

# LUXE

THE ART OF LUXURY MARKETING



Barbara Lazaroff ————— by suzy gershman

## Visceral Reality

She is not the girl next door. Probably never was. She wanted to grow up to be a doctor. Instead, she became the Queen of Beverly Hills. Barbara Lazaroff is not a movie star or a studio head, a rock star or even a celebrity brow plucker (and, yes, there is such a person). Still, Lazaroff is one of the most powerful women in Hollywood. It is not because she is married to uberchef Wolfgang Puck; it is because Puck is married to her. Together they are a central casting Hollywood power couple, and anyone who is anyone comes to their many properties to dine, arrange for catering or plan the town's top events with them. Yes, even Bill Clinton, who was the first sitting president to eat at Spago.

an Astroturf-paved parking lot called Ma Maison. Nothing can touch or tarnish or take away from the fact that he was destined to be the King of the Duck Salad. But Lazaroff made him King of L.A., official chef to the Academy Awards (his chocolate Oscars are almost as prized as the real thing), ruler over a dominion of restaurants, cafés, frozen foods, cookware, even TV shopping. Lazaroff has masterminded it all, starting with her own visual sense and her refusal to be anyone but herself—a difficult choice in a town where people regularly ask, “How tall do you want me to be?” She works harder than any movie star or studio head, logs more miles than an airline pilot and more smiles than Miss America. That she’s succeeded against any odds—and succeeded in a town that 20 years ago just wanted to make fun of her clothes and her earrings—is testament to her unwavering philosophies.

Those beliefs—perhaps passions—are reflected in each new project. She changes each message with each type of restaurant they open. Even the Spagos differ from each other. The menu at Spago Beverly Hills is conspicuously devoid of pizza. Lazaroff says that they decided to downplay pizza at the Beverly Hills location to let people know that it’s not identical to the West Hollywood location. Instead, attention is drawn to other aspects of the more classic and refined menu, which features many of Puck’s childhood influences. Some pizza selections (including the lovingly named “Jewish pizza,” a smoked salmon dish, and the grilled chicken pizza) are available if you know to ask for them. The result: Spago feels completely different from Granita, the couple’s Malibu beach eatery. Both are different from Chinois on Main in Santa Monica, a transitional restaurant for them, which eventually begot ObaChine, a new Pacific Rim-style eatery that serves gourmet fare with a more varied price range in a hot surrounding only one block from Spago Beverly Hills. As Lazaroff puts it, “a two-minute walk in Manolo Blahnik heels.”

While her exterior may be up-to-the-minute Beverly Hills mixed with Lazaroff mysticism, her interior is far more contemplative about her world, her place, her impact. She’s chatty, even passionate, when it comes to politics, art, or the difficulties of raising a family, something she is particularly sensitive to. Mother of 8-year-old Cameron and 3-year-old Byron, Lazaroff worries that the good life in L.A. may make growing up all the more difficult.

“I’m a girl from the Bronx,” she says in her

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intense, straightforward style. “I remember how hard it was growing up, how hard my parents worked, what it was to go without. Those are things my sons will never experience, and I just hope they don’t suffer because they haven’t suffered.”

People’s real concerns are a primary Lazaroff-Puck priority: They are extremely involved in charity events, political events and even religious events if they raise money to benefit a good cause. This past April Spago hosted a sit-down Passover Seder (\$150 a head) to benefit Mazon for hunger relief. While the beautiful people do dine at Spago, Lazaroff takes any possible opportunity to remind them

that there is a responsibility that goes with privilege. And that glamour means nothing without subtext.

“If you can dream it, you can do it” is written on the doors of Spago, their flagship restaurant in Beverly Hills, built on the proverbial ashes of Bistro Gardens, a Hollywood star gone bust. The words are also written on the menu, part of a poem Lazaroff compiled with some of her favorite thoughts quoted from writers, artists and intellectuals, including Albert Einstein and Coco Chanel; it sums up her philosophy and is illustrated with the flame of life, a coordinating visual theme seen on the menu, in the furniture and even in the desserts.

The soul of the firm comes from the fact that she’s not just an interior designer or, eeeeeek, the boss’s wife; it comes from a much deeper well. Perhaps the most intangible of those feelings is glamour; even Puck’s pizza cafés and fast-food joints are associated with glamour—mostly because as a designer, Lazaroff has manipulated the space to have its own personality. She goes through artists, suppliers, trends, textures and on to the next new thing with more determination than Andy Warhol. She is self-taught but now works as a designer, part contractor, part architect and, of course, part owner.

Lazaroff’s attention to detail begets attention; she is able to draw people to it. Some even debate her decorative touches as if they were political statements or fashion collections. Actually she’s just out there to share what she finds as she circles the globe, absorbing art, design, architecture and vibes. But she’s also opinionated, political, committed to issues, very involved in the community and not at all likely to go quietly into that good night.

