



Wolfgang's Garden

Wolfgang Puck's new \$4 million Spago in Beverly Hills is almost ready to serve.

PHOTO BY LISA ROMBERG

When Wolfgang Puck throws open the doors to a new Spago in Beverly Hills this month, it will be the most-watched restaurant opening of the year. And if he closes the original Spago off the Sunset Strip—which he hopes a local, stalwart stockholder will let him do—a slice of Los Angeles history will die.

The city has always had famous restaurants, but few have carried the mystique of the original Spago. When the place opened in 1982, it was designed by Puck's wife, Barbara Lazzaroff, to resemble a clean, bright California beach house. Later it came to epitomize Eighties chic the way the Coconut Grove stood for the glamorous post-war Forties, and Perino's the stuffier Fifties.

History or no history, Puck swears as if he wouldn't care if he never saw the Sunset Spago again. The kitchen's too small in which to be cre-

ative, he thinks. And the famous front room needs a complete and eye size redo that Puck feels is impossible given the age of the building.

"The best thing would be to burn it down, probably," he says in his familiar American accent as he sits in the restaurant's back room, covered for years to be social Siberia.

In an era when other restaurants reeked of opulence, Spago's old casual atmosphere wasn't the only thing that drew Young and Old Go Hollywood. There was, of course, Puck's delicious and influential (it has pioneering designee praise with smoked salmon, baby Sonoma la Chino Fern's mixed greens and chopped vegetable salads, purved pates with horse mallow, delicate bakery desserts).

Limes and papayas piled up around the restaurant's floor-to-ceiling entrance, and stars and moons vied for sea-and-be-seen tables looked out onto the Strip and the glimmering city lights below.

"The best thing would be to burn it down, probably." Puck says of the legendary old Spago.

From Elizabeth Taylor and Audrey Hepburn to Cary Grant and James Stewart, from Andy Warhol to Annald, Madonna, and Madonna de Gennaro, everyone who's ever existed ended up at Spago at one time or another. Prime time was Oscar night, at one of being "twisty" Lerner's parties—the parties that helped put Spago on the map, although they ceased in 1999 with Lauer's death.

But if the brand white-on-white inebriety of the original Spago undercuts the pretence of other fashionable hangouts, the new Spago aims for a higher profile. They say, "God's in the details." With *Bashara's* in the details, too," Laueroff jokes, admitting she's going for it.

A "Sense of life theme" threads through the carpet and echoes in other design elements, including the wall accents. There's an exhibition kitchen. And Laueroff uses mahogany, glass panels, and a color scheme that ranges from green to purple. The tabs will run about \$4 million.

Early on, she and Puck brought busy Canon Drive to a standstill when they trucked in a pair of 280-year-old olive trees for the patio around which the U-shaped restaurant is built.

"It's going to be serene and wonderful," Laueroff says about the new place, built on the site of the old *Bistro Garden*.

Because Puck works here under pressure, he waited until three days before the original Spago opened to create the menu. He's also taking a meat-off-the-pot approach to the food at Spago. Beverly Hills. One thing he knows it will involve around the seasonal selection of greens and vegetables that he finds at Southern California's Chico Farm and at Santa Monica's open-air market.

"Whether it's

live steaks, or a wonderful fish, or great strawberries, that's where the cooking starts," Puck says. "It's a very spontaneous thing."

And it will be done under the direction of chef Lee Lefter, a five-year veteran of the *Beverly Hills Spago* as well as Puck and Laueroff's *Gracias* restaurant in Malibu.

Trademark Spago dishes will stay a perfect steak, chilled chopped vegetables. The modified salmon pizza will probably be a pizza of the day, the topping changing with the season to black truffle or morels.

Puck's also going to introduce the Australian food to grow up with, but cooked in the non-poultry style of California's crisp Wiener obtained for he

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created for director Billy Wilder, a variation on his mother's Austrian noodle soup, and during apricot season, his mother's apricot clompings with apricot sauce.

"We have everything in the new kitchen from a Chinese wok to a steamer and a smoker," he says. "I just don't want to make brown food, like so many times you see in Europe."

Pack designed the kitchen at Creative Artists Agency's L. M. PVI building in Beverly Hills, and the agency's chief financial officer Bob Goldstein is one of the new Spago's key investors.

"We think it'll be like CAA's cafeteria," says Lazaroff, wistfully, envisioning Spago packed with high-profile agents.

But Puck wants a younger crowd to mingle with the power-brokers, old-timers, the Hollywood glamour set. "You don't want to get just one group of people. That kills restaurants. When you walked in at the end of Chanin's, you saw only blue hair."

The goal, agrees Lazaroff, is to end up with a mix like that of Swilly and Mary Lanza's Oscar parties, where Madonna sat on Warren Beatty's lap; Jessica Lange, Kathleen Turner and Meryl Streep schmoozed; Paul Newman arrived for dinner, then took off in a limo to prevent the Best Actress Oscar, and Berne Miller tweaked Lanza's cheeks as the left.

"We always had to give Swilly a good deal," says Puck about the parties, which cost upward of \$10,000. And Friday Irvie Lanza, manic and controlling, spent much of Oscar night barking orders and ejecting gyno-crashers.

Things can get tricky managing the ego that shows up at Spago's front door. But the secret is being a good psychiatrist and referee. "We'll never say, 'How's your wife or your husband?'" Lazaroff explains, admitting Spago's front-drink people read Vanity to keep track of leads, fringes, and divorces.

The important thing, Lazaroff adds blithely, is to make every diner feel as if she's being treated as well as Elizabeth Taylor.

Well, not quite. "Granted, Elizabeth Taylor's not going to stand at the bar and wait for her table," she admits. "And somebody said to me, 'Well, I still don't think it's fair.'"

Wolfgang Puck just leans back in his chair and looks thoughtful.

"Life is not fair all the time," he says.

—LORRA FARR



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