil, balsamic vinegar, kosher sea salt, freshly ground pepper and champagne," he replies. He likes to sip champagne while cooking, Krug being his spirit of choice.

You'll also find fresh block cheese. "When it comes to cooking, never buy cheese that has already been grated," he says. "They have to add a lot of cornstarch to it to keep

it separated, so it doesn't melt well, and it really affects the flavor, especially mozzarella. Plus, you never know how old it is and when it was actually grated."

It's a difference you can see and taste in Puck's Macaroni and Cheese with Truffles or Wild Mushrooms recipe from his cookbook *Wolfgang Puck Makes It Easy* – this dish is so good, it was even served at the Oscars. The rice-cooker recipe (Yes, in a rice cooker!) calls for freshly grated fontina cheese that melts to a creamy yet hearty texture. The recipe can be adapted to other kinds of cheese, as well, and the brown and slightly crispy top is the *pièce de résistance*.

As if we hadn't enjoyed enough already, Puck insisted we eat a meal, during which he joined us for casual conversation. The table was peppered with bottles of Acqua Panna, Pelligrino and Grgich Hills Chardonnay. First course was a creamy Butternut Squash Soup sweetened with hints of curry, ginger and apple purée, then drizzled with a red pepper sauce. It was a combination of sweet and fiery flavors that made this one of the best butternut squash soups I have ever had.

Salmon pizza and crab cakes made it to the table next. Slightly crispy, these crab cakes were taken up a notch with cayenne pepper and basil aioli that were very pleasing on the palate. They were the perfect predecessors to the Black Snake River Farms American Kobe beef over Wasabi mashed potatoes. Seared with Yuzu butter on top and prepared in a red wine reduction, the Kobe was tender, flavorful and succulent, and perfectly complemented by the subtle tanginess of the Wasabi potatoes.

As we dined, Puck explained how Michael Eisner talked him into opening a restaurant

The Grand Café's sushi bar offers a wide variety of fresh, high-quality sushi and succulent specialities, including crab, lobster and sashimi.

in Orlando. "It was an 'if you build it, they will come' type deal. And he was right!"

Since opening in 1997, Grand Café's warm, sophisticated neighborhood feel has attracted a strong coterie of regulars, as well as tourists – many of whom came over to our table hoping for autographs and pictures, which Puck happily and generously provided.

"They are the reason I am successful," he says.

Loyal and grateful fans and the ability to do new things all the time are Puck's motivators. "I still love cooking, and success has helped fuel that passion. I hope to keep spreading the word to 'Live, Love, Eat' for many years to come."

You can get "In the Kitchen with Wolf" too by visiting wolfgangpuck.com. ●

PUCKS EASY HOLIDAY APPETIZER TIPS

GOURMET PIZZA

"Pizza is easy, but it can also be elegant and gourmet. Drizzle with olive oil and balsamic vinegar, then top with a variety of gourmet delicacies, such as feta, gorgonzola or blue cheeses, salmon, capers and caviar. Serve with a side of sour cream, dill and horseradish sauce."

BEAUTIFUL BEETS

"Their exceptional purple color makes for a beautiful holiday presentation. Slice beets into circles and sandwich with an herbed goat-cheese spread. Serve as whole rounds or cut into quarter-size bites. Add some fresh parsley or mint sprigs to the platter for more color."

SOUP SHOOTERS

"You can make a pumpkin or butternut squash soup ahead of time and freeze. When you're ready, pull it out and put in small glass shooters. Add a dollop of cream and a drizzle of red pepper sauce, and you're ready to go!"

Menu

NEW YEAR'S EVE DINNER

From the Table of Wolfgang Puck

For Starters

Roasted Yukon Gold Potatoes With Caviar

Baked Yukon Gold potatoes served with crème fraîche and Iranian osetra caviar.

Entrée

Salmon With Tomato Basil Sauce

Broiled summer salmon fillet garnished with a light tomato basil sauce embodying sunny Provençal flavors.

Accompaniment

Macaroni and Cheese With Black Truffles

Brioche bread-crust elbow macaroni baked with Gruyere, Parmesan and sharp aged white Cheddar cheeses, finely chopped black truffles, onion and white truffle oil, then dusted with shaved black truffles.

Dessert

Marjolaine

Baked meringue with whipped-cream filling and chocolate ganache glaze.

The full recipes for Wolfgang Puck's New Year's Eve Dinner, as well as some of the other dishes in this article, are available on our website at ohlmag.com.

