



Stark white walls mingle with exposed wooden ceiling beams in ABC Cocina in New York



The handiwork of Christian Liaigre, New York's Mercer Kitchen combines industrial and classic modernism

Photos of ABC Cocina and Mercer Kitchen by FRANCESCO TONELLI

JEAN-GEORGES VONGERICHTEN

Chef and Restaurateur New York

At Public New York, Ian Schrager's new Lower East Side bastion of minimalist affordable luxury, the striking concrete architecture comes courtesy of Swiss duo Herzog & de Meuron; the rooftop bar offers a 360-degree panorama of the city; and Public Kitchen (where global cuisine is cooked in the smoker, wood burning oven, and wood burning grill centerpieces) and its sister eatery Luis (a grab-and-go bodega-meets-luncheonette concept) are two of the newest projects from prolific chef and restaurateur Jean-Georges Vongerichten, a follow-up to the pair's partnership at the Miami Beach EDITION.

Vongerichten, whose culinary empire with longtime partner Phil Suarez stretches across the globe with some 40 outposts, has been cooking professionally since he was a teenager in France, his native country. A passion for architecture and design naturally percolated alongside a reverence for ingredients. "It's about the visual aspect. The textures and the colors of food and design are similar," he says.

Luminaries like David Rockwell, Richard Meier, Jeffrey Beers, and Christian Liaigre have all worked with the Michelin-starred chef, and he loves the collaborative process behind executing a vision. "That's the difference between one person and a corporation where you have 40 people deciding on a design," he explains. "They bring their side, of course, which is why you choose them. But you want to make sure it's functional, that the wood or the stone you picked follows the theme, and that in two years it doesn't look like a disaster and is still enjoyable to the eye."

Consider the success of Mercer Kitchen, which opened in 1998 at André Balazs' the Mercer Hotel. The subterranean classic in New York's SoHo, decked out with brick and leather, remains as relevant as when it debuted 19 years ago. Although Vongerichten's restaurants ABC Kitchen, ABC Cocina, and the newly launched vegetarian outpost abcV (all designed in collaboration with the creative team of



ABC Carpet & Home, where the restaurants are housed) are farmers' market-driven, Vongerichten credits Mercer Kitchen as his first farm-to-table restaurant, a rarity when it opened. "Protein is limited. The variety of vegetables and herbs and spices are endless, and I feel plants really are the future," he says of his abcV concept.

Growing up in Alsace, Vongerichten always fancied himself as "an entertainer," he says, organizing everything for family birthday parties from the music and the lighting to the cake. After he was thrown out of engineering school (he was sent there in hopes of taking over the family coal business), he had an epiphany while dining with his parents at the 3-Michelin-starred Auberge de L'Il for his 16th birthday. "When I saw the ballet of waiters, the food, all the details, it was like, 'Wow, this is something I want to do,'" he recalls. At one point, the chef came to the table to ask how everything was, and Vongerichten's father, seeing his son's reaction to the meal, offered his services peeling potatoes and washing dishes. It just so happened they were looking for an apprentice, and a few weeks later, he started working in the prestigious kitchen. At the time, in 1973, "becoming a chef was not the most glamorous thing in the world," he remembers. "To me, good food was a big pot at the table at home."

Later, he worked under Paul Bocuse and Louis Outhier at L'Oasis in southern France, another Michelin-starred establishment. He then furthered his career in various hotels in Asia, spending time in Bangkok (what he calls life-changing at the age of 23), Singapore, and Hong Kong, falling for the spices now synonymous with his cooking before heading to New York in 1986. Beyond Public, Vongerichten has been busy

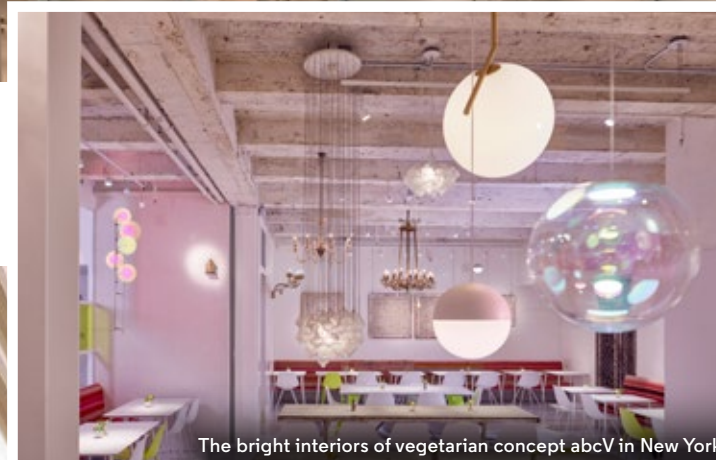
building restaurants for the Oetker Collection of hotels, at the Eden Rock St. Barths and Palácio Tangara in São Paulo, a hotel designed by local firms Bick Simonato and Anastassiadis. There's also his new Dempsey Cookhouse & Bar in Singapore, courtesy of Paola Navone; a light-filled eponymously named restaurant inside the Waldorf Astoria Beverly Hills, crafted by Pierre-Yves Rochon; and one is set to debut at the Connaught in London this summer, the handiwork of John Heah. A much-anticipated restaurant and seafood market at New York's storied Pier 17 is also on the boards.

"I've been in New York for almost 32 years now. The day I retire, I'll probably go to the country," he says, pointing out how much he relishes cooking in the Westchester home he often escapes to from the West Village. "But as long as I have the energy to be cooking in New York, creating spaces that are different and timeless, I'm here."

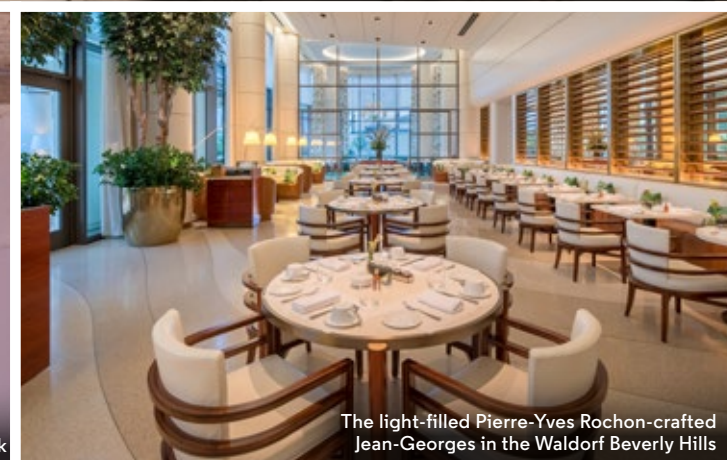
Photo by NICHOLAS E.E.



Greenery hanging over the bar contrasts the all-white interiors at Dempsey Cookhouse & Bar in Singapore, courtesy of Paola Navone



The bright interiors of vegetarian concept abcV in New York



The light-filled Pierre-Yves Rochon-crafted Jean-Georges in the Waldorf Beverly Hills



A rendering of John Heah's concept for Jean-Georges at London's Connaught, featuring expansive windows and floating circular pendants