

## CELEBRITY CHEF

# The Gourmet Globalist

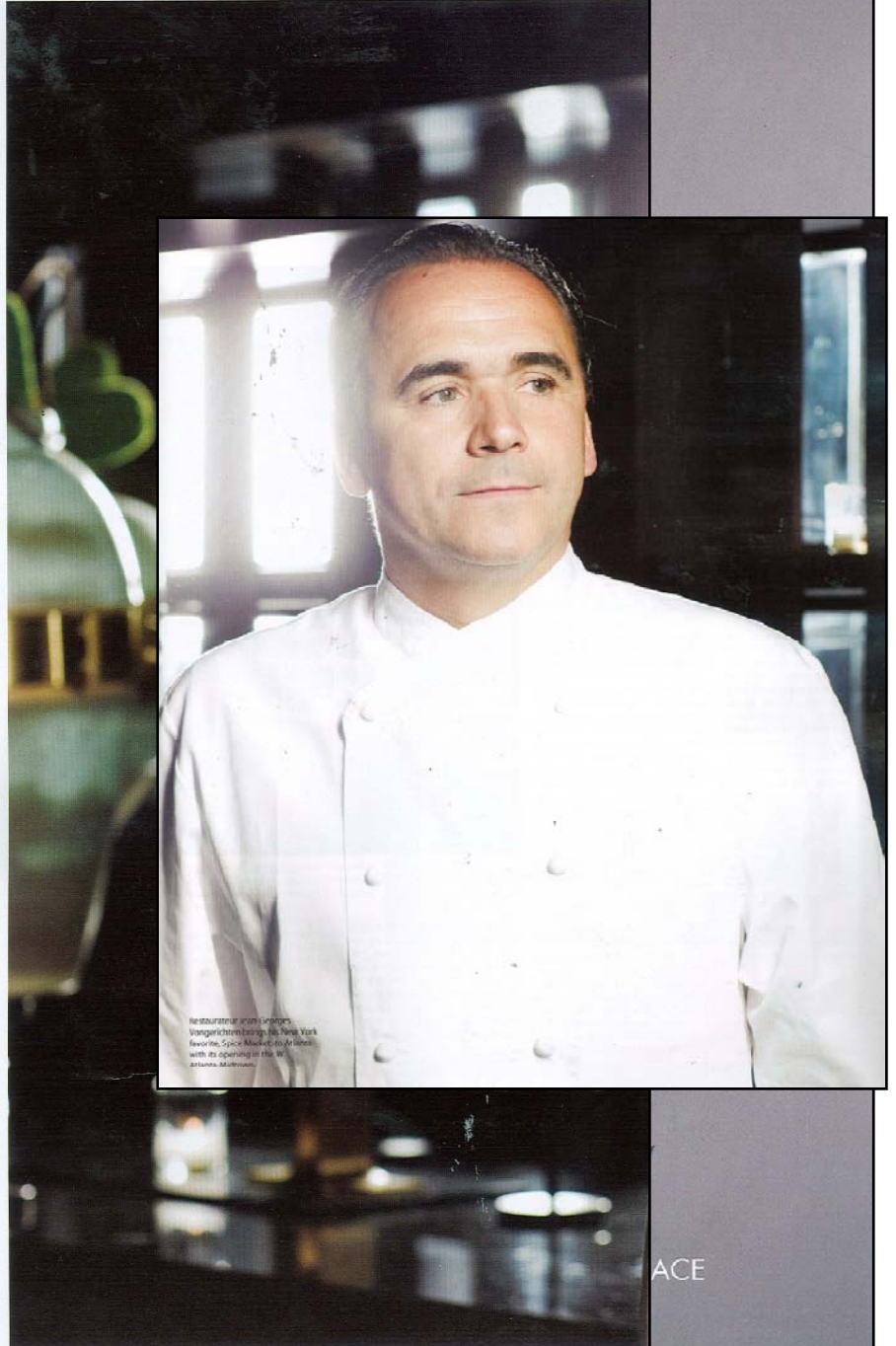
*Jean-Georges Vongerichten helped invent culinary fusion. He brings his distinctive version to Atlanta with the opening of Spice Market*

