



# PATHWAY TO PERFECTION

GEOFFREY ZAKARIAN LIVES THREE LIVES – ONE AS AN OLD-SCHOOL EXECUTIVE CHEF SEQUESTERED IN THE KITCHEN OF HIGH-CLASS RESTAURANTS, THE SECOND AS A LUMINARY RESTAURATEUR, AND THE THIRD AS A CELEBRATED CHEF ON NATIONAL TELEVISION. HOW DOES THE CHARMING, WORLDLY PROPRIETOR WHO CHALKED UP INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM AS FOOD NETWORK'S NEWLY CROWNED "IRON CHEF" EXPLAIN HIS LONGSTANDING STRONGHOLD IN THE INDUSTRY? "I'M OLD. YOU HANG AROUND LONG ENOUGH, SHIT HAPPENS. IT JUST DOES."

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

The sophisticated palates of New York have known Geoffrey Zakarian well before Yelp, Twitter, or the blogger down the next table at Starbucks who told you his food was succulent, scrumptious or any other two-cent assessment that triggered you to go and find out for yourself. Zakarian is cut from the cloth of the old school in an era where a chef was either one review away from being sliced and diced or spliced into a patron's eating DNA. It was a time when the industry believed that you had to take ingredients, be honest with them and serve a yummy product to your customer. There was no other derivation of it, or as he says, "we never did cute." Genteel and sharply dressed, Zakarian is a breath of fresh air in an industry full of scruffy and overly tattooed youngsters. He owns a make-up chair as good as his kitchen. He is suave and slender; his style is refined – note the glasses that recently entered his primped up repertoire. He is spotlessly, almost effortlessly groomed; he is a natural at entertaining; his sophisticated aura attracts legions of middle-aged women who see the silver fox as a kitchen Casanova. At 53, he is still a romantic with his wife Margaret Anne Williams, twenty years his junior and mother to his three and five year-old girls. What separates Zakarian from the pack in a cutthroat industry is his obsession for perfection. His approach in the kitchen is best described as New American with roots in French cuisine. His formula is as follows: learn the classics of French tradition, muster all the cultural influences that excite him, and come up with his own versions. Aside from creating a nesting doll of unique recipes for his restaurants, his never-ending quest for flawlessness includes laboring over

the meticulous details of his restaurants. He selects and designs everything from the china, tableware to the uniforms of his employees. He believes that the plate should showcase the food, not the other way around. It's just his way of channeling his passion for style, all in the name of creating a comforting ambiance. "I'm doing it as a natural outlet. It's a lifestyle business; it's not just a restaurant business," Zakarian says as he sips on an espresso while comfortably sitting in the booth of his Manhattan restaurant The Lambs Club. "There's nothing but detail. Anybody can hire fancy people and spend all sorts of money. But when you open up, what are you left with? I'd rather have a four-dollar glass with a story than a twenty-dollar glass that doesn't speak to anyone. You have to have soliloquy." His fervor for food and fashion is deep-seated. The strong sense of style, other than the fact that he's a public figure in New York, comes from a man who was 52 years his senior – his father George Zakarian. George was a music teacher by day who moonlighted as a trombonist by night. He treated breakfast as if it was a black-tie affair. That made an impression on a young Geoffrey. Working two jobs and with a wide difference in age, father and son never got to hang out much. Geoffrey's fondest memories are of his father introducing him to golf, but more importantly, to pinnacle, a card game they'd play for hours while they shared stories. Zakarian's childhood wasn't of the silver spoon and expensive wine variety. He says that although the family was poor, he, along with his brother and sister, were lucky to have a great upbringing.

THE RESTAURANTS HE'S COOKED FOR OVER THE LAST 30 YEARS, AND LATER BOTH OPENED AND OWNED, HAVE BEEN ON THE SHORT LIST OF MANHATTAN'S CHIC AND ELITE. THE SEEMINGLY CLAIRVOYANT ZAKARIAN HAS COOKED THE CASH COW THAT IS NEW YORK FINE DINING TO SAVORY PERFECTION!



