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ANNALS OF FOOD

PUCK'S PEAK

*How Wolfgang Puck is becoming the first chef
to turn himself into a brand name.*

BY ARTHUR LUBOW

ONE afternoon this summer, at the Wolfgang Puck Cafe in West Hollywood, Barbara Lazaroff, who is Wolfgang Puck's wife, business partner, and all-around image custodian, was concentrating on terrazzo countertops and pizza-oven placement, and on menu language, merchandising, and signage. It was two months before a gargantuan branch of the Puck restaurant chain was to open at Disney World, in Orlando, and she was having lunch with Frank Guidara, the president of the Wolfgang Puck Food Company, and with a youthful artist named David Anson Russo. Lazaroff has long black hair, which sweeps down her right side, and large dark eyes, which are heavily accented with eyeliner and waterproof mascara. At this lunch, she was wearing a black velvet hat with a violet bow, and a sheer purple-flowered shirt over a lavender silk sweater. Against the red-and-yellow pizza-slice-shaped tiles of the restaurant, which she had designed, Lazaroff was surprisingly inconspicuous. It was the straight-arrow Guidara, in a drab business suit, who stood out.

Lazaroff, who has been married to Puck for fourteen years and is the mother of his two children, oversees much of the business. For one thing, she decides the way things look. In addition to the frenetically tiled Wolfgang Puck Cafes, she designed the original, often imitated Spago, in West Hollywood, along the lines of a stripped-down beach house. It featured an open kitchen spotlight by theatrical lights that gave Puck a stage on which to perform. This spring, Lazaroff's new Spago, lavishly embellished with etched glass and South African slate and purpleheart wood, opened in Beverly Hills.

Russo had brought to the lunch some doodles of a benevolent-looking wolf that Lazaroff hoped might improve a logo that she had been developing for the Disney World restaurant. She has

for years been exploiting the happy coincidence that her husband's nickname is the English word for *Canis lupus*. "A design company sent me a wolf and it looked goofy, so I redrew it," she said to Russo. "I think ours looks more intelligent. He's a wolf dog. I took off the claws. I made him less threatening."

"It's a great concept," Russo said.

"It's an icon," Lazaroff said. "The first Cafe we did, there was a wolf and Little Red Ridinghood bringing pizza to Grandma. At the store at the airport, he's there delivering pizza by airplane. This is what we've been looking to do—make Wolf the Mickey Mouse of pizza."

When most people hear the name "Wolfgang Puck," they do not think of Mickey Mouse. They think of the Los Angeles chef who used the freshest, finest ingredients to popularize "California cuisine" for a high-powered clientele. A showman in the kitchen and a warm, witty host, Puck attracted to his restaurants the Hollywood names that appear in bold-faced type in the gossip columns. While he still provides that experience, in what the food industry calls his "fine-dining" restaurants, Puck has tied his future to "casual dining" and packaged supermarket foods. He hasn't lost his passion for cooking, but the trajectory of his career is pulling him away from the kitchen, and turning him into a raiser of investment capital and a brand name.

Puck, who appears on "Good Morning America" once a month, has become rich as well as famous. He and Lazaroff are now majority owners (their stake ranges from sixty to ninety-five per cent) of seven upscale restaurants, in L.A., San Francisco, Las Vegas, and Chicago, which together grossed fifty-six million dollars last year. (Spagos in Tokyo and Mexico City are licensed.) They also own a little more than a third of the Wolfgang Puck Food Company, which last year had revenues of seventy million dollars. At forty-eight, Puck is the most financially suc-

successful chef in history, and he is planning far bigger things. But, with his identity becoming as elastic as his pizza dough, the question arises: How wide can it be stretched before it gets too thin?

PUCK was shy when Lazaroff met him, in 1979. Indeed, he is still a bit shy, beneath his smile and his repartee. When he greets his customers, there is about him a tinge of reserve, a mixture of a little boy's timidity and a servant's reticence. Lazaroff encouraged him to speak up. They had been dating only a few months when, cleaning his bathroom, she found a pay stub from his job as chef at Ma Maison, the buzzy Hollywood bistro owned by Patrick Terrail.

