









ne recent warm evening in Las Vegas, a group of snappily dressed men stroll the cartoonish promenade that is The Strip. Past the Chrysler Building, past Monte Carlo and the Eiffel Tower and past the undulating gold fountains, graceful and obscene, spurting in climactic choreographed motion to the piped strains of Celine Dion.

At the insistence of a wedding party, the men stop to huddle around a sturdy bride as she poses in front of the Bellagio's dancing waters. She smiles broadly, only too willing to have her photo taken with some stylish out-of-towners. Her face starts to darken, however, as a growing crowd begins to snap iPhone pictures behind her photographer. "We love you, Bobby!" screams one giddy bystander. With that the bride pulls away; she is done. No one wants to be princess for a day and have Bobby Flay wander into her spotlight.

Accompanying Flay in this roving band are fellow star chefs Geoffrey Zakarian, Scott Conant and Marcus Samuelsson, along with manager Scott Feldman, a reputed power Chihuahua in the restaurant industry. The longtime friends are a tight-knit food fraternity conceived more than 20 years ago: Flay, 48, met Feldman in the early

1990s when he was an account executive for restaurants; Zakarian, 53, was one of Feldman's first clients when he started his agency in 2004 and remains with him today; and Conant, 42, and Samuelsson (both *Chopped* regulars alongside Zakarian) work with Feldman, 45, on various projects. "This is a very special group," says Samuelsson, 41. "We all have deep European roots, but we all have a different narrative; this makes it exciting to me."

The men slowly make their way back to the Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas. The newest of the mega-hotels, it caters to more urban tastes (think Blue Ribbon Sushi and Marquee nightclub) and is currently the hottest bed in town. As the guys sweep through the tourist-clogged entrance and across the gold-flecked marble floors, guests sit up and take notice, like prairie dogs, their necks collectively following the men. Even for those who don't recognize the chefs, there's something familiar about the scenario; something dimly, wonderfully retro about five men walking and laughing and back-slapping in suits. "What's cooking, Bobby?" a fiftysomething blonde asks saucily as she walks by. "I dunno," he laughs. "What's cooking with you?"



A bachelorette and her friends ask to have their photo taken with Conant and Zakarian—who is famed for such fashionable Manhattan dining spots as Forty Four at The Royalton and the Lambs Club. They oblige. The women flirt with Conant. He flirts back. "You think I'm giving you Blue Steel? That's just how I look," he laughs. Zakarian leans in to look at the photo. "It looks like you're getting your bag changed," he says.

The guys have converged on Vegas for a three-day playdate (plus a bit of business: Flay and Conant have local outposts—Mesa Grill at Caesars Palace and Scarpetta and D.O.C.G. at the Cosmopolitan, respectively). Half Rat Pack, half *Entourage*, they commune like men of an inner circle, and over the course of 72 hours, the insults, counsel

and shenanigans rack up. "We're all careerdriven and in a competitive industry, but our camaraderie is stronger," says Flay. "We love to come here, eat good food, play craps, stay out late and know that somehow we're going to be separated from our money. Vegas is Disneyland for adults."

efore dinner, the men share cocktails and cigars on the open-air terrace of Comme Ça restaurant, overlooking the neon tomfoolery of the Paris Las Vegas. They're looking sharp in

their evening finery (a fact not lost on them), immaculately pressed and coiffed with nary a pocket square out of place—only Flay has his double Windsor artfully askew.

There is an oft-repeated saying among the group, at different times directed at any one of its party: "You have come a long way." Considering the newfound fortune of a celebrity chef, one doesn't doubt this to be true. "Dude, you've gone from Members Only to Zegna in under a decade," says Flay to Conant. Flay,

the owner of 21 restaurants and one of Food

Network's biggest stars, is more likable in person: wry, smoother and more insecure than his grinning cookbook mug suggests. "Fuck you," says Conant, a half-Italian Connecticut native who cemented his reputation by creating unfussy, elevated Italian food. Broad-shouldered and barrel-chested to boot, he gives off a whiff of Tony Soprano as he tugs the lapels of his jacket over his bulk, mock-offended. "I once had a business partner who said, 'You're the only guy I've ever met who went from a Toyota RAV4 to a Maserati,'" he admits.