Born and raised in Worcester, Massachusetts, Geoffrey was exposed to – and somewhat spoiled by – good food at an early age. "I really got a taste ad nauseam of really, really good Armenian food at an early age. But not because we were snobs, we were poor! Fast food and soda was never allowed. We had to make everything – from ice cream to ketchup and yogurt – all from scratch." George, who lived to be 96, would go grocery-shopping every day, and his mother Viola would make *kibbe* and *bastec*. Even though Viola had Polish, Russian and Ukrainian roots, her Armenian meals were always prepared tastefully, Geoffrey remembers. So when going to a friend's house, he would have out-of-body experiences when TV dinners and crinkle-cut fries were unleashed from the freezer. After all, Geoffrey's earlier birthdays consisted of all-day expeditions with his father, revolving around the main event of the evening – dinner at a restaurant of Geoffrey's choice. A life bound by food would lead to his career by osmosis.

After receiving a degree in urban studies, Zakarian got a grant to go to France and pursue a graduate degree in economics. In France, Zakarian became a foodaholic, spending his time and grant money on travel and fine dining. The taste that was left in his mouth meant one thing: a new vocation. He came back and enrolled in the CIA – not the Central Intelligence Agency, but the Culinary Institute of America, where he would begin a life-long investigation into food.

### New York, New York

The palates of South Beach know Geoffrey Zakarian quite well. In 1995, he opened the Blue Door at The Delano Hotel in Miami, and in 2011, Tudor House at Dream South Beach Hotel. The palates of Atlantic City know Geoffrey Zakarian, also. In 2007, he conceptualized the food and beverage program of the 700-room hotel The Water Club at Borgata. But it is the hoards of New York's hungriest that best know Geoffrey Zakarian. ▶





The time was 1982, the year in which Zakarian began his culinary apprenticeship – and rising prominence – at New York’s Le Cirque under French master chef Alain Sailhac. As a Pastry Sous Chef, it was Zakarian’s first job in the kitchen. In a period of five years, he developed his technical foundation under Sailhac and had his coming-out party as he toured throughout France – Paris, Alsace, Nice, Lyon – as well as London. At Le Cirque, he would eventually work his way up to Chef de Cuisine. As meteoric as his ascent may seem, Zakarian’s road was anything but paved like butter. He remembers a time of brutal berating and emasculation. The pressure-cooking environment filled out the drawers in his arsenal, cultivated his authoritarian attitude, and gave him a sharp tongue. “When I came up in the early eighties, I worked my ass off. Everyone doesn’t have to do that, that’s just what I did. Every day, you would have to come up for oxygen. If there were only a couple punches, then it was a good day. If you’re serious and passionate about being a chef, you have to go through tough times; you can’t just

come [to New York] and burst out. You have to do anything you can to get here. Which means you’ve got to beg, borrow, steal and live in a four-corner room. I didn’t worry about anything. I could’ve cared less if I was paid or not because I was learning so much. We’re the sum total of our experiences. My path is just more romantic, if I may say. I’m a hopeless romantic. I romanticize everything.” Zakarian made his name in New York as the Executive Chef at the 21Club in 1987, then a year later as the Executive Chef of 44 at the Royalton Hotel, where he would be for the next ten years. In 1997, as the Executive Chef of Patroon, he was awarded Three Stars by *The New York Times*, their highest rating. After holding down forts all over town, he finally had one he could call his own when he opened Town in 2001 – as its owner – to much fanfare. The restaurant received Three Stars by *The New York Times* and made Zakarian a staple of New York fine dining. “Culinary wise, Town put me on top,” says Zakarian, who opened the restaurant six months before 9/11. “I have very bittersweet

## STIRRING IT UP WITH GEOFFREY ZAKARIAN

### ON LIFE...

“Life is short, we’re on a timetable. It ends the exact same way for everybody. So you have to determine what’s important and what you want to do in life, and how you want to do it.”

### ON BEING IN CONTROL...

“Absolutely. Except when my wife’s around. I have no say.”

### ON REINVENTING HIMSELF...

“I try to reinvent myself within the context of classical. Every fashion designer or artist, they all go back to go forward. So I try to do that with food.”

### ON HIS REPUTATION...

“My name is my reputation and I’m only as good as my last meal. Trust me, people stop me and say, ‘oh I didn’t like my meal last night.’ So I have to listen to this shit sometimes, and it’s okay. They feel really good about talking to me, and you know what? They turn out to be really good customers and they come back again. If you bust someone’s balls, and you’re honest about it, then you’ll support that person. People think it’s the opposite.”

