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José Andrés Wants to Feed the World (And You)

By **MATT GOULDING**



Photograph by Anna Wolf; Prop Styling: Martha Bernabe

CHEF'S TABLE | José Andrés (far left) combines business and pleasure, hosting friends and colleagues at his new eatery, America Eats Tavern in Washington, D.C.

José Andrés's life is like one of those off-color jokes. A Southern butcher, a Yankee reporter, a ham baron from central Spain and a cosmetics kingpin from Barcelona walk into the house of a Spanish chef living in the suburbs of D.C. The cast of characters building to the punch line is in constant flux,

but as it happens, this is the group gathered around a kitchen table on a quiet street in Bethesda, Maryland, one night this past spring. And at the center is Andrés, 42 years old, looking 10 years older, acting 20 years younger.

For four hours, he never once stops moving. He pops champagne bottles, quarters live lobsters and grills his way through half a dozen cuts of fresh acorn-fed Iberico pork, the prized pig that Andrés has been instrumental in helping import to the States. The feast is as luxurious as it is informal: hunks of lightly smoked bacon topped with Greek yogurt and caviar; slices of rosy, densely marbled loin veiled with sheets of pickled ginger; rice glistening with lobster essence and crowned with a single pearl-white knuckle of meat. As another idea comes to

mind, Andrés barks out instructions to his wife, Patricia, then rewards her later with a kiss or a special bite of food.

The guests all consider themselves friends of Andrés, but despite the increasingly raucous nature of the gathering, everyone is here for business of some sort. Over the course of the night, in fact, each one admits to me privately, with a mixture of disappointment and amusement, that they thought they would be spending the evening alone with him, discussing their mutual interests. "Not the first time this has happened and it won't be the last," says one guest. In Andrés's world, if the dozens of projects he has constantly simmering aren't marinated in conviviality, then he wants no part of it.

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In these modern times, the word "chef" has taken on a lot of meanings. There are chefs like New York's Jean-Georges Vongerichten, feudal lords who preside over restaurant empires with a galaxy of stars tucked under their toques; guys like Bobby Flay, who spend more time cooking on television than they do in their eponymous restaurants; and others, like Alice Waters, who invest their time and fame on tackling the major food issues of the day. José Andrés is all of these things at once, a man with 13 restaurants, a packed trophy case (including the 2011 James Beard Award for Outstanding Chef in America, the highest honor in the U.S. restaurant industry), a company with 800 employees and an annual revenue of \$75 million, TV shows in the U.S., Spain and Latin America, political connections throughout Washington, a teaching gig at Harvard and a long resume of social activism.

"José has always been smart enough to know that it is not enough to just be a 'chef' in the traditional sense," says Rob Wilder, his business partner and CEO of ThinkFoodGroup, their umbrella company. "He steps back and looks at the whole business, the people, the guests, the flow."

Hang around with Andrés long enough and you'll be convinced that chefs are the new superheroes, able to dazzle diners, jump-start economies and broker world peace with a wave of the tongs. When describing Andrés, friends, family and colleagues invariably grasp for an analogy. I've heard him compared to a force of nature, the Energizer Bunny, the Tasmanian devil, Luke Skywalker, King Louis XIV, Ferran Adrià and a hurricane of love.

Do you see that? that's what's wrong with America." We are walking along E Street in D.C. when Andrés spots a group of homeless people sprawled across a narrow plaza of grass and cement. The ivory rotunda of the Capitol Building pokes just above the plaza. I start to walk again, but Andrés hasn't budged. "It's blowing my mind!"

It is here that Andrés, over nearly 20 years, has grown from a talented cook to one of the food industry's most impassioned activists. Yes, he works his political contacts—he wouldn't be an adopted Washingtonian if he didn't. Yes, he has connections in the White House (the first lady frequents his restaurants), where he has cooked a few meals since Barack Obama took office. Andrés may be accustomed to the ways of the Beltway, but that doesn't make him an insider. The critical difference between him and most everyone else in the nation's capital is that he's willing to do the work himself.

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 "because he understands how to perfectly combine
 creativity and passion with economic pragmatism.

Nowhere has he been more active than at DC Central Kitchen, an astonishingly well-run organization responsible for feeding the area's large homeless population as well as eight local schools. When Andrés is there, he's electric. He'll stop an intern struggling through a pile of carrots to show him how to hold his knife, he'll stick a spoon in a braise and give the cook a thumbs-up, he'll offer advice and jokes, whatever the situation demands.

