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FOOD DRINK DISH!

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VA VA VOOM! Vongerichten is in for a celebration of his years of culinary victories.

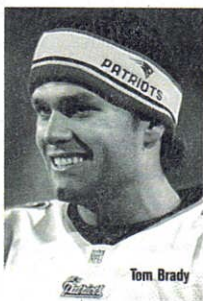
MAÎTRE'V!

Jean-Georges dishes on getting fêted at the South Beach Wine and Food Festival

Jean-Georges Vongerichten's culinary skills have triumphed over the complexity of his name and the general public's poor semantic memory. The Alsace, France-born chef is among the most famous in the world, serving as executive chef and owner of 15 of the world's top restaurants, including Jean-Georges, JoJo, Vong (*Robb Report's* 1998 "Best Restaurant in the World") and Mercer Kitchen, which together hold a record 12 stars from the *New York Times*. Vongerichten is the winner of three James Beard Restaurant Awards, but in an exclusive interview with *MIAMI*, the star chef reveals he is uncomfortable with acclaim. But Vongerichten will no doubt acclimate to accolades quickly, as a Southern Wine and Spirits tribute dinner in his honor is planned during the South Beach Wine and Food Festival, February 23 at the Loews Miami Beach Hotel. Unless he skips the event and goes in search of stone crabs, that is. —Margit Bisztray

How does it feel to be honored by eight of your most highly regarded peers? I'm not that comfortable with it! Maybe if I go wearing a chef's jacket I'll feel more relaxed. It's an honor, and I'm not sure I deserve it. In this business it's difficult receiving praise. You're only as good as your last meal. *Being honored must prompt reflection. What has surprised you the most about your career and success?* I've been cooking for 35 years, and I don't know where the time went! It's a reality check of my age more than anything else. I'm not sure I'm up for another 35 years. It's like being on stage every night, so it's difficult to stop. Some people have two or three jobs in a lifetime, but for me there's only been one track. *Are you looking forward to the South Beach Wine and Food Festival?* Absolutely. It's fun to see the other players. [In 2006], I cooked for Ferran Adria when he was honored and had a

great time seeing the other chefs—Daniel Boulud, Thomas Keller, Nobu. We chefs almost never see each other, so it was a chance to catch up and do some bonding. That was my first time in Miami. *What were some of the other highlights?* The many different events taking place on the beach. All the wines to try. They keep us very busy at these things, so I didn't have time to go out on a boat or a tour. But I did get to Joe's Stone Crab! Stone crab is my favorite crab in the world. And I tasted some good Cuban sandwiches. The Cuban influence in Miami is very interesting. *What about the food?* Do these festivals showcase what's to come? In 35 years I've seen a big evolution in food, but the fundamentals stay the same: use fresh ingredients. The difference today is that everything's available. Thirty-five years ago, you couldn't get lemongrass in France. Now you can get anything anytime, as long as you respect the season. Nobody should be eating strawberries in December. *How has the dining public changed during your career?* People are much more open to trying new things. Food magazines have done a lot, and people are traveling now. I started traveling in Asia in 1980, and it really changed [me]. Traveling for a chef is a must, to be more complete.



Tom Brady



Eva Mendes

CELEB SPOTTING

From world leaders to pop sensations, The Forge is on everyone's A-list, including that of former president of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev, who was seen dining in its private library room. Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony also chose The Forge to host a lavish dinner for their production crew. Politicians do love their steaks—Bill Clinton sampled Prime 112 the same night as football quarterback star Tom Brady was there with girlfriend Gisele Bündchen. Also seen at Prime 112 were *American Idol's* Simon Cowell, Randy Jackson and Ryan Seacrest. Down the street, DeVito was the site of crooner John Legend's much-discussed mystery date. Other *MIAMI* spottings around town include Eva Mendes at Casa Tua, Olivier Martinez at Segafredo, and Matt Damon grabbing take-out from Big Pink. Unlike Damon, Beyoncé didn't get out of her ride when she wanted a latte from the Starbucks on West Avenue, the chanteuse sent her bodyguard in for her. Where's a drive-through when you need one? **M**

BRADY AND MENDES PHOTOS BY GETTY IMAGES