

OUR FAVORITE FOOD PEOPLE

When we settled on the subjects of our sixth annual compilation, it wasn't with the intention of creating a portfolio that contrasts the extreme ends of the food industry spectrum today. But that's kinda how it played out.

In Jose Garces and Michael Solomonov, we have the rock stars. Two chefs with a rare talent that earned them national praise and fame, which they're cashing in to erect empires in their image so far beyond their humble culinary-institute aspirations that they can only truly reflect on the ground they've covered in a sort of out-of-body way.

And in Mikey Azzara, Kathy and Jim Lyons and Marcia Durgin and Paul Rizzo, we have the craftsmen. All revealed themselves to be innovators, but when the attention came, they spurned the faster tracks in the name of self-preservation, declaring that they alone would dictate the terms and leaving us to fall in around them however we needed to.

Posed alongside each other, the pursuits of the multitasking celebri-chef and the meticulous mom and pop aren't quite as disparate as they once were. Popular and thoughtful are no longer mutually-exclusive terms in the business of food. **By Scott Edwards**

The 2013
Edition



The Iron Chef's Not Invincible After All

AT LARGE. FOOD PEOPLE

In 2012, Jose Garces continued his pursuit of world dominance unchecked. Mostly. Shockingly, farming did not come as naturally as juggling 15—and counting—thriving restaurants.

It was beginning to feel as though Iron Chef was more than a title that Jose Garces earned on the Food Network competition series, that he was, in fact, some sort of invincible, larger-than-life figure.

He owns 15 restaurants across the country, including seven in Philadelphia and three in Atlantic City, New Jersey, as well as a food truck (in Philly). He was hailed as the Mid-Atlantic's best chef by the James Beard Foundation (2009). And he's authored a pair of cookbooks, the most recent of which, *The Latin Road Home: Savoring the Foods of Ecuador, Spain, Cuba, Mexico and Peru*, was published in the fall.

He's not a chef. He's not even a restaurateur anymore. He's a brand. And that's not hyperbole. The Garces Group is the umbrella company that covers all of the above.

So when word got out in 2011 that Garces bought a 40-acre farm in Ottsville, even though he possessed not an hour of experience as a grower, my reaction was, Sure. Why not? The problem with progressing at the rate at which Garces has—he opened his first restaurant, Amada, in 2005—and doing so with such agility—his concepts range from Latin-Asian small plates to contemporary American—is that eventually even the truly impressive becomes commonplace. Naturally he bought a farm. And of course it would grow like gangbusters.

The giant spread in *Philadelphia Magazine* featuring the renovated farmhouse left us envious and confirmed that Garces was laying claim to yet another frontier. Only, he wasn't pulling it off as effortlessly as the pictorial led us to believe. Last year was Luna Farm's first full growing season and it was, in short, a bitch.

Under the wing of the sage Alex McCracken, they grew a lot, too much, really. At its height, the farm turned out about a thousand pounds of vegetables, herbs and microgreens. Garces describes it as an "experimental year." "We grew a lot of different varieties of things to see what the soil would bear," he says. But his menus called for little of it. And collecting and transporting it to Philadelphia and the Shore was problematic for a man who prides himself on the efficiency of his operations.

"One of the things I have learned is farming is definitely—it's a business. And the margins are really tight," Garces says. "We're kind of wading our way through those murky waters right now. Hopefully we'll

have a better plan for 2013."

The first step is limiting what they'll grow to what the restaurants need—tomatoes, peppers and tomatillos, for starters. Though herbs—chive, rosemary, parsley, cilantro—are where the farm is most likely to prove its worth to Garces. There can never be enough, he says.

Another issue with furious growth is that inevitably it subsides. Interest wanes, then moves on. It's a natural progression that's expedited in our ADHD culture, a modern-day survival of the fittest, if you will. Garces is keenly aware that his time will come, which is why, in spite of his overwhelming schedule, he does his diligence.

"One of the things that I've strived to do since day one is try to be ahead of the curve, to look at trends and keep pushing forward," he says. "And keeping our group relevant, that's my job." In that vein, he launched the Garces Culinary Think Tank last year, an in-house initiative in which Garces, for his part, experiments extensively in the kitchen and begins profiling the next generation of epicurean revelations.

In an age when chefs are often scrutinized for stepping outside the niches that they themselves defined and then their loyal followers and paid critics bound them to, Garces stands above the fray, not because he comes across on TV and in magazines as charming and accessible—not solely because of that, at least—but because he's haunted by a fear of putting any piece of himself out there that isn't authentic.

Market research is part and parcel with opening a restaurant, but first-hand experience of the culture is not. His latest cookbook not only draws attention to a few of his favorite cuisines, it pays homage to the people and places that define him. Garces grew up eating his Ecuadorian grandmother's food. He studied in Spain. His wife was born in Cuba.

Garces named Amada after his grandmother. He opened it with two faithful partners who believed in him and an SBA loan that "locked up everything from my house to my right arm." Everything after Amada is gravy. It's also all pulling him further away from it. Which is why he's anticipating the opening of his 16th restaurant, Volver, at the Kimmel Center—probably in the fall, he guesses—as much as the gourmet addicts among us. He plans to make his return to the kitchen there.

