

FOOD ARTS

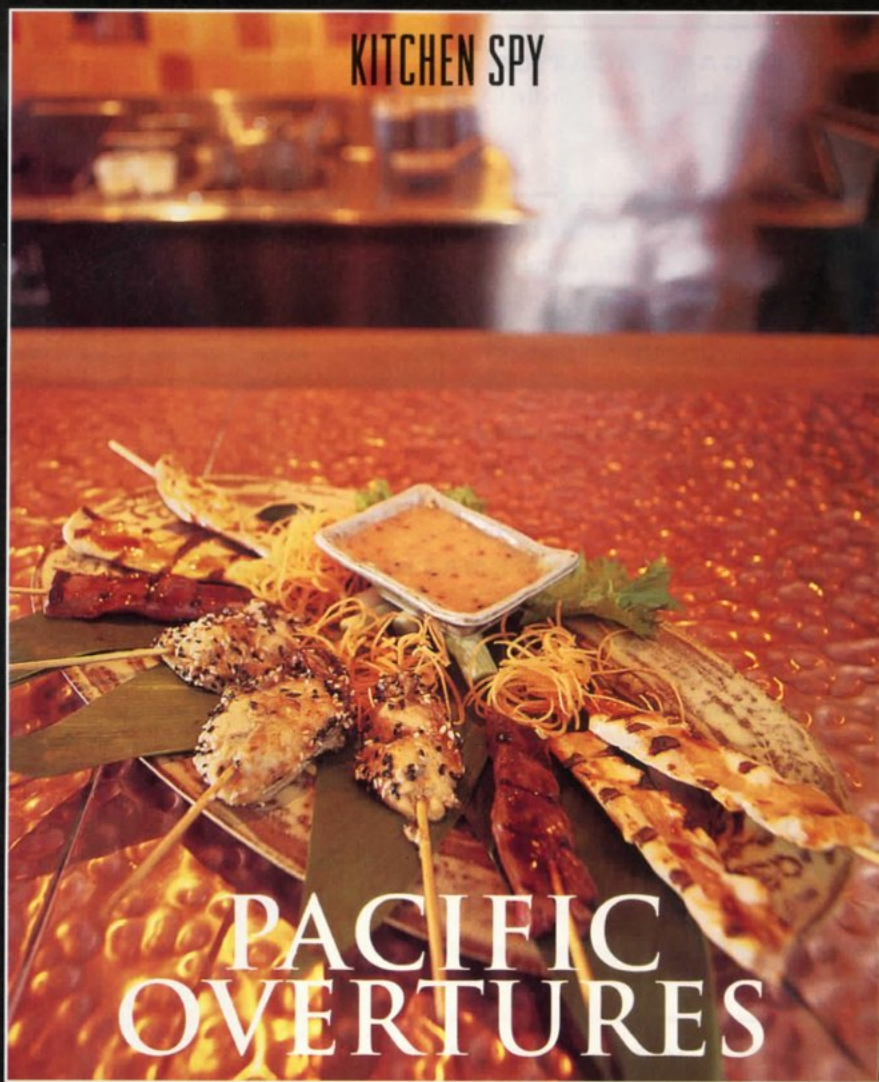
AT THE RESTAURANT & HOTEL FOREFRONT

WET PAINT!

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KITCHEN SPY



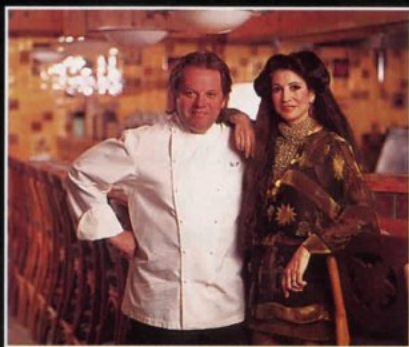
PACIFIC OVERTURES

With impeccable French underpinnings and a sure instinct for trends, Wolfgang Puck is adding his signature strokes to the Pan-Asian brushwork that's recoloring the nation. Jan Weimer looks at what makes it all work at ObaChine.

Photos by Grey Crawford.

Their muse is challenge, their mantra change. "You must remain open-minded," he says. "Just because you've done something the same way 100 times doesn't mean you have to do it the same way the 101st time." She echoes the same sentiments on another day: "If you want to be creative, you can't do the same thing 100 times in a row."