BY JONATHAN LERNER  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MALI AZIMA

In what the hospitality industry calls a soft opening, the W Atlanta-Midtown hotel and its restaurant Spice Market had already been welcoming guests for weeks, as renovation of the building was completed. (It's the former Sheraton Colony Square.) But at three o'clock on the last Thursday afternoon in May, activity approached a crescendo; the year's most glittering launch party was just hours away. By the entrance, a purple carpet was rolled out, and spotlights were rolled in. Blasts of music reverberating through the multi-story space that contains lobby, lounge and restaurant signaled DJs testing their levels. In the restaurant's kitchen, chef Ian Winslade and his *brigade de cuisine* were cranking out canapés—1,000 pieces each of 14 different exotic nibbles. In the dining rooms, woodworker Skylar Morgan and his crew were still installing the final bits of trim, while the wait staff cleared away tables and chairs to make room for the evening's expected crush.

But Jean-Georges Vongerichten seemed preternaturally calm. The trim 51-year-old chef-restaurateur enjoyed a relaxed late lunch with his lighting design team, joked easily with a photographer and her assistants, and chatted enthusiastically with a reporter about the ethnic eateries of Buford Highway. Smiling easily and often amid the growing frenzy, he was the personification of good-natured confidence. "There's no challenge that startles him," says Pano Karatassos Jr., executive chef at Kyma, who spent two years working for Vongerichten at his three-Michelin-starred New York dining room Jean Georges. Of course, Vongerichten—whose career has helped create a new job description, international chef-superstar—had experienced opening nights before. Since he first struck out on his own in 1991, his empire has grown to include more than 20 restaurants in locations as various as London, Paris, Shanghai, Las Vegas, Bora Bora and the Bahamas. Success on that scale depends on many things, one of which surely must be the cultivation of a smoothly functioning organization. "He has the true balance. He can be as intense as anybody else when something's not at his standard," says Karatassos. "But

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Restaurateur Jean-Georges Vongerichten brings his New York favorite, Spice Market to Atlanta with its opening in the W Atlanta Midtown.

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## JEAN-GEORGES VONGERICHTEN

he chooses to be happy and have fun, and motivates the staff with that type of energy." And on this potentially frazzling day, Vongerichten knew that no matter what came up, he had someone to handle it.

The chef, who grew up outside Strasbourg, France, followed a fairly standard professional arc in his early years. He acquired a classical French culinary grounding by working as an apprentice and then a sous-chef at a series of boutique-scale, chef-centered, Michelin-starred restaurants. In 1980, he was given the post of *chef de cuisine* at The Oriental Hotel in Bangkok. In Thailand, Vongerichten encountered a world of unfamiliar ingredients and flavors, as well as approaches to cooking that differ from but are just as subtle and complex as the *haute cuisine* he was trained in. He went on to head other kitchens in Hong Kong and Singapore, continuing along the way his impassioned exploration of Asian food ways. Then he took the helm at Lafayette, in New York, where he showcased what he had learned, turning out meals that had all the precision of French technique but with a lighter, Asian-accented sensibility. In place of sauces heavy with butter and cream, for example, he used emulsions, infused oils, vinaigrettes and the broths of fruits and vegetables. Shortly—at 29—he earned four stars from *The New York Times*. Then he opened his own place in the city, the bistro JoJo. "But I had traveled the world for ten years," he says. "I had too many ideas and wanted to do too many things.

hard-edged, angular, potentially overwhelming space with a vertiginously pitched ceiling. But like the interior of the W as a whole, it has been softened and transformed. Overhead in the main dining area are rustic, latticed timber constructions draped with thick ropes and hung with huge wooden bells; they add texture, and mystery. A deep red hue is prominent in the room, punctuated by silky brocade pillows in bright colors that suggest tropical flavors like lemongrass, pineapple, tamarind and ginger. A second, darkly intimate room is focused around a pool in which blossoms, fronds and candles float. The cooking is similarly bracing—full-flavored but light in that distinctly South Asian way, and not at all wimpy in the spicing. "We added some things [to the original Spice Market menu] like catfish tempura, but I'd say it's 98 percent the same," Vongerichten says.