Exhibiting a signature take on sartorial flair, Samuelsson arrives wearing a fedora, Ethiopian scarf, checked silk waistcoat and suspenders hanging down over his jeans. The most thoughtful, artistically intense member of the group, the Ethiopian-born, Swedishraised chef of Harlem's Red Rooster and Sweden's Norda was the youngest ever to receive a three-star review from *The New York Times*. Feldman, looking down at what appear to be vintage gold tap shoes, says, "Ah, Mr. Bojangles is here. Let's go to dinner."

The men snake through the dining room of the Greek restaurant Estiatorio Milos, securing watching diners in their choice for this evening's meal. They are ushered into the glass-encased VIP room, to the side of the main dining floor. Waitstaff appear in lockstep and stiffly begin pouring multiple wines from multiple sides. Signature dishes deftly appear: paper-thin slices of crispy zucchini and eggplant with tzatziki and *kefalograviera* cheese *saganaki* (or the "Milos Special"), skewers of plump scallops and the showstopping Lavraki, a slapping-fresh pearlescent sea bass nestled in a puddle of olive oil.

Confused by varying reports of the steps used to create the particularly palatable Milos Special—is zucchini really coated with water, flour, water, then dipped straight into hot oil?—the chefs decide to storm the kitchen. The guy manning the deep fryer is silent but wide-

eyed as he watches Bobby Flay in Tom Ford flouring and

deep-frying zucchini slices next to him. One minute you're working your station, the next you're on *Throw-down! with Bobby Flay*.

Once back at the table, Feldman, who as a kid worked behind the bar of his family's Irish pub on Long Island, receives a belated compliment from former client Conant. Short, punchy and Jewish, Feldman has been labeled the Ari Gold of the restaurant industry and is known for going that extra mile to keep clients happy. "That deal you got me with Valentino," says Conant, "it is still the best deal I ever had."

Zakarian clarifies, "You could go into Valentino and pick out anything you wanted for two years."

"Fantastic," says Conant.

Feldman currently represents ten female chefs on a roster of 40 clients, which includes such topseeded talent as New Yorkers Tom Colicchio and Andrew Carmellini.

Apart from the fact that women have to cut through the noise of a male-dominated industry, one wonders if investors are simply less willing to back female chefs as restaurant owners. "I don't think it's hard from an investment standpoint. I think it's hard to find great women in the forefront," counters Feldman. "It's horrible to ask the question, but who are the top five women in the industry right now?"

Conant: "April [Bloomfield]."

Flay: "Michelle Bernstein."

Zakarian: "Nancy Silverton."

Flay: "For sure, best hands in the business."

Conant: "That's not even a female thing. Nancy's just a great chef." Flay: "It's the physical respect she has for ingredients. She puts

them on a plate unlike anybody else."

Conant: "Suzanne Goin is spectacular. A.O.C. is wonderful."
Zakarian: "So that's four...."

continue









nce the proud home of the all-you-can-carry buffet, the town's mega-hotels are now littered with shiny, subterranean outposts of big-name establishments. "Alain Ducasse is here, Jean-Georges, Joël Robuchon are, too, and that's just the French chefs," says Scott Conant. "Once people came here specifically to gamble; now it's a food destination.

"Every ten years or so someone comes along and takes it to the next level. Wolfgang Puck started it 20 years ago, then the Bellagio upped the game, and now it's the Cosmopolitan," says Marcus Samuelsson. "Vegas is an exciting place to eat right now."

Herewith, the chefs nominate their favorite plates in town-"at the risk of giving Scott a big head," says Feldman, obviously not opposed to a bit of cronyism.

EAT

SCOTT CONANT

The omakase at Kabuto Edo mae Sushi, off The Strip. At 5040 W. Spring Mountain Rd.; 702-676-1044; kabutolv.com.

