

CHECKING IN at the LAMBS CLUB

Behind the scenes on opening night of
Geoffrey Zakarian's New York restaurant.

WITH ONE HOUR TO GO BEFORE the inaugural dinner service at his new restaurant, The Lambs Club, chef Geoffrey Zakarian stands center stage in an immaculate kitchen. Silver of hair, deeply tanned and wearing a bright white chef's toque, Zakarian looks every bit the leading man. As well he should. Until the early seventies (nearly 40 years before a \$95 million renovation turned it into the just-opened Charwal hotel), this 105-year-old Stanford White–designed building just off Times Square was the home of America's oldest theatrical society: the original Lambs Club. It's likely that John Barrymore and Douglas Fairbanks, both members, once stood where Zakarian stands now.

This is a homecoming of sorts for the chef. In 1987 he brought the first legitimately contemporary restaurant to the Theater District with the gutsy American menu at 44, his place just one block east at the Royalton Hotel. He moved on to Patron and then opened Town followed by Country, leaving a trail of stars behind him. But when Town shuttered in 2009 and Country closed in February, Zakarian was left a leading man with no stage. But tonight he's back in the spotlight. Excitement ripples down the line, from head chef Joel Dennis, late of Alain Ducasse's Adour, to executive sous-chef Kenny Cuomo, formerly of Per Se.

At 6 P.M. Zakarian is eyeing the clock and supervising last-minute menu tweaks. His wife and business partner, Margaret, copyedits the exuberantly American menu. ("Luxury bar and grill food," chef Geoffrey calls it.) Contemplating the sea scallops, Margaret wonders, "Porcini

and vadouvan sauce or porcini *comma* vadouvan sauce?" (She opts for the latter.) Her husband, meanwhile, considers a quarter-inch-thick Delmonico steak sizzling on the grill, directing the saucier: "Grill. Rest. Salt. Plancha. Sear." Recipe as poem, a sort of haiku for the perfect steak.

The Zakarians look into the dining room. Thierry Despont designed the 80-seat restaurant—as well as an upstairs lounge and the hotel itself—as an impeccable Art Deco set: crimson banquettes with fender-like sides; black wood-paneled walls; tablecloths, hily white and linen; a 18th-century French fireplace, installed here in 1905 by Stanford White himself. Now the room is peaceful and, the Zakarians hope, empty for the last time.

At 6:47 P.M. the first ticket comes in. "Ordering!" Zakarian shouts. "One foie gras, octopus, scallop, lamb, medium-rare." A terrine of foie gras in an orange Le Creuset appears. Chef Joel scoots by—"Hot knife!"—to cut a generous slice. He sprinkles it with fleur de sel, places it next to a small mountain of figs and a bit of corn salad and then drizzles reduced cognac sauce. "Very nice, guys," Zakarian says, running a napkin around the rim. The octopus arrives next, a charred, deep-purple tendril with turnips and potatoes. Zakarian studies the plates in front of him.

Then with a nod, "Go, go, go!" The water disappears through the swinging doors, the tray propped on his shoulder. Upon returning he reports, "We're about five minutes from clearing. She's enjoying the terrine but taking her time." Zakarian allows himself a moment of relief. And then, with a smile: "Okay. Let's fire the lamb."

—JOSHUA DAVID STEIN

THE DETAILS

Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner every day, The Lambs Club is in Manhattan's new Charwal hotel, at 135 West 41st Street. Reservations can be made by calling 212-397-2414 or going to thelambsclub.com.



Zakarian
(from left): Wife Margaret wears a **Barbara Tank** dress (\$2,040) with **Rivier** Vintage earrings (\$19,900). Anousko wears a **Valentino** organza dress (\$12,900) with **Bulgari** High Jewelry earrings (price upon request), **Verdura** Five Stone cuff (\$28,000), **Patek Philippe** watch (\$25,400) and **Jimmy Choo** Zafira shoes (\$1,995). Karen wears a **Carolina Herrera** jacquard cocktail dress (price upon request) with **Donna Karan** Bird of Paradise shoes (\$1,390) and **Hermès** watch (\$8,400). Chef and owner Geoffrey Zakarian with restaurant architect **Thierry Despont** at the table's end.