"We were looking to launch a food-cart business, and José stopped by unannounced," says Robert Egger, founder and president of the organization. "Next thing you know, José is dragging us to the stove so he could demonstrate his 'deconstructed hot dog' served in the form of a pancake. None of us quite bought the idea, but we all marveled at his passion and his desire to help us break out of the pack." The DC Central Kitchen isn't big enough for Andrés, so he's set up his own nonprofit, the World Central Kitchen, with the goal of replicating the DC Central Kitchen model—one that doesn't just turn donations into meals, but uses the food they cook to create revenue that helps keep the business running—on the largest scale possible. First up, Haiti, where Andrés visited in the days following 2010's earthquake. He and his team have been working to set up solar kitchens with special pressure cookers and reflective panels that allow cooks to boil water with nothing but a bit of sun.

"Obviously my dream isn't just to feed X number of children from Haiti," Andrés says. "I want to establish a model that we can export anywhere."

Chefs have a long history of involvement in fighting hunger at the local level, but this isn't just a guy who grabs a soup ladle when cameras start clicking. "If you sit around drinking gin and tonics with him at two in the morning, he's genuinely agonizing about how he can change the dining habits of the American citizenry," says Anthony Bourdain, host of "No Reservations" and a close friend of Andrés. "He's everything Alice Waters wants to be, but with a Spanish accent."

Andrés is fond of saying that he uses his restaurants to tell stories. But the restaurants tell his story as well. Jaleo is the story of the son of two nurses eating simple, traditional food in his home region of Asturias in northern Spain, then later in and around Barcelona, where his parents moved when he was 5. Its catalog of Iberian classics speaks of a 23-year-old cocksure chef recently arrived in Washington ready to introduce the U.S. to a new way of eating—the beginning of a wave of tapas joints that would thrust Spanish food into the national consciousness. Later, he created Oyamel (Mexican), Zaytinya (Greek, Turkish, Lebanese) and, in the Cosmopolitan hotel in Las Vegas, China Poblano (Mexican-Chinese, of all things). These are postcards from a chef with ambitions not to be contained by borders. ("I've been an immigrant my whole life," he says.) His most recent venture, a collaboration with the National Archives called America Eats Tavern, is a place where historic dishes like Kentucky burgoo and mock turtle soup serve as a love letter to his adopted country. Finally, the Bazaar in Los Angeles and even more so Minibar, the six-seat postmodern countertop in D.C., is where Andrés shows the world that he can cook with the greats. Crispy beet "tumbleweeds," wobbly spheres of carrot puree adrift in a sea of coconut and ginger, clams encased in translucent purses of clam juice that burst with each bite. Mass and class like few chefs have ever been capable of pulling off.

It's an impressive roster, to be sure, but his restaurants are not always as personal as Andrés would like you to believe. Servers



Photograph by Anna Wolf; Greg Powers and Audrey Crewe
FINISHING TOUCH | Saffron gumdrops served at the Bazaar in Los Angeles.

make oblique references to him, menus cheerily remind you that these potatoes or this margarita is an Andrés favorite, and everywhere you turn the walls are covered in articles chronicling his years as a visionary Spanish chef set loose in America. But don't expect to see him next time you come to D.C. in the mood for spit-roasted goat or carrot foam.

"He has more ideas than anyone I know. I mean, who else would have dreamed up a Chinese-Mexican restaurant in Las Vegas?" says Rubén García, director of research and development and Andrés's right hand in all kitchen operations. "It's up to us to make those ideas into an everyday reality." Andrés, whose favorite word in the English language is "pragmatic," reasons it thusly: "I could be in Minibar every day, 18 hours a day, but then I couldn't be doing seven other restaurants, World Central Kitchen, speaking engagements, all of it. If I was behind this bar every day, it would need to cost \$5,000 a person to have me cooking exclusively for you. I can disappear tomorrow and this company will run."

Of all the kitchens under Andrés's thumb, Minibar is the one that matters most, not just because it represents the highest expression of avant-garde cuisine, but because it connects him literally and figuratively to the best kitchens of Spain, above

all, to El Bulli and Ferran Adrià. It was there, as a 19-year-old just out of the Navy, that Andrés worked under the young Catalan destined to become the most influential chef of the 21st century.

"As a chef, the best thing and the worst thing that ever happened to me was being a good friend of Ferran," says Andrés. "Because I'm not shy of saying how influential he's been on my career, so maybe people just see it like José is Adrià's protégé."

