

MONTECRISTO

**Jean-Georges
Vongerichten**

**Creating Culture
Vancouver Whitecaps FC**

**The Future of Coach
Creative Director Stuart Vevers**

**Stranger Things Have Happened
Actor Finn Wolfhard**

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Food

Despite a three-Michelin star background and more than 30 restaurants located around the world, Jean-Georges Vongerichten is a down-to-earth and gracious host.

JEAN-GEORGES VONGERICHTEN stands in front of the service staff at The Cliff Beach Club in Barbados, going through the evening's menu. He is here to cook for one night only as part of the 2016 Barbados Food and Rum Festival, and though I am not attending the meal, he has been kind enough to invite me to come by and watch the preparations.

There is an air of relaxation about him, and not even a whiff of pretension, which is certainly saying something, since he is the culinary brain behind more than 30 restaurants around the world (from his adopted home of New York City, to Dubai, Los Cabos, and Shanghai), and can preface his name with three little stars called Michelin. But if I'm being honest, all I can think about as I watch him describe his tuna tartare to the staff is that he probably smells like delicious expensive aftershave.

Vongerichten's appearance is romantically French in the sense that his hair is perfectly slicked into place, not a strand astray, and his face is so cleanly shaven I'm fairly certain I would be able to see my reflection in the glisten on his cheekbones. The restaurant is outdoors, and it's incredibly hot even at 6 p.m., but Vongerichten, somehow, despite his chef's whites, doesn't seem to be sweating. Instead, he just sort of glows.

He finishes going through the menu, which ends with each guest receiving a little takeaway box of chocolates. Vongerichten wants the servers to put the boxes on the table place settings after dessert is served, but someone suggests the diners would then eat the treats immediately, instead of taking them home. Vongerichten isn't worried about that, though. "It's all good!" he says with a smile. Vongerichten is a gracious host, not a dictator. He does not care when you eat his chocolates, so long as you enjoy them.

After the briefing, he tours me around the cliffside restaurant, and stops to look over the edge, where some crab hunters scavenge the rocks as the waves lap the shore. "I love it," he says, and then takes me into the kitchen and proceeds to serve me little sample spoonfuls of the different sauces, even a taste of caviar straight from the freshly-opened can.

Vongerichten was born in Alsace, France and grew up watching his mother and grandmother in the kitchen. He began his cooking career as an apprentice to Paul Haerberlin at Auberge de L'ill, and then went to work for Louis Outhier at L'Oasis, and eventually opened his first New York City restaurant, JoJo, in 1991. He is the author of multiple cookbooks, has made





numerous television appearances, and seems to endlessly please the Michelin judges.

The night before dinner at The Cliff, the Food and Rum Festival held a party at the Barbados Concorde Museum. It was there, among the vendors serving sample plates of shrimp and pork belly, that I spotted Vongerichten and pulled him aside to discuss his storied career. "Everywhere you go, you learn," he says, cocktail in hand. "I bring something to the island, and I want something back. I want to bring some food souvenirs back to New York."

With such a long history in the industry, Vongerichten has lived through all the trends—surpassed them, even. He sees the collective culinary conversation as reverting to the basics. "I think we are going back to more natural. After the big molecular gastronomy trend, I think we are going back to the essentials," he suggests. "Yes, it's a beautiful carrot, but where did you grow it? Is it organic? Is it GMO-free? So I think we are going back to what I grew up with: I was picking radishes in my garden when I was a kid. And I think we're going back to that." But Vongerichten has never been about fancy foams and essences: he puts taste first, honing in on ingredient quality and natural flavours. His dishes are welcoming, pushing the boundaries just enough to stimulate our curiosities. He exerts power through consistency; Vongerichten's food is effortless and reliable.

I mention to him that I ate at Dune, his restaurant at The One&Only Ocean Club in the Bahamas, on multiple occasions while I was there, and he seems genuinely flattered. "I think your role as a chef, at a restaurant, is to create cravings that people come back for," he says. "So, for me that's very nice, it's a compliment. It means I'm doing something right, something that makes you come back." When I suggest that he is doing quite a few things right, he discreetly brushes away the compliment and says, "It's all about

food memories. If I capture you with something and you come back for it, we have a business. We have something that works."

His latest opening, abcV in New York City, is the third addition to his popular string of ABC concepts. Created in partnership with ABC Home's Paulette Cole, the restaurant is plant-based, focusing on produce that is sustainable, non-GMO, and ethically sourced from small farms. "We've been working on it for a couple of years now. It's all about wellness," Vongerichten says. "I think as a chef you never stop learning. I'm working with two nutritionists. I've been cooking for 45 years and I never knew bananas were good for your brain. So I'm learning about the scientific things that food does to your body." He seems excited by the knowledge, and ready to share it.

Vongerichten credits his time spent travelling through Southeast Asia as crucial to his food education, opening his eyes to the array of spices that are available in the world. "Where I came from, the only herb you had was parsley," he says. "So for me to be introduced to lemongrass, coriander—I felt like Christopher Columbus discovering a continent. Even coming to an event like this, you get excited by what you see. People are happy. Food makes people happy."

Back at The Cliff the following night, Vongerichten hands me a welcome cocktail and then presents me with a little white box. Inside are the precious takeaway chocolates, and I think about eating them right then and there, as I'm sure many of the dinner's guests did later that evening. But instead I take them back to my hotel before heading back out to another festival event. Upon returning home, I consider eating them as a late-night snack, but again I wait.

It isn't until the morning, when the sun is pouring warm light into my room, that I wander onto my balcony, open the box, and merrily devour one chocolate, and then the other. —SH