



Love at First Bite

Chef George Duran is a food reformist. His persona both in and out of the kitchen can best be described as effervescent, even quirky. He is overly social and admits he has the knack of being able to start a conversation with anyone he meets because as he says, “everyone loves to eat.” Since I love to eat and he loves to talk, our lunch in Manhattan figured to be a win-win situation.

Text **Manouk Akopyan** | Photo **Armen Poghosyan**

For the last ten years, George Duran has been a staple in the ever-growing world of celebrity chefs. He has his own TV shows – Food Network’s *The Secret Life Of...* and *Ham on the Street* as well as TLC’s *Ultimate Cake Off* – already to his credit. But it’s his passion for creating inconceivable recipes as well as cooking and teaching others that makes the affable chef an instant fan favorite. George Duran – born Kevork Guldalian – has loved cooking knee-weakening meals ever since he was born and raised in Venezuela under his mother’s home cooking. His mother Zovig’s Armenian cuisine had such a profound influence on him that it eventually led George to pursue his culinary quest in France and inevitably to his present day career. We meet with George in his Long Island City apartment. Duran’s kitchen is his compound for developing mouth-amusing recipes. As he unearths veggies from his jam-packed refrigerator, he speaks with Ursula, babysitter to his 14-month-old son Bodi, in Spanish, and then transitions back to our conversation with a mix of English and Armenian. His cooking interests are mainly comprised of Armenian, French, Mexican and South American dishes. Pick any of those languages from a bowl, and

he speaks them fluently as well. His favorite kitchen utensils – the dough scraper, pickle picker, and laser thermometer gun – speak to his personality. The color scheme of his pots and pans – red, blue and orange – speak to his love for his Armenian heritage. “My wife Ilana thinks I’m insane sometimes because I do weird things with all of my crazy and stupid tools – like using the laser thermometer to measure the temperature on my son’s back,” Duran says. “I’m just very passionate about food and cooking.”

It is for Duran’s passion that in 2009 Hunts Tomatoes chose him to be the spokesperson for its tomatoes both nationally and for its Hispanic market. While most chefs have personalities as generic as a store brand box of oatmeal, Duran’s energy in his commercial spots makes a can of tomatoes that retails for a dollar appear to be the most succulent can of tomatoes you’ll ever taste. “They see I have a passion for cooking and creating recipes, and that is what’s important – to be passionate. This is truly something any chef would love to be a part of. You know, developing recipes while also having the opportunity to bring my humor into it. In fact both campaigns performed

so well that they are bringing it back for another six months.” Currently, Duran is working on *Funny Yolk*, a show on YouTube’s “Hunger Channel” that lets him loose with a video crew and a fully stocked kitchen as he cooks up wild and mostly unimaginable concoctions. AOL is also looking into *World Eats, USA*, a show where Duran explores world cuisine throughout the states. *Funny Yolk* is largely an extension of Duran’s feel for fresh recipes. In one of the segments, he works his imagination to tempt the taste buds of his viewers with a deep fried bacon-wrapped Twinkie bathed in a bowl of chocolate soup. Duran’s loose demeanor is further shown through his comfort food cookbook *Take This Dish and Twist It*. Inside its pages, George wakes up to potato chips, dresses like a grandmother and stuffs handfuls of marshmallows in his mouth. But all high jinks aside, Duran’s innovative recipes, tips and witty writing make his cookbook a must-have for anyone looking to revamp their boring variations of their favorite meals. Pizza fondue with grilled banana split sundaes anyone? But enough with all the mouth-watering teasing already. George Duran answers our questions over some Mediterranean cuisine. ▶

Let's backtrack a little bit. Talk about being born in Venezuela and how you ended up in New York.

