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# Wolfgang Puck and Barbara Lazaroff Have Cooked Up a Marriage, Not to Mention Two Sizzling Restaurants

By **Peggy Brawley** | March 26, 1984 12:00 PM

He's as pleasant and undemanding as bread pudding—soft, mushy and sweet. She's as tart-tongued and flamboyant as chili sauce—fiery, spicy, outspoken. Not exactly a match made in culinary heaven. “It's against all the odds,” he says, “but we're a couple.”

Wolfgang Puck, 34, the mild-mannered celebrity chef and his live-in love, Barbara Lazaroff, 30, a hostess, designer and soon-to-be wife, have sifted together two differing temperaments and talents to create Spago and Chinois, two of L.A.'s hottest restaurants. “Wolfgang was already a great chef,” says L.A. restaurateur Michael McCarty, “but Barbara came along and flipped it all into high gear. She took it down a zany trail.”

A meal at either establishment is as much a theatrical experience as it is a gastronomic one. Every evening when the curtain goes up, Puck is the ubiquitous stage manager, supervising the making of angel-hair pasta or duck crepes in plum sauce and strolling from table to table greeting the audience. Lazaroff is the oh-so-visible mistress of ceremonies, poured into a sequined bodysuit, with streamers floating from her waist and a pet cockatiel perched on her head. Barbara maintains two separate wardrobes,

one for each restaurant, with a combined total of some 400 exotic designer dresses.

Lazaroff's excesses are not limited to clothing. She spent two years remodeling Chinois, once a punk-rock club in a rundown Santa Monica neighborhood, at a cost of roughly \$650,000. And to hear Barbara tell it, her creation makes the Sistine Chapel look as if it was done with a paint-by-numbers kit. "I dare you to say that my restaurant is not a painting," she declares of her fuchsia, black and celadon-green oriental fantasy. Guests have earned tongue-lashings for leaning against one of the two \$25,000 cloisonné cranes. Lazaroff spends \$2,300 a week on flowers for the two restaurants, adhering to what she calls "the Dolly Parton rule of floral arranging: More is more, and less is less."

Flitting from table to table, Lazaroff holds long conversations with the likes of Cher, Alan Alda, Carol Burnett, Johnny Carson, Joan Rivers and Victoria Principal, who held her New Year's Eve party at Chinois last year. She is very strict about keeping such chitchat to herself. Yet she shows no such restraint when it comes to the attention ladled onto her talented partner. "I've heard the story of Wolf's life so many times, I just can't listen anymore," she says. "If someone starts going on about what a genius he is, I say, 'You mean, a culinary genius.'" Puck gives an equally frank appraisal of his partner. "People either like Barbara or they can't stand her," he says, "but no one is indifferent."

Puck and Lazaroff met five years ago in an L.A. disco. Wolf, then separated from his wife (his divorce was finalized four months later), remembers thinking Barbara was "a challenge, an original. She was crazy, dancing wild and falling out of her clothes." He asked her to come to his cooking class the next morning and was pleasantly surprised when she did. "Afterward we went to Ma Maison for orange juice," Puck reports. "I tried to hold her hand,

but she kept pulling away. She said we could only be friends.”

“Even though I was attracted to him,” admits Lazaroff, “Wolf wasn’t my type.” But, she thought, “he was different from the men I had known, so refreshing.” Several months after meeting Puck, Barbara walked out on her seven-year relationship with a record-company executive. She coerced Puck into letting her redo his kitchen; they collaborated on a cookbook (Wolfgang Puck’s Modern French Cooking for the American Kitchen) and began living together.

There were problems at first. Barbara would occasionally come home and find Puck’s ex-wife, Marie France, doing the laundry or other domestic chores. “For years it was very difficult for her to deal with me,” says Barbara. Lazaroff and Puck would fight about anything—chairs, paintings, even maître d’s. “I tend to yell a lot,” she says. “Wolf is not a confronter.”

About a year ago Lazaroff became so frustrated she gave Puck a checklist of things in their life together that had to be changed, then left him for four days. “The relationship was 80 percent my effort and 20 percent his,” says Barbara. “I took care of everything for him. He was extraordinarily reserved and restrained with his affection.” But Wolf’s puckish charm won out. “He’s become much more outgoing,” concedes Barbara.

There was also a time when Barbara felt smothered by her better-known beau. She even had a satin jacket embroidered with “I’m not Wolfgang Puck’s girlfriend; he’s my boyfriend.” That too has changed. “Barbara makes it happen,” says Alexander de Toth, manager of the Mansion on Turtle Creek in Dallas, who employs Puck as the hotel’s menu consultant. “Whatever Wolf does in the kitchen, Barbara makes the world know about it.”

It’s a long way from the chichi surroundings of Chinois to the South Bronx,

but that's where Lazaroff grew up. Her father is a produce-market manager, and her mother a bookkeeper. She attended some half a dozen colleges, but never got a degree. By the time she met Puck, she had given up the idea of becoming a doctor and an actress. Wolfgang was born in Klagenfurt, Austria, and raised by his mother, a hotel chef who was divorced when Wolf was 2, and his stepfather, a miner. At 14, Puck attended a hotel school and subsequently became a sous-chef at Baumannière, a three-star restaurant in the south of France. He worked in Monaco, Paris, New York and Indianapolis before settling at the trend-setting Ma Maison in L.A.

After a falling-out with Ma Maison owner Patrick Terrail, Puck started up Spago in 1982. A year and a half later, Chinois would also prove an instant success. Spago grossed \$3.8 million last year, and Chinois will take in an estimated \$2.3 million in its first year of operation. Lazaroff is an equal partner in all of Puck's ventures, which now include consulting positions with a luxury airline, an elite hotel chain and a Spago in Tokyo.

The couple spends little time relaxing in their two-bedroom house in a modest residential section of Los Angeles. The \$35,000 kitchen is stocked with food for their menagerie (two cats, four dogs, two rabbits and the cockatiel) but not much else. Puck plays an occasional game of tennis, and Barbara goes to the movies, alone, or reads. She drives a cluttered BMW; he drives a 1981 station wagon. She teasingly calls Puck "a Pillsbury Doughboy" and is trying to persuade him to go to a jazz exercise class with her. They plan to have children someday. "He'll have our child in the kitchen at 10," says Barbara, "but I envision something more along the lines of a physicist."

They are getting married on May 20. "I wouldn't marry Wolf before because I didn't want to be Mrs. Puck," Lazaroff says. "But now I've done my own things and have accomplishments." They have invited 200 friends to Baumannière, where Wolfgang got his start, for a medieval ceremony Lazaroff

is arranging. She hopes Andy Williams will sing Greensleeves, and the bride will wear a \$12,000 Zandra Rhodes dress. After that, it's back to work. "It's hard to believe," says Barbara, "but our entire life is the restaurants. I tell Wolfgang, 'Do you think another woman would live with it?' " Would she let another woman try?