

The New Potato

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Jean Georges Vongerichten On How Chilies Will Save The World

By Danielle Kosann



THE ICONS

Like many of our icons on The New Potato, Jean-Georges Vongerichten has become more than just a restaurateur. He's become a creative director, a CEO, a businessman, and an overall maestro of cuisine. He also may just be the most dapper restaurateur we've met (we'll admit it, we're crushing a tad). No doubt a man of style, Vongerichten reigns over three and four star restaurants around the globe, and has most recently wowed New York City with ABC Kitchen and ABC Cocina (two of our favorites). We shot Vongerichten at another one of his masterpieces – **The Mark Restaurant** – an Upper East Side treasure. So if you're cooped up on this snowy day – and even if you aren't – this is the interview to peruse...

What would be your ideal food day?

I like to start my day at the market in Union Square, because that's where I get inspired. I would start my day there, walk around, get a few things, and then I would have breakfast. I love Mercer Kitchen for breakfast or The Mark. And then I would jump on a plane for sushi in Tokyo because I love sushi. I have it like two or three times a week. Then I probably would take a plane to the Amalfi Coast to have a little pasta for lunch with some seafood – like a Clam Vongole Spaghetti. And then I would take a plane to Bangkok and have some spicy food at night. Then I would take another plane to Paris and would have some dessert with Pierre Hermé. And then, hopefully, I'm back in time for bed. I need a special plane for this one – a time-travel machine. I think if you

could follow the hour pattern, because if you go to Asia it's twelve hours ahead, you probably could do the tour of the world in the same day. If you leave Asia at ten o'clock in the morning, you arrive the same day in New York at ten in the morning. So you could have two breakfasts – one in Tokyo, and one in New York [laughs]. So, you know, a couple of European meals and a couple of Asian meals in the same day would be ideal.

How would you define your brand?

I've been cooking for forty years. I started when I was sixteen, and so the brand is composed of so many different concepts. I started in Alsace [France], where I'm from, and so there is some influence from my region. Then I went to the South of France, so there is a lot of olive oil, tomato, and basil. And then I went to Asia for five years – Bangkok, Singapore, Hong Kong, Tokyo – so there are a lot of chilies and spices involved in the brand. New York is the perfect town for me to develop my brand because there are so many different communities here. It is really a New York brand – a little bit of a melting pot. We have concepts from farm-to-table (like ABC Kitchen) to Spanish (ABC Cocina). We have Spice Market, which is street food from Southeast Asia. We have The Mark, which is a little more International cuisine. I usually define my brand on the concept of which area in New York you are. ABC Kitchen is a half a block away from the market, so it's all inspired by the market. Up here [at The Mark], you have to create more of a living room for people living in the neighborhood, so we have something on the menu for everyone, whether you are in the mood for a burger, a pizza, some sushi, some caviar, or a whole roast chicken. I try to really measure where I am in the area and really give people where they are.

And now you've just opened ABC Market right? The food market below ABC Carpet & Home?

We're doing a food market that just opened, and then we're opening a vegetarian restaurant in the spring – 100% vegetarian, raw, and vegan. Right now we're starting to import and use local things that we don't make. But eventually, we'll do our own jams under the ABC label. The brand is growing and changing.

How do you keep each of your restaurants relevant and timeless? So many restaurants open and close but your restaurants have longevity.

Here at The Mark for instance, it's a very classy hotel from 1925. By using Jacques Grange as a designer, we brought back the glamour from the Upper East Side. I think the decor is timeless in a timeless building. If you look at ABC Kitchen, the building is from 1910, so we kept the beams and the farm look. I think it's very important to be in sync with your zip code, the building that you're in, and the people in the neighborhood. That's very important for me.

The concept you're building also has to be in sync with a little bit of the history, and then it becomes timeless. If you do something just for the moment – a flash in the pan – you last six months, a year or two, and then you're gone. My first restaurant was JoJo, which we opened in 1991, and it's still there because we created a restaurant for the neighborhood first, and then people came.

How much of a hand do you have in the design of a space when you first open a restaurant?

I have a hand in every aspect, from the design of the kitchen, to the whole dining room. I mean, Jacques Grange had never done a restaurant before in his life. He mostly did residences, so The Mark was really his first project. When he built this, he said, 'What do you need? How many tables? How many chairs? How many bars? What kind of texture are you looking for, etc.' So you get involved. After building so many restaurants, I feel like I've become a first-hand designer, because I was involved in every aspect of it.

So it's more like you're a creative director now than a chef?

Half and half. I'm actually a third; the business is important too. A lot of chef's think, 'Okay, I build a restaurant for cooking my food, and I do my thing.' The fact is, you have to think about paying rent, and paying the employees. It's a business in the end. I do a couple of hours a day in the office to make sure the business is good, and that we have income and people come back. Then we have to keep up the decor and the upkeep of the place. And then the food has to be great. That's the third thing that is very important. You try to create cravings to make people come back. You come back to ABC Kitchen for, I'm sure, two or three dishes, and then it attracts you. We have people at The Mark that come five times a week. It becomes their living room. I think we're all creatures of habit. If you can create something that people have cravings for, they'll come back – even if it's for the flowers or the chairs.