With El Bulli having shuttered its doors in July, Andrés believes Minibar is the closest remaining thing to the El Bulli experience. "First, because of my connection with Ferran. Second because I think I understand Ferran and Albert [Ferran's brother and partner] better than anyone. And third, because I have two of the best guys El Bulli ever created working for me. But at the same time, I am myself." For his part, Adrià says he sees plenty of his restaurant's influence in Andrés's projects. "Without a doubt José is the most bulliniano of all the cooks in the world," he says. But he's quick to point out that the relationship is symbiotic. "He's one of the cooks I admire most because he understands how to perfectly combine creativity and passion with economic pragmatism. That's where his greatness and his importance lie."

As at El Bulli, there are no menus at Minibar, just a 30-course window into the world of a boundless cuisine, complete with cocktails frozen into sorbets with liquid nitrogen, streams of olive oil turned into crunchy, gushing bonbons and hunks of creamy foie gras inside pink clouds of cotton candy. "If you don't think this is art, then you're a pretentious bastard," says Andrés.

During a meal there, Andrés is quick to offer up critiques to the team serving us. "More salt . . . the egg should be cooked just a touch longer . . . try heating the honey first because it's sticking to the bottom of the plate." At one point, he gets into a conversation with one of his chefs, discussing in detail a new technique they want to roll out soon. When he turns back to me, he flashes an impish smile. "We're talking about feeding the world and now we're arguing about feeding six people."

Spring has sprung across the tumbling hills of Catalonia. We're on our way to a cargolada, a traditional snail



Photographs by Anna Wolf

ON BREAK | A rare moment of repose for one of the world's busiest chefs, here at America Eats -- a tribute by the Spanish chef to the cuisine of his adopted home.

feast in a village 90 minutes north of Barcelona. Andrés is at the wheel, Anthony Bourdain is riding shotgun. His "No Reservations" crew, here to film a new Catalan episode centered around the closing of El Bulli, are in the back absorbing spirited barbs from Andrés. "B-roll was invented to give self-importance to the cameraman," he says, after one of the guys mistakenly tries to strike back. Lesson One: Andrés always has the last word.

We arrive at a house that Bourdain likens to the Sicilian villa in "Godfather II": "You know, the one where Vito Corleone gives Don Ciccio the knife to the gut." A long table is set in the grass; two charcoal grills are crowded with charred pig's feet; inside a

cook is pan-roasting his way through a mountain of fresh snails.

When the camera rolls, Andrés simply keeps talking. His TV personality differs from his real-life persona in no immediately discernible way—it's José Andrés, 24 hours a day.

Bourdain is accustomed to being the funniest man in a 50-mile radius, but he seems more than happy to cede the spotlight to Andrés as they blaze across the Catalan countryside. After all, this is the land of José. In Spain, José Andrés is a single word, a staccato tangle of inseparable syllables. Young girls ask for autographs. Young men ask for recipes for the young girls asking for autographs. Cooks and restaurateurs everywhere open their doors and unload their entire menus on him. "How can you not love being swept up in his tail stream?" asks Bourdain. "Nobody has more energy. Nobody."

As the show inches forward, it's hard to miss just how well Andrés has done with the spread; by the time the cameras stop rolling, his plate of snail shells and pig bones cast a shadow across the table. This is not unusual—his Falstaffian appetite for excess is legendary. I've witnessed him eat a pile of crabs, a tray of raw clams and oysters and three dozen sea urchin in a sitting.

"I've yet to see a bottom," says Bourdain.

It's part of the contradiction of José Andrés: a man fighting hunger who himself can consume enough for four; a cook without a high-school diploma who lectures on food at Harvard; a swollen-hearted crusader who works to stretch scraps into meals for D.C.'s homeless on one block, then serves 30-course feasts to VIPs on the next. His plans for the future grow faster than I can type. A hotel and restaurant in Puerto Rico. An impending expansion and redesign of Minibar. A food institute at George Washington University.

"Right now I'm at mile zero. Good, strong base, good team. It all starts from here," says Andrés.

If this is mile zero, it's hard to imagine what will happen when he actually gets somewhere.

"Maybe one day I'd like to be in politics. I'd love to be a mayor."

In Bourdain's mind, he's already there. "Anywhere he goes, whether he's ever been there or not, it doesn't matter: He's the mayor."