SCOTT FELDMAN

Pizza with fondutα, egg and truffles at **D.O.C.G.** At 3708 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 702-698-7920; scottconant.com.

BOBBY FLAY

A whole fish roasted in salt at Milos. At 3708 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 702-698-7930; milos.ca.

MARCUS SAMUELSSON

Spaghetti with tomato and basil at **Scarpetta.** At 3708 Lαs Vegas Blvd. S.; 702-698-7960; scottconant.com.

GEOFFREY ZAKARIAN

The fritto misto at Bartolotta Ristorante di Mare. At 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 877-321-9966; wynnlasvegas.com.

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VEGAS Rooms start at \$195: 3708 Las Vegas Blvd, S.: 855-435-0005: cosmopolitanlasvegas.com.

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ENCORE Rooms start at \$200: 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 888-320-7123; wynnlasvegas.com.

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Las Vegas and Encore, 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 888-320-7110; wynnlasvegas.com

MARQUEE The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas, 3708 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; marqueelasvegas.com.

THE SPA AT MANDARIN

ORIENTAL Treatments start at \$180 for a 60-minute massage; 3752 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 888-881-9530; mandarinoriental.com

WYNN GOLF CLUB Greens fees start at \$375; Wynn Las Vegas and Encore, 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 702-770-4653;

wynnlasvegas.com.

of yourself, I'm guilty," he admits proudly. "The guy is 570 years old," says Conant. "He cooked

for the original Last Supper."

EARLY THAT EVENING, THE MEN WALK THROUGH THE FLORID carousel-colored gaming floor of the Wynn Las Vegas, the namesake mega-resort of Steve Wynn, the billionaire developer who revived The Strip's spree of luxury gaming temples when he opened the Mirage in 1989. The suited pack moves quickly across the polished marble on its way to meet some dancers from La Rêve-The Dream, the resort's long-running show that the men will be attending later that night. A Cirque du Soleil-style aquatic circus on steroids, it's named after the Picasso painting Wynn famously punctured with his elbow.

Inside a circular theater, the chefs wait on a dais stage for their showgirl dates. They look like wellbehaved schoolboys as five dancers in red cutout spandex dresses and heels slowly descend the staircase in single file. Introductions are made, the women tell them what fans they are, the chefs respond graciously. Music begins to play, so they partner into couples and start to dance, the men hoping to learn a few pointers.

"What are you doing?" Feldman's partner asks him.
"I'm making a frame," he says, preparing to lead her.

"No, you're hugging me."

obody starts the day looking fresher than Marcus Samuelsson. Having arrived for an early-morning tee time, he sits with The Wall Street Journal at a coffee table in the Country Club, the clubhouse attached to the pristine \$100 million golf course at the Wynn. It's 8:30 A.M., and he is wearing a white sweater, rainbow-checked madras pants, green socks and a white straw fedora turned up at the brim.

"That's so funny, I was going to wear that today," says Flay in a gritty tone as he sits down. The rest of the party is seated in surrounding armchairs, tight-lipped, awaiting coffees, their bodies feeling the aftermath of the night before.

"I love a newspaper. I have no idea what I'm going to get into, but I'm discovering new stories," remarks Samuelsson. "When you read the paper on a phone, you select the stories you think you're interested in. When we stop discovering, that's going to hurt us as chefs."

"Hmmm, yeah," says Zakarian, looking up from The New York Times, but it's too early for him to wade into that stream.

It's a glorious blue-sky day, and as the men, already puffing on cigars, climb into carts to drive to the first hole, they appear to be reviving. On the course, Zakarian, a fiercely competitive golf obsessive, hunches over his club to give first-timer Samuelsson a few tips. Samuelsson takes practice swings and starts to show surprising promise. "I get this game, man!" he says excitedly, tapping his temple. "It's all mental."

Admiring Samuelsson's newbie prowess, Flay, a keen runner, comments, "I tell you, man, I ran a 5K with him in Aspen. Altitude got all of us, but he can fucking run."