I was born and raised in Caracas, Venezuela. When I was 15 years old, we moved to the United States. I finished high school and went to New York University. It worked out pretty well. I majored in Communication Studies and worked in radio right afterwards, a little bit in television and then I eventually went to culinary school in France in 2002. In France, I met a producer while I was in culinary school who needed a food network show in French and he said, "Do you have an idea?" I said, "I have a million ideas!" So, we eventually ended up putting a pilot together. They were like, "It's beautiful! It's an American trying to speak French! And it's perfect!" The show was done entirely in French. They loved my accent. So, they signed me up for a few seasons and it went really well, and I eventually won a French Emmy. My problem was that it was getting complicated to get my work visa. So after three years, I came back home and went straight to the Food Network and pitched them a show idea called *Ham on the Street*. We shot a pilot, and again, they loved it and picked it up. It eventually grew from there. We did two seasons of that and then I did another show called *The Secret Life of...* Then from there, I evolved and ended up going to TLC and doing a cake show called *Ultimate Cake Off*.



George Duran

Early 1990s

Leaves Caracas for New York University and majors in Communications Studies, starting his career in production.

1996

Duran's HYE Time Radio Show on WNYU is awarded "Best Radio Talk Show" at the National Association of College Broadcasters.

2000

Production career expands to hosting *Top 21 Videos of 2001* and *Pachanga!* for the Latin music television station HTV in Miami.

2002

George's love for his mother's home cooking resulted in him cooking in his own time, but this hobby quickly turned into an obsession. In this time period, he attends culinary school at the Ecole Supérieure de Cuisine Française, Groupe Ferrandi in Paris.

2003

This became a merging of his two passions: food and production. In France, he created and hosted a culinary show in

French called *Pop Cuisine*. The show garnered a 7 d'Or (French Emmy) for Best Cable Show and a Silver Grape Gastronomic Award.

2005

Returns to New York and creates and hosts the Food Network show *Ham on the Street*. The program showcases his interviewing and culinary skills.

2007

Starts Food Network's *The Secret Life Of...*, a lighthearted exploration of the history of food.

2008

Releases his first book, *Take this Dish and Twist It* (www.GeorgeDuran.com), which features useful tips, extremely amusing anecdotes and recipes.

2010

Begins hosting TLC's *Ultimate Cake Off*, where the nation's top cake artists compete against each other to build the ultimate cake.

2012

Launches new show on YouTube's "Hunger" Channel called *Funny Yolk*.

Stereotypically, men are not supposed to be in the kitchen. How did your family react to the career path you took?

I'll tell you, at least in my family, when I told my mother I was going to culinary school, she said, "Voch!" I'm like, "Why?" "A man is never supposed to cook. It's a women's job to cook!" I think if you still ask my mother what would you have liked George to do, she would probably say, "I wish he was a surgeon. He would have been such a great surgeon." But in this day and age, look at all the men who are amazing chefs. Gender has nothing to do with how well you cook. So, it was a tough sell at first with my parents.

Armenian mothers are known to be great cooks. How has your mother influenced your cooking?

I always tell people that my mother overfed me through the umbilical cord, because my entire life, all I've eaten is good Armenian food. A lot of people ask me, "Where do you go for good Armenian food?" I tell them, "My mother's house! Where else?" Over the years, I've learned a lot of my mother's cuisine, but it's very difficult to go to her and suggest making *bouregs* with chocolate chips inside. She usually screams at me! But after I make it, her and my sister are instant believers. It's been quite a trip to push my mother to try and change her food. Now more than ever, she really accepts international foods in the house. Nowadays, I come over and make Korean food, French food, and all these different pastas, and she loves it. Your career progressed very quickly in a short period of time. By the way, how old are you?

I'm 36...I think. I'm not sure, maybe 37. I think, I'm 37. Seriously, I'm not sure. (Long pause) I'm 37.

I'll confirm with you later! (He is, in fact, 37 years-old) ... Once upon a time, you were Kevork Guldalian. How did your name change come about?

I changed my name, although not legally, a long time ago. I was doing shows for the Latin music television station HTV, and they didn't like my Armenian last name because it was very difficult to pronounce. I had a very close friend whose last name was Duran, so I just went with that. And then I went to France for my cooking show

→ Duran's wife fell in love with him as soon as she took a bite of his burger.

