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ADWEEK

HOW THE FOOD & WINE CLASSIC BECAME AMERICA'S HOTTEST FESTIVAL Dining and drinking with celebrities at 8,000 feet By Robert Klara

With 11 restaurants in three countries, a trio of cookbooks and multiple TV appearances, Marcus Samuelsson—the celebrity chef whose grandmother started him cooking at the age of 6—has lots of memorable experiences in the kitchen. But among his favorite is the night he cooked leftovers.

It was three years ago, on a Sunday night after a long day Samuelsson had already spent cooking, and in his company were several other bright stars in the culinary constellation: Food Network host and Eataly impresario Mario Batali, urban-western cuisine progenitor Tim Love and Spain-born José Andrés, the chef credited with popularizing small plates in America—four famous chefs on a Sunday night with no place to go.

“We brought the food to the house, and wow, it was like a culinary jam session,” Samuelsson recalls. “We did it just for us”—no customers, no judges, no TV audience. And as Samuelsson watched his colleagues improvise that night’s meal, he had a thought: “Only in Aspen would this happen.”

Meaning, only at the Food & Wine Classic, held every spring in Aspen, Colo.

At a time when food lovers have their pick of gastronomical events (by one count, there are 7,000 in the U.S. alone), the Food & Wine Classic in Aspen is widely considered to be tops, dubbed the “crème de la crème of culinary festivals” (Forbes), the “food Olympics” (Denver magazine)

and the “granddaddy of them all” (The New York Times).

This will mark the 33rd year that foodies will flock to the thin air of the Colorado Rockies for a woozy weekend of eating, drinking, learning and rubbing elbows amid a warren of white tents, pitched and victualled by Food & Wine magazine, which charges 5,000 attendees \$1,400 a pop for an event that sells out three months in advance.

On the weekend of June 19, the magazine will host more than 80 events, including cooking demonstrations, seminars, panel discussions and tastings featuring 50 noted sommeliers and more than 70 star chefs. Over the years, if you wanted to see Tom Colicchio braise a lamb shoulder, Daniel Boulud hold forth on charcuterie, Richard Blais reveal his secret ingredients or Danny Meyer talk about wine pairings, this is the place.

The Classic didn’t come to enjoy its status by accident. For all involved, it represents a rare opportunity, even with the vast array of food happenings stretching coast to coast—from the Maine Lobster Festival to the San Diego Bay Wine & Food Festival. (Not to mention A-list food events around the globe, like England’s Ludlow Food Festival and France’s Fête de la Gastronomie.) For those serious about eats and drinks, it’s a chance to meet and talk to stars usually seen on TV shows and cookbook covers. For chefs and restaurateurs, Aspen has become a sort of class reunion, possibly the only time all year they get to socialize with their peers.

And for Food & Wine itself, the Classic has become not just its signature event but also the cornerstone of its editorial and financial architecture.

“When it comes to food festivals, you see all ranges,” says Patrón Spirits’ vp, event marketing Pam Dzierzanowski, who has attended the Classic for the last 15 years. “But Aspen is so well put together. The look and feel is so upscale, so elegant and yet so fun. Everybody tries to copy them but hasn’t had the success.”

Part of the reason for that is, unlike the food fair down the block, everybody who’s anybody shows up in Aspen. The chefs there are a who’s who of the food world, including, aside from those already mentioned, David Chang, Jacques Pépin, Éric Ripert, Gail Simmons, Michael Symon, Christina Tosi, Jonathan Waxman and Andrew Zimmern.

The Classic continues to draw such names because it was the first to draw them.

In 1983, Aspen restaurateurs Gary Plumley and Bob and Ruth Kevan launched what was then known as the Aspen/Snowmass International Wine Classic. Three hundred people showed up—not bad, but hardly a smash. At the time, the food culture had only just begun to sprout. Emeril Lagasse had recently taken over the range at Commander’s Palace in New Orleans, while an upstart named Wolfgang Puck was putting caviar on pizza at Spago in Los Angeles. The closest America had to a culinary star was Julia Child.

In 1986, the year Food & Wine signed on as the event's title sponsor, "many of the people on the stage were cookbook authors because that's who the celebrities were," recalls the magazine's editor in chief Dana Cowin. "We embraced the people who were leading the world of food."

But slowly, the food space and the people who dominate it were changing. Puck and Lagasse started showing up in Aspen, along with chefs like Bradley Ogden and wine experts such as Kevin Zraly. They came because there was buzz around the place—and it's not like there were too many other food events on this scale at the time.

"There wasn't a lot of competition the way there is now, and the fact that Julia Child, Wolfgang Puck and Emeril Lagasse were there—and it was in Aspen—those things combined made it pretty dreamy," says Food & Wine publisher Christina Grdovic.