"Is this what you earn every week?" she asked him.

"No," he said. "This is what I earn every two weeks."

"You got to be kidding," she said. "You work six nights a week? I don't think you value yourself enough. I think you ought to tell Patrick you need a raise. And you know what? You should be making twice as much." He did as she instructed, and six months later she told him it was time to ask for another raise.

Then, one afternoon, while they were watching television, they saw a Ma Maison waiter preparing a dish on a local show.

"What is he doing?" Puck exclaimed. "He's not even a cook!"

"Do you want to be on TV?" Lazaroff asked.

"Maybe," Puck said.

Lazaroff called up a friend, who booked him on a popular syndicated program. "I think she was the one who had a vision, and saw what there is today," says Richard Krause, a chef who once worked for them and is now at Martini's, in New York. "Everything she did seemed purposely geared to having this happen." When Lazaroff saw the jacket design for Puck's first cookbook, she insisted that the words "Ma Maison" be smaller and the name "Wolfgang Puck" be larger. "Why promote Ma Maison?" she said. "You're leaving anyway."

Puck quietly assembled a group of in-

vestors, and with the opening of Spago, in January, 1982, he achieved what he had dreamed of at nineteen, when, as a poor Austrian boy serving as apprentice to a top chef in Provence, he imagined owning his own restaurant. "The plan was to come to America, make a beautiful restaurant, and have a Rolls-Royce," says Guy Leroy, a chef in Jacksonville, Florida, who has known Puck since those early days in Provence. "But then

ard Krause, his chef, invented a hybrid of French and Chinese food which remains his most original cuisine.

PUCK and Lazaroff have had some setbacks in their fine-dining career. Eureka, a lavish brasserie that opened in West L.A. in 1990, went bankrupt after two years: the restaurant was making money, but it was attached to a brewery, and the brewery failed. Although Eureka is their only flop, Granita, a phantasmagoric grotto that Lazaroff designed in Malibu at a cost of more than three million dollars, is too ambitious for a seasonal location: after six years, it is barely breaking even. Still, the other fine-dining restaurants have profit margins that range from six to twelve per cent, providing Puck and Lazaroff with a very comfortable living but also with a very arduous life. A chef, no matter how famous, is a servant. "When people call you in the middle of the night, you have to be there," Puck says. "When someone complains, you have to come talk to them." He doubts whether his sons, who are eight and three, will follow him into the business.

Recently, I watched Puck in the kitchen at Spago Beverly Hills, where the kitchen is separated from the dining room by sliding glass panels, on which Lazaroff has had inscribed a poem she wrote about "the flame of life." (The so-called flame, which resembles a

teardrop, is a recurring motif in the design of the restaurant. A granite fountain carved with the word "passion" in twenty languages is another prominent element.) Puck was dressed in a chef's white jacket and black-and-white striped pants, and had a dirty towel draped on one shoulder. His hands were stained red from cherry juice. He was dipping a finger in a hot saucepan.

"A little black pepper in the sauce for the ducks," he said. He walked away from the stove to a vast bin of morels and asked, "Do we have cilantro leaves for the fish soup?"

He was cooking a six-course lunch for twenty-two in honor of the French chef Alain Ducasse. During the lunch,



Puck with his wife and business partner, Barbara Lazaroff: Everything she did seemed geared to having this happen.

Wolfgang learns very quickly that to cook in one restaurant, you're not going to get rich."

A year later, Lazaroff and Puck began working on their next restaurant—Chinois on Main, in Santa Monica. A capricious public that flocks to a hot dining spot one year is likely to abandon it the next. "Once it goes down, it's very hard to get back up," Puck says, and owning another restaurant acts as a cushion. Working with a narrow shoebox of a space into which she had to cram ninety seats, Lazaroff composed an Orientalist fantasy of celadon tables, bamboo wainscoting, a tiled open kitchen, and oversized pieces of Asian art: her ur-design. And Puck, in collaboration with Rich-