↓ The chef's Armenian pizza, also known as *lahmajun*.



"We are in a revolution right now. Celebrity chefs are inspiring people to cook more at home. Viewers look at us and say, 'I want to make that too.' We are pushing people toward better food. It's an excellent thing."

and they said the exact same thing – my last name was hard on the viewers. By the time I got to New York, I had already established myself in different places as George Duran, so I just stuck with it. Where does all your creativity come from?

I don't know. I look at food. I taste it and I say, "Wow, I want to try it this way." Sometimes I even dream of it. Sometimes, the dreams come into place. Other times, it's inspiration. I see a lot of things and then I try to combine them. My wife always says, "I feel so bad that you always have to cook." I don't understand that concept. I have a passion for cooking. What do you consider your best creation? It's the creation that made my wife fall in love with me. It's my hamburger. She always says, "When I tasted your hamburger, I knew I was going to marry you." It's a cheese-stuffed hamburger. I made it for her when we were dating. A lot of people will say it, but I make the best

burger. People come over to my house, they taste my burger and say, "I thought I made the best burger, but no!" Even burger professionals say mine is the best. I take a little cube of cheddar cheese and freeze it. Then I mold the hamburger meat around it. Once you bite into it, you have a warm chunk of cheese right in the center. When was the last time you had fast food?

It was on Valentine's Day; that's why I love my wife (laughs). She is part Armenian, part Norwegian. But she's becoming more Armenian, she doesn't have a choice. Once a year, my wife gets to have a McDonald's fish filet sandwich, and she wants to have it on Valentine's Day. She doesn't want flowers or restaurants. So we go to McDonald's, and have a fish filet sandwich, fries and a strawberry milkshake. That's wonderful because there's no pressure for me. Except for the rest of the year when I have to go get her flowers and make her food! I am what my wife would say,



the best husband ever, because I don't even watch any sports. For me, sports is a medium to get more food on TV and come up with more ideas, so it works out. Like for the Super Bowl, a lot of people ask me to develop recipes or go on morning shows. **With that being the case, do people ever decline your Super Bowl party invite?** You have no idea. Every time I throw a Super Bowl party, it's massive and I don't think I watch one minute of the game, maybe some of the commercials, but not one minute of the game because I'm in the kitchen with my friends – and there's food galore. Recently, I went to someone's house, it was a potluck, and he ended up doing soft tacos, and all the guys were there, watching TV, and the women were in the other room, talking about babies. I was the only one in a

kitchen I had never been to. I have to say, I was happier than anyone else. **So, with all the cooking you do, has there ever come a point where your eating gets out of control?** With access to so much good food, it's very easy to overeat. It is important for you to train yourself, to train your body, to cook better food, to understand what you're cooking, to eat out less. When you cook for yourself, chances are you're eating better. The best way to begin a healthy lifestyle is to start cooking in your house. A lot of people don't cook because they say "I don't know how to." If you can read, you can cook. That's what it comes down to. **It's also about experimentation. A lot of people are afraid to cook because of the possibility of ruining the dish.**

Absolutely, there is no doubt about it. Since everyone has a different palate, it also matters if the recipe is well written. Most celebrity chefs hire someone to do their recipes. I make all my own recipes, and I cook them three to four times. Depending on how much I love my guests, I'll try it out on them as well. But the rule of thumb is to first test it out on yourself. If you follow all of my step-by-step directions, it will come out exactly how I said it would, no matter what. **How important is it to gather ingredients from proper sources in order to have a great dish?** It's important that you understand that things are changing in the U.S. I think more and more people are eating local foods. In New York, everything has to be imported. How do you feed the masses

during winter? It's important that you stay in touch with local farmers and see what is in season. I am a part of the CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). I pay a certain amount of money, and every week the farmer brings a big basket full of fruits and vegetables that they've just harvested. This way, I'm supporting the farmer directly; someone who has passion in what they're growing. **Since we're eating right now, have you been thinking about what you can do differently with the *kyufta* and *octopoli*? Is that always the case?**