"You raced him? The guy's from Ethiopia!" says Conant.

Back at the clubhouse, Flay collects his earnings. "What, do you carry around a cash bag?" asks Feldman, watching him fold the money into his pocket. CONTINUED ON PAGE 155 »



WHERE TO BUY

Seated outside, Zakarian is pouring wine as lunch arrives: shrimp and grits, pheasant and black-truffle potpie... As they begin to eat, Feldman tells the story of a young chef opening his first restaurant and his preoccupation with celebrity.

That's fucking dumb," says Conant, shaking his head. "Fame is an elusive luxury. People make stupid decisions based on popularity."

Flay: "That's because they became popular based on popularity. There's a difference. Everybody at this table put their chef coat on and peeled potatoes. We understand what it takes to make it work with and without fame."

Conant: "I say to chefs on Chopped all the time, the best quality is humility. If you're humble, you're likable. Otherwise, get the fuck out of here!"

Flay: "And there is the humility."

Conant: "Look at Bobby. His first book came out in 1994. It's rare that you find a guy who has been successful at such a young age and for so long. These young guys on Top Chef, any of these shows, have had this little taste of what they think is success...."

Flay: "I've seen it posted outside a restaurant: 'Third Place, Top Chef San Antonio.' They spend the rest of their career trying to find that place they lived in instead of trying to stay relevant in a different way."

Samuelsson: "Love for the craft, man. We are still talking about the same chefs in Europe even after 30 years. It should be that way, but now people want to go straight to the penthouse. You gotta use your craft, get savvy. Make some bad business deals, take some punches."

Flay: "You can't substitute experience and time-you can't speed it up. You can become successful as a personality, but your repertoire will run out very quickly."

Samuelsson: "And that comment about celebrity chefs never in the kitchen, it doesn't make sense. I am in the kitchen every day, but you don't define an artist by how much he paints. You judge him by his skill level and what he's punching out."

Flay: "You have to have your face in the food. These days people think a tattoo and a bottle of Sriracha equals success."

All: "Whoh-oh!"

Samuelsson: "I think all this will go away. Why do you have to be loud about farm-to-table? You're not loud about 'We have electricity.' It's natural.'

Zakarian: "It's all bullshit. I was doing farm-to-table in 1981 at Le Cirque."

Flay: "It's common-sense cooking. It means nothing to me. The food people are doing today in some high-end, more modern restaurants is missing one thing: craveability. With molecular gastronomy you don't have that."

Conant: "The best compliment you can give a chef is that you remember a dish they cooked."

Zakarian: "Like Jonathan Waxman's chicken, it's ethereal. It's food that tastes like itself. It's so hard to do that."

Another Food Network fan walks over to introduce himself. Ron Perelman, the billionaire financier, is in the clubhouse to have lunch with Wynn. "I'm a big fan. Food Network is my favorite channel. I hate the network stuff," Perelman says, then turns and wanders away.

Zakarian continues, "Everybody here is insecure. I'm insecure, so I want to take care of people, make them happy. That's what I love about this business. We're all innkeepers at the end of the fucking day."

The plethora of dude chefs and cooking bros on the current food scene can make these alpha-male unions hard to swallow, or just seemingly ego-fueled. With this group, the mix of ribbing, respect and affection is evident, and alongside the empire building and the book tours and the TV appearances, they also value the rare opportunities they have to convene. Aside from sharing the same pressures—they walk the tightrope between becoming a mega-successful chef and maintaining their credibility as a skilled cook-they are bonded by an unadulterated passion for food. They are at their best and most entertaining around a table, over a meal.

Zakarian stands to make a toast and everyone pipes down. "I don't know what happened in the last three days, but it's been amazing. It's a tribute to everybody here. I love you guys, and I feel honored to know you," he says, hand on chest.

"I'd like to add something to that," says Conant, raising a glass. "Thank you, Geoffrey Zakarian, for the friendship... and the eye-cream regimen." +

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