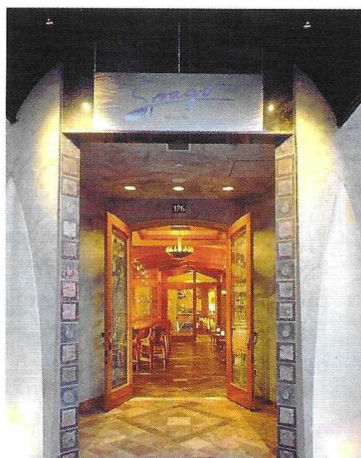


Far right: top US chef Wolfgang Puck at his famed Beverly Hills restaurant Spago (below and right).



beverly hills crop

Stellar US chef Wolfgang Puck talks about his new focus on the future and sustainable produce.

When it comes to celebrating the milestone anniversary of one of Hollywood's most legendary eateries, you can be guaranteed it will be one hell of a party. And when you consider the owner and head chef of that restaurant also holds the honour of feeding Tinseltown's finest at the Academy Award's prestigious Governor's Ball for the last 13 years (where gold-dusted chocolate Oscars are awarded to winners and losers alike), expectations are high.

The event? The 25th anniversary of Spago in Beverly Hills, which from the start – at its original Sunset Strip locale – has been patronised by an unparalleled galaxy of stars.

The chef? Wolfgang Puck. "Initially, I thought let's have a party, let's close down the street, we know so many people – it's going to be crazy," exclaims Wolfgang in his still-thick

native Austrian accent as he sits in the palm-dotted surrounds of Spago. "But somehow, it didn't make sense. So instead I sat down and thought about how we could really address where we wanted to go in the next 25 years."

So Wolfgang focused on the main problem he believes the food industry is facing today. He explains: "Sooner or later, the current farming and fishing practices that value money over ethics are going to come back and haunt us. To live well is the most important thing and it starts with the food we put into our body. It's about the bigger picture and our planet. Not long ago, everyone was laughing at Al Gore, saying, 'What drugs is he taking?' and look at him now."

"I knew that we had to stand for something, too, if we wanted to continue to be successful and make a difference," he says, "which is more important than just another birthday party."

“To live well is the most important thing, and it starts with the food we eat. It’s about the big picture and our planet.”

The result is the ground-breaking program entitled WELL (Wolfgang, Eating, Living and Loving), the chef’s public vow to use only produce from animals raised under strict humane standards across his entire empire.

And when you take into account what exactly comprises that ‘empire’ – from celebrity haunts right down to his products on the supermarket shelves – the WELL program should have no small impact. A household name for more than a decade in the US, and a regular on the Forbes’ Celebrity 100 List since 1999, he presides over a business worth a reported US\$300 million.

Arriving in the States in 1973, European-trained Wolfgang opened the original Spago on the Sunset Strip in 1982, and soon drew attention for his first signature dish – gourmet pizza with smoked salmon and caviar. His devoted clientele, including many Hollywood power players, followed when Spago relocated to Beverly Hills 15 years later. Today, the brand has spread to Las Vegas, Maui and Atlantic City.

One of the latest additions to his string of fine diners is CUT, the award-winning steakhouse in the Beverly Wilshire Four Seasons Hotel. Add to this his chain of more than 80

Wolfgang Puck Gourmet Express restaurants across the US; books and branded cookware; food including coffee, frozen pizza and organic soups; multiple industry awards; and two Emmys for his Food Network television program and you begin to understand his reach.

When it came to the challenge of turning the philosophy of WELL into a tangible reality, however, Wolfgang and his team of business partners knew they needed help. Enter the Humane Society of the United States, with whom Wolfgang found a shared goal. “I knew if we could work together and change how animals are farmed or killed, it would be better all round,” he explains.

Wolfgang had to take a trip backwards in his culinary journey to help realise his vision, gleaning inspiration from as far back as his childhood. “Growing up on our farm in Austria, we fed the chickens seeds and corn,” he recalls. “It was all natural and they walked around and ate whatever they wanted. It used to be so different, and it’s sad to see how farming has evolved.”

“People will always love eating meat and fish, so animals will be used for food no matter what – that’s never going to change. But it’s about being responsible. We decided to use produce only from farmers and ranchers who practise sustainable agriculture, raise animals humanely and don’t use additives in food.” And his new suppliers couldn’t be happier. “The small farmers are doing the right thing, yet they never get any publicity. We’re changing that.”

Top of the list when WELL kicked into gear in March this year was the elimination of foie gras – the fatty liver of duck and geese produced by force-feeding through a tube – from all Wolfgang’s menus, as well as the banning of eggs from caged hens, and crated veal and pork from all his kitchens.

He first brought WELL to public attention at this year’s Academy Awards where he served an all-organic menu, but glitz and glamour aside, this father of three is clearly achieving true satisfaction by using his fame to spread a message, particularly to the younger generation. Plans to introduce school programs based on the initiative, as well as an animated children’s food TV show, are in the works.

Although the complete implementation of WELL will take time, word is swiftly spreading. “I’ve had so many supportive letters from celebrity clients, and customers in the restaurant come up to me all the time to say, ‘We’re so happy you care’,” he smiles with pride.

“Because we’re in a leadership position and people look up to us, I really hope that if they follow us, the future might be better. That’s our goal for the next 25 years. If we can even just raise awareness, it will all be worth it.” **d.**



Wolfgang's latest venture, the luxe steakhouse CUT