Yesterday, I met people from the California Fig Board. I was the happiest man on Earth. I was also excited because I said "I bet I could make a salty cheesecake with goat cheese and put figs on top of it. They looked at me and said, "Wow, what a great idea!" It's like with every Armenian family. You sit down for lunch and discuss what you're going to have for dinner. You sit down for dinner and discuss what you're going to have for breakfast the next morning. It's non-stop thinking. **There's a heightened interest in celebrity chefs. Is that good or bad for the industry?**

We are in a revolution right now. Celebrity chefs are inspiring people to cook more at home. Viewers look at us and say, "I want to make that too." We are pushing people toward better food. It's an excellent thing. **Do you ever plan on getting into the restaurant business?** It would have to be a very specific circumstance, something like a food truck would be very good, a small hole in the

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Lolli-Kebabs, a sampler-sized version of the *luleh kebab*.



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wall restaurant, something where they can see me cooking and serving them, but I don't think I would go into it. Maybe I'll consider partnering up with somebody, and advise on the menu. It is tough work. I did it for a while in France and I was miserable. Although the food was amazing, I didn't like the people I worked with; everybody treated each other like shit, and that's not where I wanted to be. It almost made me hate food and cooking. Everybody wants to be in the restaurant business. I tell them to work two weeks straight for free to see what it's really like. Honestly, restaurant chefs do not get as much credit as they deserve. They are truly hard workers and deserve all the credit in the world. What I do is nothing compared to what they do. They are back there cutting, cooking, sweating and burning themselves, and we as customers don't even think about them. We just sit there and take it for granted.

Are you open to the idea of being a private chef?

Being a private chef is a little tough because it would really take away time from my family. I would certainly cater to one-time events a few times a month. I'm more open to teaching people. I enjoy going to people's homes for private lessons in a very interactive setting. I set up their kitchens and show them and their guests how to cook. I do a lot of private events, but teaching is what I'm good at.

Your cookbook *Take This Dish and Twist It* is an extension of your passion for both teaching and cooking. It is put together in an interesting way, representing your persona.

Absolutely. You need to have a sense of humor. I got mine from my father. That's pretty much what my mantra is. But more importantly, I want to be who I am and be true to myself. I could easily turn into a Gordon Ramsey. I am who I am and

some people would say I'm incredible and successful at it. I don't change. The publisher allowed me to be hands-on with the book, and to bring in pretty much who I am, and I am actually working on another cookbook that will be coming out at the end of next year. When you meet me in person or when you go to my house to eat, it's exactly what you see in the cookbook. Nothing changes. It's evolving but it's usually the same.

What are some of your twists on Armenian dishes?

For my *luleh kebab* recipe, which is more of an appetizer version, I call it the "lolli-kebab." I changed the name so it's like lollipops. I think it's more for the fun of it. It's the short version of the *luleh kebab* so both children and adults can eat it. You don't have to sit and eat a whole *luleh kebab*. You can just eat two or three. Then there's the *lahmajun* recipe where the bread is actually a tortilla. So, again, there's a simple recipe with the choice of different meats. **What is the most essential ingredient in your kitchen?**

That's a very good question. For me, it would have to be chipotle hot sauce. I use a batch of chipotle hot sauce on almost everything I cook. I love it on my eggs. There's even an organic olive oil version of it. I love spicy.

What is your favorite Armenian food?

The *sarma* that has bulgur and *sumakh* inside. Man, it's my favorite! It will be the food that I will eat the day before I die – or the moment I die. **You've done a great job combining all of your passions. You must love life right now.**

I don't think a lot of people can say you can combine two passions. I think that's the secret of life, to have two things you're very good at and being able to do it at the same time. So, life is good. Things worked out pretty well. ■