



EDITORS' NOTE *An accomplished chef, host, and culinary consultant, Geoffrey Zakarian has presided over some of the country's top kitchens, traveling the world for new inspiration to marry with his classical training and techniques in a lifelong effort to deliver paramount hospitality experiences. Zakarian's rise to culinary prominence began at Le Cirque, where he took his first job in a professional kitchen and worked his way up from Pastry Sous Chef to Chef de Cuisine under Chef Alain Sailbac. In 1987, Zakarian took his first turn as Executive Chef at the legendary 21Club. In 1988, he became the Executive Chef of 44 at the Royalton Hotel. In 1995, he opened the Blue Door at the Delano Hotel in Miami. In 1997, Zakarian became Executive Chef of Patroon. He added the title of Owner to his resumé in 2001 with the opening of his first restaurant, Town. Following in the successful footsteps of Town, Zakarian opened Country, which was awarded a Michelin Star in its first year of operation along with Three Stars from The New York Times. In 2007, Zakarian signed on to conceptualize and oversee the entire food and beverage program at The Water Club at Borgata, in Atlantic City. In the fall of 2010, Zakarian opened both The Lambs Club, as Chef and Partner, at The Chatwal Hotel and The National, at The Benjamin Hotel. In June 2011, Zakarian returned to Florida to open Tudor House at Dream South Beach. In May 2013, Zakarian partnered with Norwegian Cruise Lines in a three-restaurant deal aboard their newest, most luxurious vessels. He has also accepted the role of Culinary Director for The Plaza where he will oversee the F&B venues, including The Palm Court, The Oak Room, The Oak Bar, The Rose Club, The Champagne Bar, and in-room dining. Zakarian is also an accomplished author and his second cookbook, titled My Perfect Pantry: 150 Easy Recipes from 50 Essential Ingredients will hit shelves in fall 2014. In addition, he is Chairman of the City Harvest Food Council. Already established as America's favorite judge on Food Network's Chopped, Zakarian emerged victorious in the fourth Season of The Next Iron Chef: Super Chefs, earning him the title of Iron Chef. His newest Food Network series, The Kitchen, premiered in January 2014. He also hosts Sirius XM Radio's, Food Talk.*

What makes a successful chef?

I don't know what someone else's success is. There is a lot of celebrity stuff. It's a stepping stone, but it's not success, which is about how well you can develop the community and be a good mentor to other cooks. For me, how many people who work with me is important. The more I can teach, the better it is for me.

What is the secret to remaining relevant?

It's a lot of hard work and editing. I want to stay fresh.

What I don't do is jump on trends. What is relevant is melding into the fabric of a lifestyle for people. This has become an entertainment lifestyle for everybody – everybody has a favorite restaurant, and it becomes a hang-out and it's about much more than eating.

To make that more relevant, we offer better service and better understanding, we learn how to work social media and how to go backwards. We want to take something and make it cool again. Traditionalists want great service, amazing drinks, and a "wow" factor, but they want that to taste like a memory.

What do you look for in bringing talent in?

It's so hard to find management, even in New York City. There is something to be said about hiring people with no experience and training them. A lot of kids today sit in front of TV or computers; there are enough experiential things going and there are no manners.

I spend 80 percent of my time recruiting. It's about identifying people. This is a vocation – we're innkeepers. It's important to have people with great personalities and great smiles.

Are you comfortable with being known as a celebrity chef?

After I won *Iron Chef*, people said they hadn't known I was a chef – they thought I was a judge on *Chopped*. The celebrity for me came late, but the best thing about it is that TV has driven business to the restaurant.

Chef and Mentor

An Interview with
Geoffrey Zakarian, Chef/Restaurateur

Is being a chef today more about being a businessperson?

It has always been about business. We can be artists, but we'll be starving artists without the business component. We can be great but we can also close restaurants. There are many amazing restaurants that just go out of business for whatever reason, even if the food is unbelievable.

You also have your second book coming out, *My Perfect Pantry: 150 Easy Recipes from 50 Essential Ingredients*. What prompted your writing this book?

It's not a chef book. I have already done one of those. I wanted to show people what you should buy – your pantry is the most important part because things stay there for a while. People neglect the pantry and go to the refrigerator, but the pantry is the basis of everything. So I recommend 75 things to have for an American pantry. For each item, I include three recipes to make with that item.

It develops the diversity in your own pantry, but you have to buy the right ingredients for it. It's about very simple food and utilizing the right ingredients.

With TV and the books, do you still have time to be a chef?

Sure. I cook in my head all the time. It's a continual conversation – it never starts and stops. I cook with my kids every day. I don't have to be behind the line because that is not the best use of my time. I'm better off mentoring the chef at my restaurant rather than showing people how to cook.

How did your involvement with The Plaza come about?

I've been going to The Plaza for 40 years. We're renovating The Palm Court and putting in a bar, and doing things like cocktails on carts – it will be mobbed.

Are there any other projects in the works?

We're opening more locations of The National. There is one on 50th Street and Lexington Avenue, and we're doing one in Greenwich Village and one in Tribeca. We also just signed with Donald Trump to do a corner spot in his new hotel in Washington, D.C. I intend to expand to other cities at some point as well.

Do you ever go to a meal and just relax?

Yes. I go to restaurants not just for the food. It's about the scene and fun. Do I like serious food? Yes, but the ambiance should not be dull. ●