

NYC

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RESIDENT

Geoffrey Zakarian: On the Menu

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An Ode to Haute:
GEOFFREY ZAKARIAN'S
JOURNEY THROUGH GOURMET COOKING

By Christopher A. Pape

Mention of Mr. Zakarian's name either strikes pangs of pleasure or induces jolts of despair in the heart of the listener. For the sophisticated and knowledgeable diner, (one day I can only hope to be in that category), Chef Zakarian's food is the nectar of the gods; and so sublime is his cooking he has received (on three occasions) three stars from the NY Times dining critic. For fellow chefs and restaurateurs (his competitors), in the cutthroat gourmet culinary industry, Geoffrey's haunting haute cuisine reduces them to a state of paralysis in the knowledge that his food is far superior.

Chef Zakarian has turned his passion and hobby into an award-winning career and has gained further fame as the biting (but fair) judge on Food Network's Chopped and as the recent champion of The Next Iron Chef, Super Chefs. In an exclusive interview with NY Resident, Mr. Zakarian gives us his take on being a chef in New York.

THE
NEWEST
IRON
CHEF

NY Resident (NYR): First of all, nice to speak with you today and congratulations on the recent win!

Geoffrey Zakarian (GZ): Thank you very much, it feels great! It was, however, the most difficult thing I've ever done – it was brutal. It was truly physical and it was shot over two months, from Los Angeles to Montauk, we were all over the map! But I'm very grateful for the experience and for the win!

NYR: You are an adopted New Yorker, having been born in Massachusetts, correct? When and why New York and where in the city do you live?

GZ: I moved to NY in 1981, I was actually a year and half in Hyde Park, going to CIA. When I graduated in late 1982, I moved to Manhattan. Now I live near Sutton Place on 58th and 2nd. I enjoy Midtown East. I can walk to restaurants nearby and go to my daughters' school. It's a great area, safe and close to a lot of businesses.

NYR: How does New York color your approach to cooking? Do you think you'd change your style if you were primarily based in another city?

GZ: Yes, I'd think I would change my approach if I lived in another food city. But the base of my food is a modernist approach to a clean, classical technique. Obviously the ingredients also inform my cooking. I know I'd be a different chef if I were cooking in Paris than in New York.

NYR: New Yorker's are notoriously spoilt for their restaurant choices. How do you keep the diner engaged and coming back for more?

GZ: Well, it depends on the kind of restaurant you have. I have one that is up-market (The Lambs Club) and one that is more neighborhood café (The National). New Yorkers are wonderful - they want to have all types of choices – casual, fancy, expensive, etc. We have some of the best bistros, best wine bars, best little sushi bars in the world. You can find anything in New York; you just have to know where to look.

NYR: How hard is it to open and operate a restaurant in the city?

GZ: On a scale of 1 to 10 – it's a 20 and if you know what you are doing it's a 19. It's a crapshoot, but with the best information, best ingredients, and best staff –it helps. There is, however, no guarantee - it's an industry with an extremely high failure rate.

NYR: Any plans for new restaurants in the city or beyond?

GZ: We just opened Tudor House in Miami. Beyond that I'm always looking, but I'm not right now engaged with anything new. Just looking around for a few good possibilities and we do have a few things on the backburner, but for the moment nothing planned.

NYR: Do you have a classic New York favorite dish or restaurant?

GZ: New York is fantastic! If I want something, I can go to XYZ establishment. I go to neighborhood restaurants, because they are convenient. I very much exist on yearnings; and I have different needs and wants. I'm around food all the time. I just want a plate of seafood or a slice of pizza. It's never what's the best pizza slice, etc.

Restaurants – I lean toward casual – I love Bond St. for forward and innovative sushi, Balthazar is great for French bistro fare and Molyvos for Greek seafood.

NYR: What do you think the next new trends in NYC restaurants are?

I would like to eliminate the word trend. We (the restaurant industry) need to focus on service; sustainability; profitability and we must always give great value to the customer. Trends are always going to come and then going to fade. And I believe strongly, that trends are just going to get the chef/restaurateur into trouble. We put a plate of food in front of a customer; and we thank them for coming and we hope they come back. We are basically innkeepers – we should never forget that!

NYR: Is there a New York chef or restaurant that you truly admire?

GZ: Of course I am a big fan of Daniel Boulud for whom I worked. I'm also a big fan of Terrance Brennan, Marcus Samuelsson and all of the contestants from The Next Iron Chef.

NYR: How was it to work at Le Cirque (recently profiled in last month's edition) at its peak?





GZ: Amazing. It was the birthplace of what I learned and what I do. I spent five years there from 1982 to 1987. In those times you learned more because there was less staff and you were thrown into the mix. Now everything is disjointed; and it is much harder to move up the ladder.

NYR: As a relatively new father, how do you balance work with the demands of being a high-profile chef?

GZ: Being 'high profile' is not an issue. I believe that you've got to get your kids involved with what you do. In fact, they come to the restaurants with me. I cook them breakfast in the morning – you work your life around them. If you do that, it's crazy, but it's great. They live in NYC – what's better than that? It's about meeting people – while its hectic –there is still quiet time.

NYR: On another note, tell us about your experience on Chopped. Since it first aired, has the talent pool gotten better? What do you like about the show?

GZ: It has always been good. It's not a perfect science – they are so nervous and they shoot them selves in the foot, but for the most part the chefs are extremely talented.

It's a fantastic show – I learn just as much as the contestants, plus I get to see a budding talent. The show happens to be a real equalizer and a runaway train at the same time. Twenty minutes or thirty minutes for any chef is a very little amount of time to create a dish. It really brings some interesting choices out of people. I try to show them and correct them but in the end its very educational and we never try to be too harsh.

NYR: What about The Next Iron Chef, Super Chefs? How is it different than Chopped?

GZ: No comparison – a totally different format. We have no help and it's so difficult. Working with ingredients you don't know and at a level of the sophistication that is much higher – both are difficult but the physicality is what kills on The Next Iron Chef.

NYR: Any plans for your own show on the Food Network or the Cooking Channel?

GZ: We are currently trying to do something but nothing is set in stone. This was a very nice way to finish the year and so it makes it easier to try to develop something in the very near future.