He, chef **Wolfgang Puck** and she, his wife, designer, and business partner **Barbara Lazaroff**, perhaps the most innovative couple in restaurantland, expanded their frontiers once again with the launch of **ObaChine** in Beverly Hills last fall, followed with a second unit opened in Seattle in December. ObaChine, the 36th restaurant in their galaxy, reflects their mutual commitment to altering



Wolfgang Puck and Barbara Lazaroff (above) have turned their attention to Pan-Asian trends at ObaChine, where customers can try a tantalizing array of skewered treats (top) at a ground-floor satay bar (opposite) before ascending a colorfully carpeted staircase to the main dining room.

their course. "You have to keep changing when you're successful. If you don't you'll die," says the man who brought us designer pizza and almost single-handedly ignited the American passion for wood-burning ovens. From the trendsetting California dishes he launched at **Spago** and his pioneering French-Chinese fusion fare at **Chinois on Main** to the Pan-Asian themes he's now exploring at ObaChine, Puck continues to break new ground on American menus.

ObaChine was in development for several years. The original intention was to showcase a Chinese menu in a small brewery that would be more viable than Eureka, Puck's restaurant and brewery that folded beneath the crushing weight of economics. But soon Chinese cuisine



East meets West at ObaChine, where wok ranges and rice cookers coexist with stockpots and cooktops.



Top left: The satay bar is equipped with a griddle, deep-fat fryer, and char-broiler. Left: A chef preps dim sum alone in a room behind the bar. Above: Chinese wok ranges are the backbone of the line at ObaChine, where even sautéing is done in single-handed Shanghai-style woks.



olved into a broader Southeast Asian theme. Even the restaurant's name reflects the fusing of these multiple influences: "oba" for the pungent Japanese mint-like herb more commonly known as *shiso*, and "*chine*," the French word for China. At first Puck hated the moniker. "We had one of those Wolf-Barbara moments," recalls Lazaroff. But Puck relented, and the name survived. "That was easiest," he says, justifying his cave-in. The oba leaf inspired much of

Lazaroff's interior design. You'll find it carved into the backs of the wood chairs, in apricot-colored glass sconces cast in the shape of this signature herb, and in the restaurant's color palette. A sprig even adorns the cooks' caps. ObaChine deliberately sounds like aubergine, the regal shade of purple that figures prominently in the space—and in Lazaroff's wardrobe. She combined the purple with celadon for a traditional note and with orange for its appetizing appeal.

"Life is about color," she explains. "It lets us express what's in our hearts." Her husband, on the other hand, wears black. "He's not a color lover," she admits, assuming his Austrian lilt, "but a 'vood' kind of guy." To please Puck, a rich cherry-stained mahogany was used for the tables, booths, and smiling rotund Buddha whose tummy guests pat when they reach the top of the stairs.

Other symbols that suggest Asian themes are cut out of metal and encircle



the white, globe-shaped light fixtures and the copper band on the exhibition kitchen's hood. Similar icons float in the tsunami light Lazaroff fitted with halogen bulbs to make the colors pop. The exuberant energy of these vibrant, curvaceous forms lies in the interweaving of colors and textures in a rhythmic repetition of pattern, material, and theme. The carpet, which took six months to formulate, undulates with deep purple bands inset with orange medallions and ribbons of orange and purple swirls. Wooden torsos with bamboo struts break up the flatness of a sandblasted brick wall and hide I beams. There's hammered copper on the satay bar and hood, while the exhibition kitchen's dining counter flashes cinnabar red Persian marble and a backsplash made of copper and glass tile. The serpentine curve is functional here, making conversation easier than it is along a straight expanse.

The consummate collector, Lazaroff has mixed the antique and contemporary with the valuable and funky. There are Vietnamese paintings, Burmese puppets, Thai temple stone carvings, and Chinese ancestral portraits. Photographs from Japanese children's books, Chinese fashion magazines, travel posters, and playing cards adorn two walls of honey-caramel tiles. A 17th-century gold-leafed Burmese Buddha presides over one side of the bar, a TV on the other. An ad from the '40s was recolored and manipulated by computer to create an "original" ObaChine poster (pictured on page 78).