### ON MAKING IT IN NEW YORK...

“If you really want to learn this business, there’s a lot of places you can go to – trust me. But here, it’s endless. You just have to constantly reinvent yourself.”

### ON BRANCHING OUT WEST WITH HIS RESTAURANTS...

“I would never live in the West Coast. It’s just that I’m really a homebody. I love my family and hate being away from them. I’m an East Coast guy.”

### ON THE NEW YORK MEDIA...

“I rarely read *The New York Times*; they’re so politically left wing I can’t even stand it. Being a libertarian, I’ve always been tipped to the right. I just try to stick to the food section.”

### ON TRENDS...

“I don’t dabble in trends or things that are in my ear and out the next day, so maybe that helps. I’m very old school. Farm-to-table is a trend that I don’t like because it’s a trend that’s not new. I’ve been doing farm-to-table since 1981. We called the farm, they brought it, and we cooked it. It’s sort of like somebody made it up and thought it sounds cute. I don’t come up with cute.”

### ON HOW CHEFS HAVE CHANGED IN THE BUSINESS...

“We’ve unfortunately turned into this ‘what’s in it for me’ syndrome instead of like, ‘you’re teaching me, I’m learning from you, I want to suck your brains.’”

### ON FAST FOOD ...

“Every day – every breakfast, lunch and every dinner – you are never going to get it back. To me, if you eat McDonalds, you might as well commit suicide. That’s how I think. There’s nothing wrong with McDonalds, but are you kidding me? You can go get a cool taco at a taco truck, sit and have lunch at a bar, make something for yourself, or go to some groovy little farm-to-table restaurant. Every situation is a chance to live life, you know what I mean?”

### ON DINING OUT...

“I know how hard it is to put a plate of food in front of someone that’s warm and targeted properly, so I actually have low expectations. I enjoy simple food like pizza or sushi when I go out. I go to fun, casual and fancy places, but very often I just go to try it. It’s more of a ‘look up my skirt moment;’ it’s not like I’m eating. So when I go out, I expect to see a lot of shit, a lot of flaws. If it goes well, I’m like ‘wow this is good.’ I know how hard it is. I expect absolutely nothing.”

### ON CRITIQUING...

“If nobody critiqued you, your self-worth is going to be measured with nothing. That’s the same way I teach in my kitchen. I’m absolutely fair and straightforward. I shoot from the hip, but I shoot squarely. I never aim at anybody, because we’re all in this together. They represent me. They cook my food. I don’t cook the food. They cook it. So I teach, they cook.”

### ON HOW HE’S CHANGED...

“I’m much funnier than I used to be. I’ve always been lighter; I’m just funnier now because I don’t take a lot of things seriously.”

### ON LESSONS THAT CAN’T BE TAUGHT...

“I can’t teach someone self respect, manners, politeness, how to treat people. Sadly there’s not enough of that. I can’t teach someone integrity. They have to get that from their parents. I can teach just about anything else.”

### ON DOING ANYTHING DIFFERENT IN HIS CAREER...

“Oh my God, I don’t think like that. I live today. I know what I’m going to do, what I want to do, I just don’t think about it. Did I make mistakes? Of course. Youth is wasted on the young. The path today led me to my wife and two children and all the nice people that surround me. I feel very, very blessed to be where I am at my age. There’s nothing I don’t have. Materially, I don’t really want anything. Of course we all want more, I want my family to be healthy, and to leave them in a situation where they’re confident, with support to fall back on, but I want them to go get it themselves. I did. Nobody did it for me.”

ZAKARIAN IS GENTEEL AND SHARPLY DRESSED;  
HE IS SUAVE AND SLENDER; HIS STYLE IS REFINED;  
HE IS SPOTLESSLY, ALMOST EFFORTLESSLY  
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LEGIONS OF MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN WHO SEE  
THE SILVER FOX AS A KITCHEN CASANOVA.

memories from that restaurant, but it turned out to be a very satisfying ten years.” During his ownership of Town, Zakarian added Country at the Carlton Hotel (Michelin Star, Three Stars by *The New York Times*) in 2005, The Lambs Club at the Chatwal Hotel in 2009, and The National at the Benjamin Hotel in 2010 to his growing proprietorship.