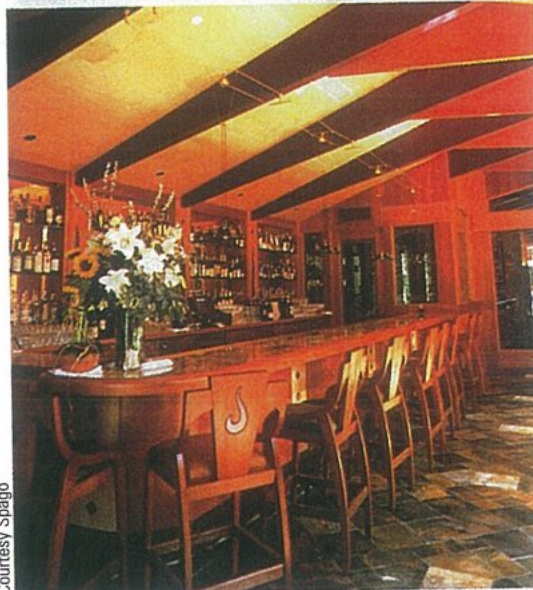
So she gets dressed up in her lavender velvet hand-painted tunic and makes the rounds, lighting up the room with a movie star smile. Surely the food works on its own, and Puck has a more than serious talent, but the secret ingredient is that he married a woman with a dream and a vision and a talent, and the ability to marry them all. ♦

Not that Lazaroff planned any of this; she was studying biochemistry and planned to become a doctor when she met Puck, after which she found herself an accidental designer, working with Puck on the interiors, images and menus of his restaurants. To boost Puck's image out of the kitchen, she called a girlfriend and booked the then rising-star chef on a national talk show; a far more studied interior effort resulted in Puck's first independent restaurant, a pizza place in the West Hollywood Hills. Puck saw it as something simple with red and white checkered tablecloths; he wanted to call it Trattoria Vesuvio, but Lazaroff pronounced with typical candor, "Over my dead body will he call it that." When she was finished it was Spago, the first brick in their empire. "Over the years I've learned that Barbara is usually right," says Puck of the innovations that Lazaroff started with their first address. Her ideas have launched 32 other ventures, including nine fine-dining properties that have proven that Puck and Lazaroff can open new stores to immediate sold-out success, as well as become instant top-notch locations for events, such as Elton John's Oscar night party to benefit AIDS, held this year at Spago Beverly Hills.

But creating that inviting environment isn't just a matter of composing a better menu or extending a brand name. To Lazaroff it is adding to lessons learned in the past, maturing to new pleasures, finding what pleases next.

"Visual luxe is about creating a whole that can take a sensitive person to another place...and all of us are sensitive to the same basics. When you enter a place you are immediately taken with the light, the textures, the colors, the way you are greeted, the energy of the place. Such a visceral response is normal. But smell and sound and stimulation are all things you need to be surrounded with before the food arrives.

"When the food comes, you dine with your eyes first. In everything in life, you dine with



Courtesy Spago

"IF YOU CAN DREAM IT, YOU CAN DO IT" IS THE MOTTO OF THE NEWEST SPAGO IN BEVERLY HILLS. THE DINING ROOM (TOP), THE GARDEN (CENTER) AND THE BAR (BOTTOM) ARE DESIGNED TO CULTIVATE THE CASUAL ELEGANCE THAT SPAGO IS KNOWN FOR.

your eyes first. Then a part of your brain asks if you are comfortable. Even if no words have been exchanged in this process, this is the primal experience.

"As a designer and a restaurateur, I can tell

you, we are all about the glimmer in your eye. From the dishwashers to the investors, we are all people with a vision, and that vision is not about food—it's about feelings."

Artist as restaurateur, Lazaroff is rather unconventional in her approach. Her appearance has become her trademark: She's often dressed in purple, with dangling amethyst and peridot earrings and flowing teen-angel dark hair, which, when she wears it turned up, she refers to as "geisha hair." Her clothes, of course, are her "Sunday go-to-meeting clothes," which she wears on the floor of the Puck eateries when she meets and greets, as well as when she gives speeches, does interviews or makes public appearances. She wears high heels that make you wonder how she stands all day.

In real life, as she calls it, she looks like a carpenter, known on a work site for her ability to get down and dirty and to simply ruin her manicure.

The two different work outfits very much sum up the duality of Lazaroff's personality: She loves beautiful things that are well made and exclusively crafted, but she's not afraid of hard work, of doing the job herself, of dirt under her nails.

Lazaroff's public image has gotten her in trouble, especially in the early years when locals didn't understand her talent or her strength.

"I used to tell her to wear a business suit like everyone else, not to wear a short skirt," Puck says. But then he realized that what makes her tick is what makes her vision work. Puck had asked her "to make the restaurant more simple, or not to do some inventive details." But with persistence and easing Puck into her ideas, and of course, with all their successes, he's relented, even converted. "Now I've come around to be more like her."

Puck never planned to leave his first starring role as a chef. But his talent was clear years ago, when he was a cherub-faced cook at