Along with the \$1.55-million budget, Lazaroff was guided by the skeleton of

Left: An atmospheric steamer is prized for its ability to cook fish and vegetables quickly and flawlessly. Right: Before being tea-smoked, ducks hang to air-dry over the ultimate East/West line composed of rice cookers, stockpots, an eight-burner range, and a convection oven.

the 10,000-square-foot-space. "You have to respond to the footprint you're given and work that into good design," she says. As a first step, Lazaroff assigned the satay bar to the ground floor, where people can drop in at all hours to graze on a skewer of shrimp with green curry and *oba* sauce or tuna and scallions with a ponzu/wasabi dip. Upstairs, the centerpiece of the dining room is a stunning, 3,000-square-foot hexagonal exhibition kitchen with a dining counter on three sides, and flanked on the right by a bar.

The most daunting design task, however, was to give the restaurant a curb presence despite a mere 15 linear feet in front. Though it meant sacrificing interior space, Lazaroff designed a carved balustrade that sweeps onto the sidewalk, nestling tables for al fresco dining. Visible from two sides, a pair of arced canopies unfurl like banners in opposite directions from a pole. A huge metal *oba* leaf-shaped sign hangs from the eaves.

Once involved in every aspect of the project, Lazaroff's plate is too full now to continue attending kitchen meetings. "It's not my place anymore to select equipment and lay out stations," she says. "My job is to make it all look attractive." The focus on function falls to **Hank Sachs** with the contract design division of foodservice distributor Rykoff-Sexton.

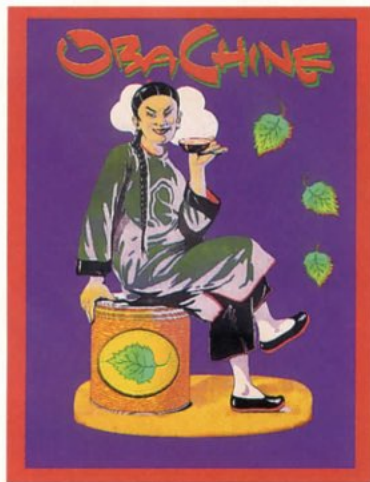
Sachs has been designing kitchens for Puck since 1993, when he opened his first restaurant, **Wolfgang Puck Cafe**, in Universal City, California.

At ObaChine Sachs installed three separate work areas. A griddle, deep-fat fryer, and char-broiler hum at the satay bar so orders can be jump-started on the griddle when it gets busy and then finished on the grill. Compressed into 500 feet, the prep space is tightly organized with pastry and garde-manger sharing a small U-shaped corner with a walk-in. Dishes are washed on the other side of a stainless divider.

Running along the length of the room is what can only be described as the ultimate East-meets-West line: a convection oven, a stockpot, two large rice cookers, and an eight-burner range over which ducks hang to air-dry before being tea-smoked. A small pantry sits at the top of the stairs, which descend into a corridor behind the bar. This room below houses a walk-in, an ice machine, beverage storage, and a work counter where a lone cook shapes pot stickers, steamed pork-filled buns, and Dungeness *siu mai* for dim sum.

But it's the exhibition arena that counts as ObaChine's kitchen. First the soaring, original wood, bow-string trussed ceiling with exposed HVAC tubes presented a stumbling block. Declaring wood unwashable, the local health department demanded a cover. Then the fire department objected to glass panels, which were to be positioned near the stoves. Once wire glass was substituted, though, everyone was satisfied.

Sachs fashioned the cooking center



OBACHINE

Asian Restaurant and Satay Bar
242 North Beverly Drive
Beverly Hills, California 90210
(310)274-4440

THE DETAILS

PROPRIETORS Wolfgang Puck, Barbara Lazaroff, and the Wolfgang Puck Food Company
EXECUTIVE CHEF Naoki Uchiyama
CHEF Chik Fong

PASTRY CHEF Christine Echiverri

GENERAL MANAGER Philip Miller

ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNERS

Barbara Lazaroff & Associates, Imaginings Interior Design, Beverly Hills, and the Wolfgang Puck Food Company Design Group, Santa Monica, California

KITCHEN DESIGNER Hank Sachs, Rykoff-Sexton Contract Design Division, La Mirada, California

TYPE OF CUISINE Southeast Asian

DATE OF OPENING November 7, 1996

HOURS lunch: 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Saturday; dinner: 5:30 to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 5:30 to 11:30 p.m. Friday to Sunday; bar: 11:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Monday to Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Friday to Sunday