“What’s great about working with Geoffrey is that I get to explore myself and he puts his identity on it. It works out for me because it allows me to learn. For me to get a chance to have my boss be somebody who will sit down and eat with me and have a relationship, it’s pretty tremendous,” says Eric Haugen, Zakarian’s Executive Chef at The Lambs Club. “I’ve learned a lot of life lessons here. I’ve learned a lot about myself. When he is right, he is right. It’s an invaluable experience to be able to work alongside someone like him.”

The restaurants Zakarian has cooked for over the course of the last 30 years, and later both opened and owned, have been on the short list of Manhattan’s chic and elite. The seemingly clairvoyant chef has cooked the cash cow that is New York to savory perfection.

But he had the darkest moment of his career in 2011 when he filed for personal bankruptcy in order to avoid legal claims from his kitchen staff at Country. Zakarian had closed Country prior to this in 2008 because of the recession, he says. When asked to discuss his personal bankruptcy, his brain is programmed to shut off all talk relating to it. He answers the question before it is finished. “I don’t want to talk about it because it’s not germane. It’s public knowledge.”

Unfortunately for Zakarian, it is. A simple Google search of his name shows the report above his accolades.

### Cruisin’ Forward

Very soon, palates from all over the world will get to know Geoffrey Zakarian. Earlier this summer, Zakarian inked a partnership with Norwegian Cruise Lines to open yet another restaurant. This one is called Ocean Blue. The challenge is unlike any other he has seen thus far in his career. He has to prepare seven days of food for the restaurant on the soon-to-debut four-thousand passenger ship, Norwegian Breakaway. On select voyages, he will host meet-and-greets with the passengers and give cooking demonstrations. In addition to the restaurant Ocean Blue, Zakarian will be getting his feet wet by highlighting crustaceans and wines by the glass at The Raw Bar. A more casual dining experience will be offered with Ocean Blue on The Waterfront. The cruise is set to sail waters in May 2013, and Zakarian is the headliner of the seafood smorgasbord.

Anyone with a remote control and an eye for food pornography (television cooking shows) knows the telegenic Zakarian. He is a natural in front of the camera. For deadpan mastery, do yourself a favor and YouTube his video with fellow chef Beau MacMillan.

Armored with a quick-witted personality – and Hello Kitty Band-Aids – he finally emerged from a life sequestered in the kitchen and into the living rooms of millions when he won the recent fourth season of the Food Network’s *The Next Iron Chef, Super Chefs*. His showmanship was on full display over the course of a series of one-hour cooking marathons in the stadium-like kitchen setup. In the end, he proved his culinary superiority. Zakarian says that being asked to compete was an honor in itself, and he had no illusions of winning.

“WHAT MAKES ME SUCCESSFUL IS THAT I HAVE A LOT OF DOUBTS. I’M ALWAYS NERVOUS AND WORRYING ABOUT THINGS. I DON’T TAKE ANYTHING FOR GRANTED. I’M VERY CONCERNED AT ALL TIMES ABOUT THINGS; I KNOW WHAT CAN GO WRONG.”



He labels the title of “Iron Chef” as “gratifying” and lists the honor in his top-five list of lifetime accomplishments. Some other not-too-shabby accolades include Manhattan billboards bearing his face, getting to ride on the Macy’s Day Parade float with his family this Thanksgiving, appearing on two Food Network shows – ones as a judge on *Chopped*, the other highlighting his favorite dishes on *The Best Thing I Ever Ate*.

He is also building a concept for his upcoming retail line of products. With all of the cooking, filming and launching of restaurants, Zakarian also writes. In 2006, he wrote the cookbook *Town/Country: 150 Recipes for Life Around the Table*, and has already inked two book deals with Random House.

“What makes me successful is that I have a lot of doubts. I’m always nervous and worrying about things. I know what can go wrong,” he says, sipping on a Mad Men Cosmopolitan. “I enjoy finding old and classic restaurants that have always been around and try to modernize them. At the end of the day, it’s about great service, a great environment, and really dependable, reliable food. So that’s what I try to do. I’ve been lucky that I haven’t gotten put out.” This pinch of insecurity fuels Zakarian’s never-ending quest for culinary perfection. “I’m still not there [with perfection]. I’m not. I’ve learned a lot of tricks, I’m really good at certain things, but I’m nowhere near where I’m going to be in five years. There’s so much to learn in this business, it’s incredible.” ...And so his path continues. ■