The restaurant will be open on a limited basis, most likely around the Kimmel Center's events schedule. It'll be comprised of 25 seats, give or take, each one destined to be coveted because there's only going to be one seating per night.

Garces is envisioning the ultimate creative outlet. "There are going to be no barriers in which we define the experience," he says. Though, it reads more like a lifeline. He's building his dream kitchen—"more for myself than for anyone else"—and he's molding the concept, at least in part, around the intimate chef's table he planned to host at Amada but never had the chance to because the restaurant took off too quickly, and he never looked back. It turns out, however, he was looking back all along, and waiting.



PHOTOS (JOSE GARCES) BY JASON VARNEY



The Trending Translator | MICHAEL SOLOMONOV

CHEF AND CO-OWNER, ZAHAV, FEDERAL DONUTS AND PERCY STREET BARBECUE, PHILADELPHIA; AND CHEF, CITRON AND ROSE, MERION

AT LARGE. FOOD PEOPLE

In the year after Michael Solomonov was named the best chef of the Mid-Atlantic region by the James Beard Foundation, he opened a second Federal Donuts, was the object of Anthony Bourdain's crush on the Travel Channel series, "The Layover," and was anointed an "Empire Builder" by *Food & Wine*.

More intriguing, though, Solomonov took his first steps into the suburbs. He and his partner, Steve Cook, were hired to run Citron and Rose, a kosher Eastern European restaurant that opened in November in Merion (see page 66)—14 months after he told *The New York Times* that the concept was too complicated and too likely to alienate.

You'll have to excuse Solomonov for rethinking the concept because he seems incapable of doing any wrong at the moment. On his way to work a dinner shift at Citron and Rose, a drained Solomonov describes the unrelenting—and mostly welcome—pressure of building an empire.

Rome Wasn't Built in a Day

It's taken a lot of time, and a lot of support and a lot of collaborating to be where we are. Every single day, Steve and I spend hours and hours discussing what our strategy is, even in a sort of micromanagement kind of way.

Zahav: The One True Love

I genuinely love being there. Getting in there and cooking and being part of service is, like, incredibly satisfying and a lot of fun. So I don't ever want to really stop doing that.

On Going Kosher

I think that the timing was just right. We'd gotten, not comfortable, but just a little bit more fluent in what we were doing, and I think that we wanted to explore the other side of Jewish cuisine, the European side.

(Un)complicated Cooking

Opening an Israeli restaurant, we had to translate things. At the table. Which is hard as hell. So, like, kosher, yeah, of course, is hard, but I mean, I don't know, it's not that hard.

Life After James Beard

I'm going into Citron and Rose right now and I'm probably going to hop on line and bang out some dishes and, you know, help out with some pastries. In a physical sense, not much different. Mental, or spiritual or a philosophical sense, I would imagine quite different.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL PERISCO

The Indispensable Link | MIKEY AZZARA

FOUNDER AND OWNER, ZONE 7, RINGOES, NJ

Aside from the mailbox with the street number that sits across Route 31, there's no distinguishing feature on the outside of the Ringoes, NJ, warehouse that, since last May, belongs to Zone 7, a grassroots produce distributor. But inside, two immense freezers stand as irrefutable proof that the revolution is taking hold.

Five years ago, Mikey Azzara, a guy with a personality as warm as the knit hat that usually covers his shaved head in the winter, was collecting produce from several farms throughout Bucks County and Central Jersey and delivering it to forward-thinking restaurants in a borrowed truck, often bumming freezer space in said restaurants. That year, he made \$50,000 for those farms. In 2012, with most of December to go, it was over a million.

Azzara wasn't the only one with interest in filling such an obvious void, of course. In fact, the idea wasn't even his. Chef and farmer friends lobbied, and Azzara finally, reluctantly, caved. He opposed the idea of a middle man. He spent five increasingly-frustrating years with the nonprofit Northeast Organic Farming Association trying to encourage farmers and chefs to work directly together, but it just wasn't possible, not on any large scale.

Azzara confirmed their trust by becoming far more than a food distributor. He developed into their most outspoken advocate. He profiles both sides of his clientele, farms and restaurants, on the Zone 7 Web site, www.freshfromzone7.com. And, a couple summers ago, he began staging a "Dinners on the Farm" series.

Demand has dictated Zone 7's direction to this point. There's hardly even been a sales call made, though Azzara's distaste of them has as much to do with that as the lack of need. (On average, Zone 7 fields calls from five potential customers a week, according to Azzara.) Instead of a sales director, he employs a "farmer-chef liaison." "And in terms of sales," he says, "it's really just steering customers toward the right product or toward the right farm, that kind of thing."

Maybe it's the mounting overhead or that he's finally settling, but Azzara, for the first time, really, is blueprinting. More specifically, he's thinking about once-unapproachable outlets. "A chef can really only take so much. For a chef to take like four cases of broccoli, that's a lot," he says. "But if Wegmans was interested in product, they would take four pallets." They have the audience, and he now has the clout.

