

Live, Love, Eat!

The ubiquitous Wolfgang Puck personifies his three-word mantra and hopes to add 'Drink' to the mix

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

The name Wolfgang Puck refers not only to the world-famous Austrian-born chef but also to the global brand he has built since the early 1980s. His entrepreneurial endeavors include restaurants, catering services, consumer packaged foods, cookware, book publishing, television, radio and Internet programming. Each month, more than half a million customers dine in Wolfgang Puck restaurants, and he sells more than five million of his fresh and frozen pizzas annually.

Quite an accomplishment for this classically trained French chef who began his formal training at 14, inspired by his mother, Maria, a hotel chef. Puck entered the United States in 1973 to begin his campaign to capture America's palate. He took his formal French techniques and blended them with Asian- and California-influenced esthetics while insisting on the highest-quality ingredients. His restaurants, including the renowned Ma Maison and Spago, quickly became magnets for the rich and famous. They also brought the restaurateur personal fame and acclaim.

Though Puck lives in Beverly Hills, he recently sat down with *The Wine Report* while in Atlanta to celebrate his Wolfgang Puck Express restaurant's one-year anniversary.

THE WINE REPORT: *Your culinary empire includes 55 restaurants, a catering business, Food Network TV shows, spots on ABC's "Good Morning America," franchising, licensing, merchandising activities, consumer packaged foods and cookware, a newspaper column and six cookbooks. How many hours do you sleep per night?*

WOLFGANG PUCK: I always tell people, you sleep enough when you are dead. If I worked in front of a computer, I would need much more sleep. But in a restaurant, after four hours I can come in, see all the people and get their energy.

TWR: *Your motto is "Live, Love, Eat!"*

WP: And drink, too.

TWR: *That's what I was going to ask: What about drink? Where does wine fit in?*

WP: The thing is that [the word] "drink" makes some people nervous. The organization Mothers Against Drunk Driving



World-renowned chef Wolfgang Puck.

told me that I'd be a bad influence if I said "drink." So, at least on the [restaurant's back] wall there's a mural of a vineyard. That's meant to show the importance of wine with food.

TWR: *Your cookbook, Live, Love, Eat! The Best of Wolfgang Puck, includes wine-pairing tips. What's your philosophy for pairing food and wine?*

WP: Food and wine each have different levels. There are two ways to approach food-and-wine pairing: Choose a wine first or choose the dish you want to serve and then the wine to go with it. It's really not complicated. Drink what you like.

You know, wine is such a personal thing. Some people only like reds, or only Bordeaux. I think it's important to be adventurous. Try new things. When I have salmon, I like to have a lighter red wine with it. Traditionally, people might not think of that combination. Everybody thinks cheese and red wine go together, but goat cheese and Sauvignon Blanc are excellent together. You can even pair beef with a big white; in some cases, I don't think someone who was blindfolded would know that they were drinking a white, and they'd really like it.

TWR: *What considerations go into choosing wines for your restaurants?*

WP: The goal is to have an assortment of various wines at reasonable prices. This Atlanta location offers 25 wines ranging

from \$4 to \$10 by the glass and \$16 to \$90 by the bottle. We'll add some more by-the-glass wines in the \$4 to \$5 range and a few more moderately priced reds.

TWR: *When you opened Wolfgang Puck Express in Atlanta last year, what were your goals? Have you achieved them?*

WP: The concept is to have quality food in a casual setting with quick service. The only way for me to do a restaurant like this is obviously to make sure the food is good, but also to make wine available. Because when I go to a restaurant for a nice meal, I like a glass of wine. Still, it's fast and convenient.

In the first three months, it was so crazy that we almost went under. It was a hard experience. But then it went up, then down, and now up again. Maybe this restaurant concept didn't match some people's expectations. It's not Spago. But it's catching on. People have told me that they come here all the time to eat or use takeout.

TWR: *What's Atlanta's favorite item?*

WP: It varies by season. In the summer, it's cold chicken salad. In the winter, it's pizza and soup.

TWR: *You just opened a Wolfgang Puck Express in Charlotte. Any plans for Birmingham?*

WP: Not yet, but we might. The goal is to bring quality, healthy food to the masses.

TWR: *How would you describe your philosophy as a chef?*

WP: Buy the best quality and then don't screw it up.

TWR: *What do you think the food of the future will be?*

WP: What I want for the future is a greater emphasis on moderation, not one fad [diet] to the next. The key is smaller portions. Burn more calories than you take in. Exercise and moderation. I would much rather have quality and minimize quantity.

Hope Philbrick is a freelance writer because she doesn't think work and fun should be mutually exclusive.

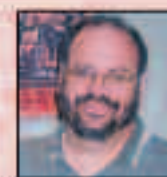
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