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## FOOD & DRINK

# In My Kitchen: Jean-Georges Vongerichten

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Jean-Georges Vongerichten FRANCOIS DISCHINGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Only two months after opening his 30th restaurant, Fern, at the St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort in Puerto Rico, chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten is now focusing on London, where his Spice Market debuts on Valentine's Day. Known for fusing Asian flavors with classical French technique, the tireless Mr. Vongerichten, 53, lives in Manhattan and just recently began taking weekends off, relaxing at his house in Westchester County, and making two forays a year to St. Barts. While the Alsace-born chef spends most waking hours overseeing his restaurants, we followed him home to see how an expert gastronome lives and eats.

### **My kitchen in New York**

City is in the Richard Meier building on Perry Street, so it's ultra-modern: white, glass and transparent. It's 180 square feet, with an induction stove. Everything's hidden, so you don't see the microwave or the fridge. I'm at the restaurant until midnight every day, so my wife does the cooking during the week. At my weekend home in Waccabuc, we have a bigger kitchen, 350 square feet. It's country-style and it's a major part of our life.

**For friends, I love to make bruschetta.** I grill country bread with Frantoia olive oil and make toppings, like crab, roasted squash, mushrooms, whatever's seasonal. For the crabmeat, I'll do a quick aioli, spread it on bread with olive oil, fennel fronds and always a bit of chili. I also like to do a one-pot meal, because that's how I grew up. I'll do a roast chicken with potatoes; my wife is half Korean, so she'll do a bulgogi or something Korean.

**At home I never plate.** Things go in the middle of the table and you serve yourself. In the restaurant every day I plate things, but at home I want to enjoy my company.



Zani & Zani pot F. MARTIN RAMIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**I could not live without my Vita-prep blender.** I use it to make a quick mayonnaise, a puree and even drinks. You can buy it online or at Williams-Sonoma.

**For pots and pans I love Zani & Zani.** They make great kitchen products, and for gifts I'll sometimes give their steamers, containers for sugar and flour or the traditional mezzaluna. I love those things.

**My two essential ingredients** are chilis, any kind, dried or fresh; and acid, whether it's citrus—lemon, lime, yuzu—or vinegars. Food has to pop.

**A secret food I really love** is gummy bears. I can eat a jar every day.

**I can't sleep without** a piece of chocolate in my mouth. I know it's not good for my teeth, but I've gone to sleep with chocolate since I was four years old, and I can't go to sleep without it. I let it melt in my mouth, and I have sweet dreams, every night.

**The most surprising recent meal I had** was last year at El Bulli. I ate 40 dishes and had no idea how to make them. We had an orchid made of I don't know what and a square of passion fruit. Crazy stuff like a cube of very thin caramel sheet filled with olive oil. How did he do that? I say "bravo."

**The best single dish I've eaten** was in Singapore at Tetsuya Wakada's restaurant. He gave me a Japanese grape, which you can't eat raw because the skin is so thick and bitter. He peeled it, juiced the skin, made a granité out of the skin, cut the grape in four pieces and

put it back into the granité. It was a magical moment, so simple but so intense.

**The soup that changed my life:** In 1980, I went to Bangkok for the first time. I was 23, and my head was full of French home cooking. On the way from the airport, I stopped for street food and had the best shrimp soup in the world. I came from making formal stocks that cook for 20 hours and this woman used lemongrass, shrimp, mushrooms, chilis and was done in three minutes. I thought, "What have I been doing for the last eight years?"

**My biggest indulgence** is an expensive stone stove and grill I built for my weekend house, using stone from our land. I'll use it all summer and in the winter. It's my new toy.



Gummi Bears F. MARTIN RAMIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



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Fern at the St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort

**The best gift I ever received** was from my partner, Phil Suarez. I was 34, and had been a chef at Lafayette. I showed him the space for JoJo and he wrote a \$200,000 check right there. It was a gift. We didn't use lawyers, we just shook hands.

**My earliest restaurant memory:** For my 16th birthday, my parents took me to Auberge de L'ill, a three-star Michelin restaurant in Alsace. We ate at home every day, and a restaurant was like something fast we'd go to on the beach or skiing. So this was a revelation. I loved the ballet of the waiters and the food. When the chef came to the table, my father said, "My son is good for nothing. Do you need anybody to wash dishes?" The chef said, "Come in next week." That was the first restaurant I worked in.

**The greatest challenge to cooking at home** is inviting the right group of people and creating an ambience.

**I would be happy eating** pasta and sushi every single day for the rest of my life. I love anything from uni and crabmeat at Marea [in New York] to something simple, a pasta with tomato sauce and Parmesan.

**The most overrated ingredient** is truffle oil. It's like gasoline. I never use it in my restaurants. It's heavy, and it repeats on me.

**My favorite cookbook** is the "Gastronomie Practique," by Henri Babinski, who was a bourgeois chef in France in the last century. He was making tomato water, jelly—the things El Bulli is doing now

he was doing 125 years ago. It's incredible stuff, beyond L'Escoffier. I also love "The Breakfast Book," by Marion Cunningham. Breakfast is something I discovered in America and this book is my reference.

**My escapes** are my houses in Waccabuc and St. Barts. When I turned 50, I'd been working six days a week for 36 years, so I decided to start taking the weekend off. It keeps me fresher. I also have a little house in St. Barts, so I take my shoes off for two weeks at Christmas.

**My favorite markets around the world** are the Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo; the Or Tor Kaw market in Bangkok, where they have produce and prepared foods you've never seen; and the Boqueria in Barcelona. I really miss the old Fulton Fish Market in New York. I loved it, with the burning barrels, it was so wild, and I hate that they closed it.

**Every day I wear** my silicone Power Balance bracelet. It gives me energy and works through holograms and magnets. It comes in lots of colors but I only wear white. It goes with my chef whites.

—*Edited from an interview by Jackie Cooperman*



The Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo. REDUX PICTURES

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