Originally, what struck you about Asian cuisine? When did you know you wanted to integrate it into your food most of the time?

I was always fascinated by traveling and by spices and things. I started cooking way before you guys were born – 1973. I did five or six years in France, and I was always using spices, but I didn't know where they came from. I was using black pepper, which doesn't grow in France. I was using nutmeg, star anise, and mace, but I never knew where they grew or how they grew. I wanted to go to the source of where the spices were coming from. So in 1980, I went to Bangkok. I had an opportunity; I became a chef at the restaurant in the Oriental Hotel in Bangkok. I was twenty-three, and it changed my life. At the time, no one was using ginger, lemongrass, chilies, or galangal, so I was like, 'My God, this is amazing.' And most of the spices you would find in Europe were dry. In 1980 you couldn't find fresh ginger, fresh peppercorn, fresh lime leaf, and chili.

What do you think when people use the word fusion?

I think it's been a little bastardized, but it's a normal path. There is no kitchen without a piece of ginger now. Even Italians who are very stuck to everything have ginger in their kitchens. The world has become one. Everybody travels and you can have everything everywhere. I think we are fusions. Half Dutch, half French; everybody is from somewhere. Everyone is a mix today, and I think to mix food is totally logical.

Is there a trend in the New York restaurant scene that you're not a fan of?

I'm not a fan of, and have never followed, that new molecular stuff – using a lot of chemicals. When it was the hottest thing around, I went in the polar opposite direction. I went to farm-to-table, to ABC Kitchen. I couldn't cook with those gels and all of the different chemicals that people are using. I think food as a science is not for me. Food for nutrition, food for well-being, food for nurturing your soul – yes. If I eat a shrimp, I want it to look like a shrimp. I don't want my shrimp to look like a noodle. I'm a purist when it comes to food; I really want the product to be the product. If it's an all-organic chicken, you can season it with a little bit of licorice or something, and you create a new chicken, instead of chicken looking like a crab. I think creating a new flavor or a new sensation is good.

I prefer to waste my time looking for the best fisherman. A lot of people don't know about fish, and have big boats that leave on Monday and come back Friday. Some of the fish that was caught on Monday has already been on ice for a week. That's most of the fish you buy at Whole Foods, and all the supermarkets. We only work with small boats. They leave in the morning at six, and they come back at twelve. The fish is in the house at four o'clock in the afternoon. It's like when you go to the market and you buy fresh corn or tomatoes. They were picked that morning or the day before, and when you have them the next day, they're sweet and delicious. If you buy tomatoes from a green house and they are sitting on a shelf in the supermarket for months, how can they be good? I see people forget season as well. People are eating strawberries in December and there's no flavor. They're white inside. My goal is to source the best items I can find.

What if your customers want something that's not in season? Will you still do it?

We do that – especially when we work in hotels. We run the food and beverage in three hotels here – The Mark, The Mercer, and The Trump – so there’s always someone who wants a chocolate dipped strawberry. So we’re going to do it; we’re not going to say no. I wouldn’t put it on a menu, but we don’t say no to people. It’s not going to taste good, but it’s okay [laughs]. We want to please, you know?

Is there anything you know now that you wish you’d known when you started?

I wish I knew everything I know now, and could go back forty years. I would own the restaurant world! It’s a different life today. When I started forty years ago and I wanted to know about tamarind or any ingredients that I didn’t know, I had to go to a library and go through books. Today you google ‘tamarind’, and you know where it grows, how it grows, and you have ten thousand recipes with it. I wish I had that tool forty years ago. Today I think you can learn the craft in a couple of years. In my time, it took ten years to really know how to mix things and do things.

What are some common pitfalls of young chefs when they’re coming out of culinary school?

They go a little faster. They want to be a chef right away. If you spend time on the internet, you can learn a lot. I had to learn from every mistake. Today you can learn what not to do, what to do; it’s all there. You have all of the information because people share things, and I think it’s a wonderful world for information now. I think people can open up a restaurant in no time just by being savvy.

What one piece of advice would you give them?

If they’re passionate, they’re going to make it, so I think it is to just cook from your soul. Don’t copy, because you can copy a lot now as well. I think in the music business, in the food business – everyone is copying each other. Just cook from the heart. I think food is very personal. It’s a personal interpretation of yourself. Like an actor – every actor is different and I think every chef should be different. They shouldn’t be following too many trends. I think the people that are really succeeding are the ones that cook from the inside out. I think your personality comes out from that, and people become known from that. I was fascinated by spices, and I made a brand and a name out of that.

