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## Best Foodie Gift Ever: Aspen Food And Wine Classic 2014

Rimmed by one of America's most magnificent mountain chains, Aspen, Colorado plays host every year to Food & Wine Magazine's Classic. Bravo TV's Top Chef lovers know it as a part of the prize package to the winner: a showcase at the Aspen Food & Wine Classic. I visited this past summer as a media guest to see what all the fuss was about. Sure, it's about food and wine, but you can't swing a stick in a big city without hitting some kind of food and wine festival. What makes Aspen special?

This: Sitting on the St. Regis hotel patio with a glass of Veuve Cliquot watching Iron Chef winner Geoffrey Zakarian interview a stellar cast

of chefs for his Sirius XM radio show, Food Talk. Across from me, Eric Ripert of Le Bernadin waits to be interviewed. He leans back in his seat, clad in jeans (jeans! he's normal) and Adidas, occasionally checking his phone, enjoying the western sunshine. Up front, Zakarian is interviewing José Andres, a James Beard Outstanding Chef and one of Time magazine's most influential people in the world. Mad Men cocktails are whisked around by servers, a cool breeze lifts the air and quiet chatter fills the background. A slight catch in Andres' voice makes us all suddenly still. Zakarian just asked him what he loved about America. "What I love about

America," Andres sighs, "I always felt a freedom in America, a freedom you don't see anywhere else." Now, the air is positively pregnant with attention.

"In my country (Spain) do you think I could make waffles with blueberry ketchup? People would call me crazy. But in America chefs have freedom to do things that in the old world they'd call crazy. In America, that freedom has been used toward good. That is what I love about America."

A moment of quiet and then a burst of applause....guests, chefs, press, we are all moved by his words and

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as I glance around me I see proof positive of Andrés' sentiments. This is what the Aspen Food & Wine Classic is: A big ol' celebration of culinary freedom in an intimate setting.

Zakarain's interview also teases out some interesting thoughts from Dana Cowin, editor in chief of Food & Wine, on food in America. She cites the emergence of celebrity chef culture and food as a centerpiece to life, not just solely for entertaining. Times have changed she notes, "It used to be chefs were cooking great food only for people who could afford it, now we have chefs elevating everything from the taco to the burger. Food has been democratized."

This touches on another element of the Classic (and why any serious foodie should have it on their bucket list): Access. Very few festivals offer consumers the kind of intimate ambiance that Aspen delivers. In big cities, people spread out. Here you might run into Thomas Keller on your way to Starbucks or maybe you'll catch Richard Blais on a morning run. This is the nature of this particular festival, you can't hide. In fact, I found the street corner in Aspen to be the most likely place to spot your fave foodie celebrity.

On my first day I bumped into right into Carla Hall from Top Chef All-Stars. She was the Fan Favorite and it's immediately clear why. She's warm and authentic, immediately confessing to me that she's in awe being here. I take her picture for her. During my interview with this year's Top Chef Winner, Kristen Kisch, she also acknowledged the surreal aspect of the event. "You see these people on TV and then, here they are, hanging out. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine myself here. I have to remind myself to not stay on the sidelines and to be in the action. It's such an epic, classic event."

One of my favorite encounters was with Jacques Pepin, discussing the story of life and food in his utterly engaging memoir, *The Apprentice*. During our chat he tells me that he and his father had more or less similar childhoods. "But today," he muses, "how very different it is for my daughter and me."

We talk about what people used to do before Facebook, YouTube and cellphones (talk)....and he recalls seeing a family at dinner, looking at their phones and how sad it made him that they weren't talking. Then he recalls the kitchen he grew up in and having the first wire, or phone, in his French village. He and his brothers would run the messages to the families—typically two or three miles away. "But," he smiles, "we'd get a cookie or a biscuit in exchange."

I ask you, where else can you have a meaningful conversation about the passage of time with one of the culinary world's most iconic individuals? I believe Pepin has it spot on: gathering over food and wine in the spirit of great conversation is what we have always done, long before the iPhone, Top Chef or food magazines. Life moves fast, we can all be thankful that the Food & Wine Classic offers an opportunity for everyone to slow down, celebrate the meal and talk.