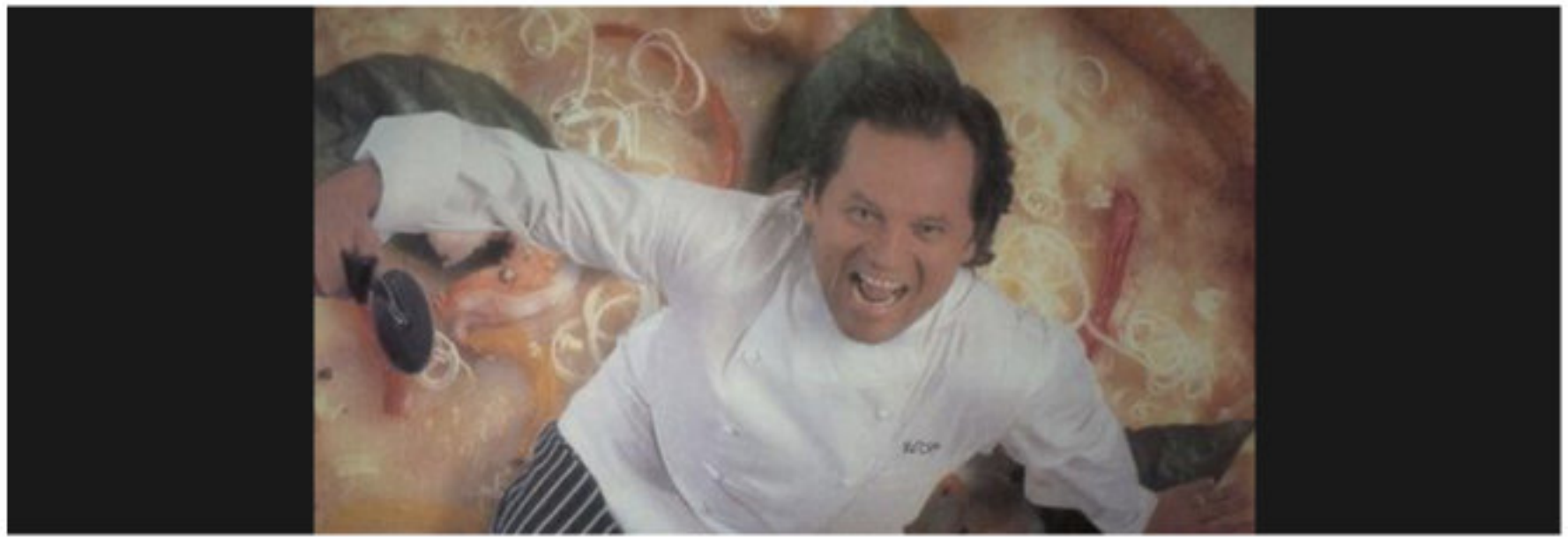


Genre: Documentary

Wolfgang

Lynn's Grade: A-

Lynn Venhaus Jul 8, 2021



Editor's Note

Rated: TV-PG

Now streaming on Disney+

THE PLOT:

An intimate portrait of the life and work of the original celebrity chef of the modern era, Wolfgang Puck.

LYNN'S TAKE:

Wolfgang Puck changed the way we eat in America. This fascinating documentary explores his vast influence as it chronicles his journey from Austria to Los Angeles.

The team who created two Netflix series' "Street Food" and "Chef's Table," director David Gelb and writer Brian McGinn, are thorough in their 78-minute presentation, showing Puck's passion for cooking and his devotion to feeding people well.

The food, as photographed by Will Basanta, is tantalizing – showcasing Puck's famous signature wood-fired pizzas and his childhood comfort food, wiener schnitzel.

Hitting all the key notes, filmmakers have focused on how his star power grew in the 1980s, and his undeniable impact on restaurants and food as showbiz – elevating chefs as luminaries on display in the 'open kitchen' concept.

His ideas were simple, but revolutionary at the time: Use quality ingredients to serve flavorful dishes. He visited farms to bring back fresh vegetables and fruit – and he still does.

Gelb, who also helmed the well-received "Jiro Dreams of Sushi" in 2011, obviously has a knack for the subject matter, and lets Puck's charming personality come through – affable and gracious, but also strong-willed in a pressure-packed industry.

From a rough childhood, growing up poor and terrorized by an abusive stepfather, to making his way up the culinary ladder, learning valuable lessons along the way, Puck, now 71, is candid about his life experiences.

Gelb and McGinn emphasize Puck's spirit, energy and drive, traced back to his overwhelming "fear of failure," and how he seized opportunities because he felt safe in the kitchen. He moved to America at age 24, achieving a level of success that was beyond anyone's imagination. (After all, he has been a character on "The Simpsons"!)

"Wolfgang" features his family, friends, former employees, and renowned foodies to espouse his skills and virtues, including his chef son Byron, sister Christine, revered food writer Ruth Reichl and legendary pastry chef Nancy Silverton.

There are some painful past decisions he made as a young man that his sister brings up, working in France and not in touch with his mother and grandmother.

With his son Byron talking about how he was an absent father, Puck also admits his time in the limelight and overseeing the growth of his business empire was not easy on his wife, Barbara Lazaroff, and their two sons.

He was married to Lazaroff for 19 years, and she is prominently featured. A designer with a theater background, she was integral to his ascension as a world-famous chef in the 1980s and 1990s. As his business partner and catalyst, they were quite a formidable team. She provides perspective on the landmark restaurant Spago, which opened on the Sunset Strip in 1982, an immediate sensation for fresh and new California cuisine -- and the place to be seen.

It was a heady time, sparking a transformation in American cuisine and ushering in celebrity chefs of the modern era. He worked incredibly hard to make a difference and see his American dream come true.

His early appearances on morning TV shows are used to point out how, before the Food Network was founded, Puck rose to a superstar-level of fame.

Since 2007, he has been married to Gelila Assefa, and they have two sons. His companies – restaurants, catering and licensed products are world-wide, and he is the author of six cookbooks.

After reaping the rewards of a long and acclaimed career, in which his name is a brand, he is still fired up about what he does.

Those who are already fans, or 'foodies,' will be fascinated by his backstory and experiences in Europe, and what happened when he became the toast of the town at L.A.'s Ma Maison, after being horrified to learn they used mostly frozen food.

As an appreciation of a cultural icon, "Wolfgang" is a profile to be savored.

(Full disclosure: I admit to a fan-girl bias, as I had the opportunity to talk with Puck twice while attending a national food writers' conference in Los Angeles in June 1986. I dined at his restaurant, Spago, and it was one of the most memorable evenings of my life.)