What do you think about that in terms of mentors? If somebody who you mentored opened a new restaurant, people would want to go because they would think it was like your cuisine, not that person’s cuisine. Maybe they took so much from you that it’s more like your food...

It depends. Young cooks that work with me will sometimes know nothing else, so they’ll just see what I did and copy that. That’s kind of flattering too because they really respect what you put together and they’re going that direction as well. Eventually, I think, with maturity, they go and do their own thing. But it’s normal; when I started I would learn from other chefs and I used their techniques. I used their flavors, and I used their combinations of ingredients and spices. After a while you really believe in yourself. When that happens, I think you do your own thing.

Would you ever consider doing competitive food TV?

I’ve been approached to do a few things but I’ve never had the time. I’m too busy doing restaurants. When people approach you to do shows you have to give two or three months of your life to step away and do that. I’ll keep it for my retirement.

Do you enjoy watching it?

I love it. I think food has become a whole new culture on TV, on the radio, and on the internet. There is so much going on now. I hope [I can do food TV] one day. If I can still cook! But now I'm busy developing the brand, doing new things, and just having fun. I'm doing ABC Country [which is opening soon in Pound Ridge], the vegetarian restaurant ABC Homegrown right next to Cocina, a place in Japan and a place in Shanghai.

What are your favorite cities for food and where do you go in each?

I have a lot. I mean New York is my favorite, to start, because I think what's nice about New York is that you can really eat anything you want, anytime you want. It can be two in the morning and you will find something. At Great NY Noodletown in Chinatown you can eat anytime you want; it's open twenty-four hours. I like Sushi Seki, NY Noodletown, and The Spotted Pig. The Spotted Pig is like two blocks away from my house, so if I forget to eat, that's where I go. Some of my other favorites are Mr & Mrs Bund in Shanghai, Maya in St. Barths, NOMA in Copenhagen, Marea and Masa in New York City, L'Arpege in Paris and Waku Ghin in Singapore.

On a typical night, what's your go-to recipe for eating in?

Usually I cook only one night a week, which is Saturday night, because I go to the country on the weekends now. Saturday and Sunday I go to [my house in] Waccabuc, New York which is an hour from here. It's amazing. When I cook at home – because during the week, we put everything on a plate – I never plate anything. I put a pot in the middle of the table and people serve themselves. It's all a family style, one-pot meal. A roast chicken with some potatoes and garlic, or I do a stew. Whatever it is, I refuse to plate.

In a restaurant every dish is individual, and I feel when you eat with family it's really good to share. That's the way I grew up.

What's your breakfast every morning? How do you always start your day?

I change every day. Fried eggs today, tomorrow oatmeal, the day after yogurt or something. I start my day at the gym. I live in the West Village and then we have an office in Soho. I have breakfast either at Mercer Kitchen, here [The Mark], or at Jean Georges. It depends. I move around – different agenda and different breakfast everyday.

Since the name of our site is The New Potato, we ask anyone in any industry, 'What is the new potato?' in the same vein of, 'What is the new black?' So, what do you think is the new potato?

My new potato is chili. We use about twelve different kinds of chilies. First, because it's the healthiest thing you can eat. If you look at the number one anti-inflammatory (preventing cancer and such) it's chilies. That's why I think there is less sickness in the world in Southeast Asia or India, because they eat spicy – they eat with chilies. Chili is my new passion. We're doing different sauces, like sriracha. Sriracha is becoming the new ketchup. A little heat is so good for you. It's healthy, and it makes your food pop. Every single dish we have on every single menu, whether it be in the vinaigrettes, on the fish, or on the vegetables, has a little heat. We put chili everywhere. So that's my new potato – my hot chili.

If you could have a dinner party with any five people, living or dead, who would be there and what would you cook?

I would say the first person, because I met him a couple of times when I was in Thailand, would be the King of Thailand. I would make him a meal – a fusion dinner for him – and get his thoughts, because I think Thailand really changed my life in terms of food. I spent two years over there, from twenty-three to twenty-five. I owe a lot of my cooking to Thailand, so I would love to cook for him, sit down at a table with him and give him a

royal dinner. Then, who else? I don't know, there are so many people I would like to cook for. I can't say my mother because she hates my food [laughs]. You know the mothers, they only like what they cook. But she would be number two. I would cook something that she would hate, but I'll do it anyway.

Sunday night we cooked for Madonna at Cocina; she came in for fifteen people. That was pretty spectacular. I would like to do a dinner for her. Who else could I do a dinner for? I love the Dalai Lama too. I would do a dinner for him. It'd have to be vegetarian, so I could test my new vegetarian menu for ABC. One more to go? I would like to do one of my mentors. I would do a dinner for Paul Bocuse. I worked for him for a year. He kicked me twice, so I'd like to give it back to him. He doesn't like chili, so I would do a chili dinner for him. I like to provoke some people [laughs].