

PLAYBOY

CHEF JONATHAN WAXMAN ON THE PAST AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN DINING

After nearly 40 years in the restaurant industry, chef and restaurateur Jonathan Waxman has seen it all: the rise of celebrity chefs, shortages of line cooks and ingredients, and real estate booms and busts. So when the cost of doing business in New York City skyrocketed recently, he did like he's always done and adapted. He quit opening restaurants there and moved to the West Coast.

Waxman grew up in Berkeley and got his start in California's famed [Chez Panisse](#) and [Michael's](#) restaurants in the 1970s. He then switched coasts and opened a series of rustic Italian restaurants in Manhattan including [Barbuto](#) and [Jams](#), which was recently rebooted in Midtown. He is also the chef-owner of [Adele's](#) and [Bajo Sexto Taco](#) in Nashville and [Brezza Cucina](#) in Atlanta. He is also currently starring in Bravo's reality cooking show [Recipe for Deception](#). Next month he will open Brezza Emporio and Pizzeria in San Francisco, his first restaurant in California in decades.

Playboy talked to Waxman about how the dining industry has changed over the years, what finally brought him back to the Bay Area, and why he can't bear to watch himself on TV.



You're opening Brezza Emporio and Pizzeria in San Francisco next month. What finally brought you back to the Bay Area?

Well, a lot of reasons. One is that in New York the rents are just getting insane. I love New York more than anything, but the rents are getting out of control. And it's becoming harder and harder to do business here unless you buy something or open something in Bushwick. And I understand. Property values have gone up dramatically in the last 10 years. That's just the way it is. I'm not bitching about it. I'm just saying it's the reality. And it's tough. It's really tough.

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What can restaurateurs do about rising costs?

You have to have a different strategy. It might involve raising your prices or having different economies of scale, but everything changes. It's like climate change. You can be ignorant of it and think it's not happening, or you look it straight in the eye and say OK, how are we going to fix this?

We have to look at other models in other cities around the world for answers to this. Look at successful situations outside of New York and do your analysis. For

instance in Sydney, Australia, the minimum wage is \$21 an hour. And all the restaurants are thriving. So how do they make it work? Look at how London runs its restaurants. That's what really needs to be done. I'm all for waiters doing well. Trust me, I want everybody to have more than a living wage, a wage that they're happy with, a wage that can give them a contented life.



These certainly aren't the only crises restaurateurs have had to weather in your career.

I got caught in the '87 stock market crash in New York. That's the reason Jams kind of went out of business. The Upper East Side turned into a ghost town. Back in the early '80s in California the mortgage rates were 20 percent. I opened a restaurant right after 9/11. I remember Jimmy Bradley opening up The Harrison like three weeks after 9/11. What a crazy thing to do. But you make it work.

What other ways have you seen the industry change over the years?

When I was in cooking school, it was French and nothing else. We were so closed up as a culture. It's evolving like crazy. Students are hungry for everything. They want to know how to make fermented fish sauce. They want to know how to use a wok. There's a great eclecticism that's happening, sort of like pan-cuisine.



To me there are two great cooking philosophies: European and Asian. The Chinese have been cooking better than

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everybody else forever. They just have. India too. When I grew up in San Francisco, my parents used to take me to Chinese restaurants, Japanese restaurants, Mexican, Italian, French, everything. I remember I had a dish once in a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco and it was chicken that was marinated and wrapped in parchment paper and then deep fried inside the parchment paper. It was the best thing I've ever eaten in my whole life. I can taste it right now. I started using a wok when I was really young because I wanted to learn how to cook like that. I was fascinated. I watched every Chinese cooking show I could. Danny Kaye used to teach me how to do Chinese cooking. It was great. I'm not as confident of it in a commercial setting, but I love cooking Chinese food at home.

Also you don't have to go to New York to find great restaurants anymore. You can go anywhere. I was in Savannah last month and I went to this restaurant called The Grey. The chef was from New York, she worked at Prune, and her food was just magnificent. Some of these young people coming up are just remarkable. Like Michael Voltaggio. Fucking remarkable. Amazing, creative and exciting food. Or David Kinch or Justin Smillie. Justin worked for me and learned his techniques from me, but now he's practicing them for himself and discovering new ways to do old tricks. I love watching what they do. There's a lot of great people out there. There are people too who are undiscovered that need recognition.



How can they get that recognition?

Go to the food and wine festivals around the country. You get exposure on a national level. Write cookbooks. Obviously go on cooking shows. Who knew that when Bobby Flay started going on TV that this thing would continue for such a long time.

Do you think food TV still has the same impact as it did when Bobby Flay started?

I think it has much more impact. The audience has grown so much. And they're demanding more sophisticated things. They're hungry for new stuff and for better stuff. Look at grocery stores. The variety of things that are available is amazing. Back in the day, every grocery store in America looked the same unless you went to Italian markets or went to Chinatown. You couldn't find a piece of fresh fish if you stuck your foot in the water. It was terrible. Things were so boring back when I first started cooking. Now you walk into a Whole Foods and it's like oh my god, where do I start?

People travel so much these days, too. People always call me and say, I'm going to London next week, give me your 10 best restaurants in London. Or I'm going to Auckland. Where do I eat in Auckland? Everybody thinks that I'm an expert. It's funny, but it's kind of true. When I go to cities I do my homework and I call my friends who have been there or who live there, and I say, where do I eat? And there's always something new going on or something old that is worth checking out. In the old days it was like, what museums do I go to? Now it's, what restaurant do I go to? I love that.

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How are you liking *Recipe for Deception* so far?

Well, I hate looking at myself. I look old and fat. But I really am happy I did the show. It was a delight. I worked with a lot of the same folks before on *Top Chef Masters*—the same grips, same makeup people. Everybody knew each other so it was like a big family. My co-judge Chris Oh and I bonded from day one and we love Max [Silvestri]. And all the contestants were hysterical. There's a great energy with that show, and it's not always that way, I have to tell you. With a reality show, it's all about how people are treated. The *Top Chef Masters* I was on was amazing. You watched that show and you felt it. This show has the same energy. Even though I can't watch myself, I'm still proud of it.

On *Recipe for Deception*, the chefs are basically playing Two Truths and a Lie with each other. Is being able to lie an important chef skill?

Let's face it: yes, ma'am. I lied at my first job interview. I'll tell you a funny story. When I went to Chez Panisse in 1977, I had been cooking professionally for about a year. So I walk in the kitchen and the first thing Jean-Pierre [Moullé] says to me is, go make me artichokes *à la grecque*. Oh sure, I know exactly how to do that... I had to run upstairs and grab a cookbook! Everybody lies on their resumé about how much they know. In a way, having the chefs not know their secret ingredient and they have to guess it with the 'Two Truths and a Lie' thing is just like reality. You're sitting in a kitchen and all of a sudden something comes to you. I want to make a passion fruit meringue pie. It sounds good, doesn't it? But it's not normal. There aren't recipes out there for it. So you have to figure it out. You have to make it up. Being a chef, number one, you have to be able to improvise and think quickly on your feet. And you need to be able to lie a little bit. You need to be a good poker player. And that's what the show's about.

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