



When he opens the EMP Winter House later this year, Daniel Humm will join the cast of celebrity chefs who have cooked in Aspen.

A SUCCESSION OF

# Culinary Stars

Celebrity chefs continue to use Aspen's kitchens to test out concepts on A-list clientele.

*By Kelly J. Hayes*

Nobu Matsuhisa opened an Aspen restaurant in 1998, nine years after being named a best new chef by *Food & Wine*.



For 30 years, the biggest names in the culinary world have come to Aspen for the Food & Wine Classic, many to be honored as *Food & Wine* magazine's best new chefs. And over those three decades, there has been no shortage of high-profile celebrity chefs who have operated or cooked in Aspen's top kitchens as well.

Gordon Naccarato (best new chef 1988) was arguably the first in this celebrity-chef parade to open a restaurant in Aspen, when he launched Gordon's in 1984 in what's now home to Jimmy's on Restaurant Row. Naccarato came to Aspen after a stint in the kitchen of the highly acclaimed Michael's in Santa Monica, where he met television producer Bruce Paltrow and his wife, actress Blythe Danner, who, together, backed the high-altitude venture.

With its eclectic menu, hotter-than-Hollywood vibe and star backing, the room was a draw for the A-list celebrities of the 1980s. (The restaurant shut in 1990.) The Eagles' Glenn Frey and Don Henley, the Kennedy clan, Don Johnson and Jack Nicholson were all regulars. And playing in the kitchen and the dining room was a young Gwyneth Paltrow.

Gordon's was an early adapter to the farm-to-table movement. "We sourced mache and red oak leaf baby lettuces and vegetables from a small farm in El Jebel," Naccarato says. "We gathered watercress

from a secret spot on Mount Sopris, even in the dead of winter. The cilantro smelled of warm mountain sunshine. We picked wild slippery jack mushrooms and pungent wild juniper berries to perfume the duck marinade alongside the ice caves at the Grottos up Independence Pass."

Thirty years later, the be-seen celebrity haunt in Aspen transitioned to the historic Victorian on Main Street that's home to Matsuhisa Aspen. When it debuted in 1998, it was the first Matsuhisa location outside of chef Nobu Matsuhisa's landmark Beverly Hills restaurant. (Two Nobu restaurants previously opened in New York City and London before Matsuhisa marked the initial expansion of the brand.)

Matsuhisa's secret for success is a combination of quality cuisine and creative design, the hallmarks of his eponymous international brand. While the chef himself is often spotted in the kitchen during the Food & Wine Classic, in his absence, his signature dishes—broiled black cod with miso, yellowtail sashimi with jalapeno, and new-style sashimi—are impeccably prepared under the auspices of Aspen's Philip Tanaka, best known as Philip-san.

Recently, another global chef with an international empire of restaurants has made Snowmass the chosen location for his local kitchens. "I am extremely happy to call Snowmass home to two of my restaurants, especially during such a strong development period in the



Richard Sandoval's empire includes 50-plus restaurants, two of which are in Snowmass Village.

village,” says chef Richard Sandoval, who helms both the slopeside Venga Venga and TORO Kitchen & Lounge in the Viceroy Snowmass.

Sandoval started his restaurant group in New York by launching the highly lauded Maya and grew his RS Hospitality to include over 50 concepts in locations ranging from Snowmass to Tokyo to Dubai, United Arab Emirates. “Honestly, I see myself more as a chef/ restaurateur [than a celebrity chef] at this point in my career,” he says. “I like to work with the young, talented chefs in my company and make sure that they shine.”

Of course, Sandoval—like all high-country chefs—faces obstacles. “Staffing is definitely a challenge in seasonal communities,” he says. “But there’s a silver lining to that as well. We get a lot of wonderful international staff that come and work seasonally, and bring an added flair to the restaurant that I appreciate very much.”

And the trend continues for visiting chefs with outsize reputations to come to the valley. Chefs Club in The St. Regis Aspen Resort announced that, this June,

chef Matthew Accarrino (best new chef 2014), executive chef of one-Michelin-starred SPQR in San Francisco, will be bringing his distinctly Californian take on regional Italian cuisine to Chefs Club. Accarrino will be the first participant in the restaurant’s Chef Residency Program in Aspen and will work alongside executive chef Todd Slossberg in the kitchen.

This winter, Daniel Humm (best new chef 2005) of Eleven Madison Park in New York, one of the world’s top restaurants, is planning to open a pop-up in Aspen in conjunction with American Express. The concept calls for an EMP Winter House, an offshoot of the EMP Summer House that Humm and his colleagues have perfected in the Hamptons.

“The entire team had such a fun experience at EMP Summer House that we decided to open a winter branch in Aspen later this year,” Humm says. “The EMP Winter House’s menu will draw on my Swiss roots while continuing to take inspiration from the local ingredients and culture around us. Another one of my passions is snowboarding, so Aspen is the perfect location!” ■

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Matthew Accarrino is the chef-in-residence at Chefs Club this summer and will host a few events over the Food & Wine Classic to debut the program.