"He knows Asian cuisine inside and out, and when he puts together his recipes he's not having to look in books," comments Karatassos, who describes "the most beautiful thing, working for him" as the point each week when the menu at Jean Georges would change. "There he was at the bar having his coffee. It's 8:00, 8:30, 9:00, 9:30, 10:00—he's there not only writing the menu, but he's writing down ratios of spice mixes, ratios of flavors for the sauces," Karatassos recalls. "We were supposed to produce it for that day's lunch. It was intense. It was a huge challenge as a cook to work for him."

Vongerichten is not the only chef

### Vongerichten's career has helped create a new job description, international chef-superstar.

I need changes every year. For me it was easier to open a new restaurant rather than changing the menu at [now closed] JoJo."

One of those ideas—a menu that interprets the vibrantly flavorful street foods of Southeast Asia in an environment that seems to transport you there—found its original realization as Spice Market, in New York in 2004. Atlanta's Spice Market is the first outpost of the concept. The restaurant occupies a

from out of town who has recently identified Atlanta's potential and opened here (or made plans to do so). No doubt all of them carefully analyzed our economy, our existing restaurant spectrum and our love of dining out before taking the local plunge. But he gives reasons for his decision that are particular to the kind of food Spice Market turns out. "I'd come here many times to do food events. I knew Pano, and I was very friendly with Guenter Seeger, as well. I guess I'd been



Eastern exotica. In one dining room at Spice Market, a serene pool is the focal point.

here 25 times. So I knew the town a little bit. And I thought that people are very open to Asian food here," he says. "So I thought this concept would be really well-received." He speculates that this openness could be at least partly a result of the metro area's significant and growing Asian population, and the many restaurants that immigrants have opened which have introduced local diners to previously unfamiliar tastes. "Another thing that was important to me was



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being able to find the ingredients—like lemongrass, lime leaves. (I didn't want) to try to open a restaurant and have to import everything, all the spices."

With names like Dune, Vong's Thai Kitchen and Café Martinique, most of Vongerichten's restaurants are informal. Their menus reflect his spare, ingredients-centered aesthetic and his instinct for merging culinary traditions. The exception perhaps is Jean Georges, an elegant 60-seat room in New York's Trump Tower. "It's my temple of gastronomy," says the chef. "It's not so much French in the way of the food, but more in terms of the classiness, the service. The other places are more fun." But he adds, "It is my home. I don't put my name on every place." Karassos says, "When he's in New York, he's still at that dining room. He works the pass, he jumps on the line and puts some dishes together—right there, every single day."

These days, some chefs draw inspiration from multiple culinary cultures yet shun the label "fusion" to describe what they do. Vongerichten would agree that the term was compromised during a period when "people were mixing, just to be trendy. They used things like lemongrass or ginger, but they didn't know how to extract the flavor." But he remains an unembarrassed champion of both the attitude and the word. "Fusion has been around this world for the longest time," he declares. "I'm from a fusion region: It's French, but the influence of the food is German and the language is Alsatian. As people immigrate, they take things with them. The world today is a big fusion place on every level." He has a similarly realistic view of molecular gastronomy, the foodie compulsion of the moment. "It's exactly like fusion. In some hands it could be magical, and in some other hands it's a disaster." He laughs broadly at that, and then adds, "In the end, food just has to be delicious."

Vongerichten's current game plan is to open outposts of deliciousness all over the planet. "When I was a kid, I wanted to be either an architect or a chef and I think today

"The world today is a big fusion place on every level."

I'm doing both," he says. I let my imagination go, and just open restaurants with different concepts. They're my dreams. Every time I have a dream I open a restaurant." ☺



A floating world. Timber constructions hung mysteriously with ropes and bells are suspended above Spice Market's main dining room, which itself is a balcony overlooking the hotel lobby.

