

Jean-Georges readies to rumble with Boulud

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VANCOUVER — He may have been here only a few hours, but Jean-Georges Vongerichten is already smitten with Vancouver.

"I had three types of salmon for lunch, a dozen different oysters, scallops, sablefish - it's pretty amazing what you can get here," he enthuses. "If I was younger, I would probably have started here. I'm a big skier - it would have been a great time for me."

The celebrated New York-based chef speaks fast - in the manner of a man who doesn't waste time. How could he? He has 21 restaurants worldwide (eight in New York, including flagship Jean Georges).

And with more concept rooms being rolled out, it's surprising that Mr. Vongerichten pauses for breath, let alone conversation.



Market, a new restaurant by Jean-Georges Vongerichten, here at a reception, is set to open in January in Vancouver's Shangri-La Hotel. *(LYLE STAFFORD FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL)*



His first Canadian enterprise, Market - due to open in January at the Shangri-La Hotel - is only one of a number of new ventures on the slate for his Culinary Concepts empire. This month, the 51-year-old chef opened another Market in Mexico's Cabo San Lucas, and earlier this year he opened Spice Market restaurants in the W Hotels in Atlanta and Istanbul, with a third due in February in the W Doha.

He has never been to Vancouver before, he admits with a shrug. Well, that's not quite true: He used to land here when he had his Hong Kong restaurant, Vong. "Fifteen times, I think," he smiles. "I never got out of the airport. I had a favourite noodle shop."

Nor did he have any idea that his fellow New Yorker, Daniel Boulud, was expanding into the city until he had signed the contract with Shangri-La.

Did the Olympics figure into his decision? "No, no," he insists. "I actually didn't know the Olympics was coming until recently - after Beijing."

Just as he starts sounding a little too much like Sarah Palin, he claps his hands together and exclaims: "Thank God for Obama."

Last weekend in New York, following the U.S. election, his restaurants saw their biggest volume of customers since May. "I don't know if it was just celebration, or a real sense of hope."

Whatever it is, he welcomes it. The economy is a serious worry and it is no accident that his new restaurants take a less formal - and less expensive - stance than his Michelin-starred New York rooms.

In Vancouver's saturated restaurant market, it's hard not to see the arrival of two celebrity chefs as something of a showdown. They are friends, and Mr. Vongerichten is coming for the opening of Mr. Boulud's DB Bistro Moderne and revamped Lumière in December. But business is business.

"The question is, who will be more successful?" says Alan Richman, food and wine critic for GQ magazine. "Daniel's food appears simpler, but I have never seen anyone take basic, farmhouse-style French food and elevate it to haute cuisine better than he does."

On the other hand, he says, "Jean-Georges is a more complex culinary animal - you could argue that he is the most creative and successful chef ever to work in America."

For Mr. Boulud, speaking by phone from New York, the difference will be evident. "We are not going into a hotel," he says. "Lumière is independent and we are creating a local restaurant. Of course," he adds, laughing, "Jean-Georges gets to come check us out first - so he has an advantage."

Born into a coal-mining family in Alsace, France, Mr. Vongerichten walked away from the family business after his 16th birthday, when his parents took him to the late Paul Haerberlin's three-Michelin starred Auberge de L'III.

He apprenticed under Mr. Haerberlin, then the feted Paul Bocuse before moving to Bangkok's Mandarin Oriental hotel.

He arrived in New York in the mid-1980s via Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan, with a classical French menu to deliver daily at Park Avenue's Drake Hotel. But Asia had colonized his taste buds, and in just a year he became a pioneer of east-west fusion. Cooking hasn't been the same since.

But that was more than two decades ago, and these days fusion is not just a global trend - in Vancouver, it's an institution. Here, soy sauce is as commonplace as sea salt - and there are plenty of chefs who work with both traditions. "I know, it's another challenge," he nods. "But it's not just about putting ginger in a dish."

Indeed. His restaurants may dot the globe, but look closely at each menu and you see the same dishes appear in New York, Shanghai, Paris, London. There may be a

different emphasis and a recognition of local ingredients, but it is very clear that this is a centralized organization, not a franchise.

Controlling his brand is important to him, and he is known to bristle at criticism. Earlier this year, he used his blog to respond to New York magazine's negative review of his new Japanese soba spot, Matsugen, suggesting its author Adam Platt didn't understand the food.





"Yes, I am sensitive," he says. "And when you expose yourself, you have to take the good, the bad and the ugly - but the day I stop caring, I retire."

One thing he says he's learned from nearly three decades of working within hotels is that the food must take precedence over the chef. He does not employ chefs in his satellite restaurants for their invention, but for their skill and ability to execute his vision. "Often in hotels, if you have a chef with his own vision and then he leaves, the customers leave with him," he says. "With us, if the chef moves on, the menu remains the same."

This is key, Mr. Richman suggests. "Which concept do you believe in? Do you want to eat food - still good - but at 75 per cent of what it would be if the celebrated chef was in the kitchen, or food that is 100 per cent the vision of someone you have never heard of? Personally, I am a fan of the emerging rock chef point of view."

For Mr. Vongerichten, that's an outdated model. "To receive 100 per cent of any chef, they would have to cook everything, serve everything. ... Once you open a restaurant, you have to depend on your team on every level." His own team is huge - more than 900 employees in New York alone.

"Once you accept that you can't do everything yourself," he smiles, "then everything becomes much easier."

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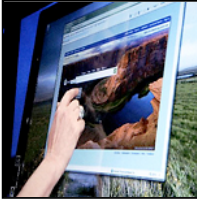
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