SEATING CAPACITY 200

CHECK AVERAGE lunch: \$20; dinner: \$32

PROJECTED ANNUAL F&B SALES \$3 to \$4 million

THE EQUIPMENT

REFRIGERATORS Traulsen

UNDERCOUNTER REFRIGERATORS Beca

WALK-INS Thermalrite

ICE MACHINE Scotsman

CHINESE WOK RANGES Jade

WOKS Jade

COOKTOP Wolf

POT FILLER Fisher

RANGES Wolf

CONVECTION OVEN Wolf

CHAR-BROILER Wolf

BAR CHAR-BROILER Ember-Glo

STOCKPOT RANGE Wolf

BAR GRIDDLE Toastmaster

BAR DEEP-FAT FRYER Wells

EXHAUST HOOD Delfield

EXHAUST SYSTEM Preferred

Mechanical Systems, Northridge, California

FIRE SUPPRESSION SYSTEM Preferred Mechanical Systems

BAIN-MARIE Rykoff-Sexton

ATMOSPHERIC STEAMER Cleveland

DISHWASHER Rykoff-Sexton

CUSTOM STAINLESS FABRICATION

Rykoff-Sexton

SHELVING InterMetro

MIXER Hobart 30-quart

ESPRESSO MAKER Unic

COFFEE BREWER Wilbur, Curtis, Co.

TEA AND HOT WATER BREWER

Bunn-O-Matic

For a list of manufacturers, see SOURCE INFO.

with two long lines of equipment facing each other, each piece carefully chosen for its suitability for Pan-Asian dishes. Set perpendicular to them, a butcher-block counter is reserved for early-morning prep and *mise en place*. On one side are two three-section Chinese stoves with single-handled Shanghai-style woks, which are better for sautéing than the two-handled versions.

"Sautéing goes very fast in a wok," says Puck, who first experimented with this technique at Chinois. "If you're stir-frying chicken or making *pad thai* (see RECIPE FILE), you can do it in a few minutes. In a sauté pan, you wouldn't get enough heat. We do a lot of single-portion cooking, and the smaller woks with single handles are easy to lift off the stove. For example, we fry lobster or shrimp very fast, then dump the oil out and make the sauce right in the wok. If we had the bigger two-handled woks, we'd run out of space."

The Chinese stoves are fitted with a rack for holding lids and tools such as long-handled mesh spoons and a pot filler for water. Sachs chose Jade, a manufacturer known for its heavy-gauge

quality and good value, and had the units constructed from a continuous sheet of metal to avoid seams where food can lodge. The second line, opposite the woks, hosts a char-broiler, a cooktop, *bain-marie*, flat-top range, and Cleveland atmospheric steamer—a prized possession for cooking fish and vegetables quickly without breaking down their fibers, as prolonged pressure does in a standard bath.

"It's great for fish, potstickers, steamed dumplings, or *siu mai*," says Puck. "If you steam in a wok, you have to worry about running out of water, and if each thing is in a different basket, it's sometimes hard to find what you're cooking. This is a modern-day steamer but it's not pressurized. It's like a cabinet: you can put different shelves in." And if the tandoor oven ever arrives (it's said to be making the journey across the sea . . . still), Sachs will install it and a two-section wok stove in place of the larger model they're using now.

Puck created ObaChine's current menu with Japanese executive chef **Naoki Uchiyama** and Chinese chef **Chik Fong**. Its inter-Asian temperament free-

flows in dishes such as tea-leaf baked 10-spice salmon with soy/yuzu/lime sauce and crispy calamari salad with tobanjan/miso vinaigrette and a ruff of greens mounded in a fried spring-roll basket. Grilled Mandarin beef sirloin with orange sections, noodle cake, and warm plum wine sauce also promise Pacific flavors, but the steak is as rare as it would be in a Parisian bistro and is served with a veal-reduction sauce. But for all the talk of Asia, it's Puck's classic French training and European techniques that make ObaChine work so well.

Not surprisingly, ObaChine's menu remains a work-in-progress with the promise of more fish, noodle, and curry dishes. The peripatetic Puck is always visiting his restaurants, sticking his fingers into the pots, and working closely with his chefs. With this kind of passion sparking the stoves at ObaChine, the restaurant can only get better. May its life be as long as its noodles.

Jan Weimer is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer whose book, *Kitchen Redos Without Murder, Suicide, or Divorce*, will be published in June by William Morrow.