PHOTO BY KRESIMIR JURAGA



The Uncompromising Artisans | MARCIA DURGIN AND PAUL RIZZO
OWNERS AND BAKERS, CROSSROADS BAKE SHOP, DOYLESTOWN

The Crossroads kitchen is divided in half, roughly. Marcia Durgin covers the pastry side and Paul Rizzo, her husband, the bread. Rarely do they crossover. A 20-year-old small-batch mixer is junior in seniority only to a similar 21-year-old model across the room. The old storefront is mostly occupied by a hulking, French-made oven that's growing very finicky in its old age. A flour film coats the kitchen floor.

Several years back, Crossroads took over the space next door when the dry cleaner moved out. It was long overdue. Still, Rizzo, a wiry figure with disheveled hair and intense eyes that undermine a relaxed posture, resisted, and still does. Crossroads has developed, over the last two decades, into the go-to bakery for a growing majority within an hour's drive of Doylestown and plenty of others willing to drive as far as needed. And yet, it remains relatively the same as it was upon its inception, physically and philosophically. *Stay small and keep the control.*

That kind of longevity and commitment suggests a rigid process, but the opposite is truer. The bread recipes are in constant flux. (Pastry preparations, on the other hand, are exact and methodical.) "Time honored doesn't mean a recipe," says Durgin, who wears her soft-edged cynicism like a cable-knit sweater. "It might mean a technique, or something. And there are lots of time-honored techniques, so sometimes

you're just mishing them and mashing them together and coming up with new ways of doing old things."

As Rizzo, who'll be 55 this year, steels himself for a nine-hour night shift, he says he could see himself doing this for another 20 years, with one stipulation: "If it fed me." There's a weariness about Durgin, though, and it manifests itself when she cuts Rizzo off and says she needs an exit plan.

"I feel this kind of guilt," Durgin says. "In some ways, I'd like to do something else with my life. Honestly, I'd like to be somebody else, do something else. You know, I'm 50. I'd like to say, 'OK, did this for 20, 25 years. Now what am I going to do with the next 20?'"

But Durgin's sense of responsibility trumps her curiosity, trumps almost everything. From behind the counter, she's seen young children grow into adults who graduated and married. Likewise, longtime daily customers—friends, really—have died and disappeared from her life. The truth is, both their lives are hopelessly intertwined with the bakery.

After so many years, Durgin, naturally, can't help but wonder what life looks like outside of the bakery. Yet, she's simultaneously aware that the relationships and experiences within it are much of what sustains her.

PHOTO BY KRESIMIR JURAGA

The Conscientious Innovators | KATHY AND JIM LYONS
OWNERS, BLUE MOON ACRES, BUCKINGHAM AND PENNINGTON, NJ



In two decades, Kathy and Jim Lyons went from basically clueless to, arguably, the most trusted wholesale farmers in the tri-state region. Name a top chef in New York, Philly or around here and you're likely to find their microgreens in his or her kitchen.

Last summer, they took a run at being retailers, opening a market at the 63-acre Pennington, NJ, farm they bought in 2007. From the summer drought that forced them to dig a third well, to the reconstruction of a bridge that closed the road to the farm, to Sandy in October, which leveled their entire winter crop, just about everything that could go wrong, did go wrong. "It was a pretty sharp learning curve," Kathy, a soft-spoken woman, says.

But the success of the market and especially the farm are dependent less upon a season than they are a string of them.

Blue Moon's stout reputation grew from a handful of closely clustered greenhouses on seven acres in Buckingham. Ten years ago, their chefs began asking for more variety. Kathy recognized it as an opportunity to bring Blue Moon into more intimate contact with their increasingly conscientious community. For Jim, a conventional setup would be a platform upon which he could start testing some paradigm-shifting theories he was avidly reading up on.

Jim was inspired to grow rice because grain, not produce, comprises most of our calories, and grain production in this country is nowhere near sustainable. A commitment to an all-natural process in the greenhouses has evolved to analyzing the biology of soil under a microscope.

The time- and labor-intensive practices hamstringing them at times. They lost their arugula last summer because it was consumed by Downy Mildew and they refused to fumigate it. But with every season that the land's meticulously tended to, or, rather, untended, the farming will get easier, Jim says, and problems like the mildew will occur less and less. Not to imply that he's immune to profit margins, though, the retail represents a "spec" of their operation, which grants them the leeway few farmers know, but Jim is concerned foremost with actualizing practices that are still largely being formulated.

Their friends in farming are winding down. Even Jim and Kathy started handing over many of their daily responsibilities to the next generation, which includes their daughter Ashley, in favor of "visionary" roles. Still, the Pennington farm seems to have rekindled a drive in them that initially fluttered inside that first 10-by-48 greenhouse so many years back.

"We're thinking this is the farm that we leave behind after we're done," Jim says.

PHOTO BY THOMAS ROBERT CLARKE