(One would imagine a glass or two of Chardonnay, enjoyed while breathing in the thin air of a town 8,000 feet above sea level, would also make things pretty dreamy.)

By the time Food Network launched in 1993, establishing the template for today's food celebrity, the Food & Wine Classic had established itself as the standard, drawing 5,000 attendees per year.

It was the same year that Cowin took over as the magazine's editor, and she can still remember nervously leading a panel discussion in Aspen where she asked Julia Child to talk about food trends she saw on the horizon.

"That is a media question," Child warbled, "and I'm not going to answer that."

Fortunately for Cowin, it was an isolated incident. Chefs have, of course, become more media friendly and more likely to cheerfully answer such questions—and that willingness to share what they're thinking, eating and cooking isn't just a big draw for the general public who shell out the (considerable) dough to attend the event, but also for the other chefs.

"I remember the first time I went," Samuelsson recalls. "I was on a panel with Mario Batali and I found myself taking notes. I'd say, 'Mario, could you slow down?' As a chef, I learned a lot of things there. I'm a food nerd who goes to all the seminars."

The blending of professionals and food fans makes Aspen what Grdovic calls "a summer camp for foodies." (It's certainly difficult to imagine that kind of informality happening in New York.) Samuelsson credits Aspen's remoteness and small size for creating an atmosphere of easy intimacy.

"It's not like you're in a big city," he says. "You're forced together in a great way. With the smallness of it, you get the chance to spend real time."

Adds Cowin: "The place is actually a character in the event."

The venue, as it happens, has a lot to do with the Classic's success. Nestled around six 14,000-foot peaks, the town of Aspen is remote and difficult to reach. ABC News has dubbed its airport one of the scariest in the nation owing to the steep descent—about 2,400 feet in one minute—required for landing there. The sheer difficulty of just reaching the place (in addition to the expense) ensures that only the most committed will attend.

"There are no day-trippers. They're superfans," Food & Wine's publisher says of those who journey to Aspen. "And they're the people who can afford to be there." Namely, they are the kind of people who are not troubled that a first-class ticket from Denver runs around \$1,500 or that a suite at Aspen's St. Regis hotel goes for \$2,000 a night.

The average household income of Classic attendees is upwards of \$700,000. (It's little wonder that this year, wine expert Mark Oldman will lead a seminar titled "Wine for IPO Billionaires.")

For the sponsors of the Classic, it all means exposure before a highly desirable demographic. "This is my top event. It's a high-end, superpremium consumer that we're looking for," says Patrón's Dzierzanowski.

For her, the Classic isn't just a way to entertain vendors and network with chefs who she hopes will use her brand, but also a good shot at some free publicity. When Patrón flew in tequila popsicles a few years back, the Today show did a segment on it.

A circus-sized tent called the Grand Tasting Pavilion is where some 300 vendors get to show off their wares, mostly the sort you can eat or drink. But Grdovic points out that attendees who can afford to jet into

Aspen to nibble on daikon-wrapped crab rolls spend money on other stuff, too.

Like vacations. Oceania Cruises, which operates five luxury vessels to destinations such as Alaska and the South Pacific, signed on as a sponsor this year.

"It's a natural fit for us to tap into that audience," says Oceania's marketing chief James Rodriguez. "If you look at different food events across the U.S., this one has a higher-end demo." (It's also no coincidence that Oceania's executive chef is Pêpin, who turns 80 this year and will be fêted in Aspen.)

The Classic has become increasingly important to the Food & Wine brand as well. Editorially, "we scout for both wine and food ideas, and also destinations, because we have travel brands," Cowin explains, referring to Time Inc. sister titles Travel + Leisure and Departures.

And while the event produces its own revenue stream, "the truth is, the primary thing is actually ad sales," Grdovic notes. "For us, it's still very much about the advertising." Case in point: Food & Wine's issue devoted to the event will carry ads from some 80 brands, the publisher says.

The Classic plays multiple roles for the magazine, from giving it a place to entertain clients to generating a good deal of earned media attention. (Sooner or later, nearly every publication does a celebrity-spotting or food-trend story coming out of the Classic.)

In fact, Aspen has become so popular that it has given way to not only an offshoot event, the South Beach Wine & Food Festival, but also the restaurant concept Chefs Club by Food & Wine, a partnership with the St. Regis hotel brand with locations in New York and Aspen.

It all leads one to wonder: Considering how huge the event has become, should it eye relocating to a bigger venue in an easier-to-reach port of call? Say, Las Vegas or New York?

"A long time ago, we did talk about moving it," Grdovic reveals. But the intimacy of Aspen, the fancy folks catching a buzz off a nice Verdejo amid the mountains, even the scary airplane ride in—all remain part of the draw. Plus, the publisher cracks, "The thin air is great for drinking."