

# THE FOOD & WINE ISSUE

# *pasadena*

## JONATHAN GOLD

Our hometown Pulitzer Prize-winning food writer tells us where to go

## MICHAEL VOLTAGGIO

Can Langham's *Top Chef* make the cut here in Pasadena?

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NOVEMBER 2009 \$6.95 US



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# The Contender

Can The Langham's *Top Chef*, Michael Voltaggio, make the cut here in Pasadena?

// STORY BY LINDA IMMEDIATO

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▶ **"ARE YOU SURE YOU'RE NOT EMINEM, MAN?"** ASKS DENIS DEPOITRE, EXECUTIVE CHEF OF THE LANGHAM HUNTINGTON, IN A FRENCH ACCENT AS THICK AS VICHYSOISE. DEPOITRE LAUGHS AT HIS JAB AT CHEF DE CUISINE MICHAEL VOLTAGGIO, WHO, WITH HIS SHORT-CROPPED, BLOND HAIR, PALE SKIN, TATTOOS, AND INTENSE DEMEANOR, DOES HAVE A TOUCH OF THE SLIM SHADY.

Foodies and regular *Top Chef* fans will recognize Michael Voltaggio from the sixth season of Bravo's much-watched series, where he and his brother Bryan largely dominate the competition with their skills. As of press time, the winner had not been announced, and with hundreds of thousands of dollars riding on it, lips were naturally hermetically sealed. In the series, Voltaggio came across as serious, focused, and intensely passionate about food. In person, he's exactly the same—maybe add a slight swagger and touch of bravado. But if there is an air of cockiness, he's arguably earned it. Voltaggio was overqualified for the show; to the other contestants he must have seemed like Kobe trying out for a high school basketball team. At one point a fellow

cheftestant (as they're called) compared Voltaggio to Picasso, saying he was happy to wash his metaphorical paintbrushes.

Voltaggio was the youngest person to apprentice at the then prestigious Greenbrier. He went on to work for some of the greatest chefs in the country. We're talking big names: Charlie Palmer, José Andrés (of El Bulli, about the best restaurant in the world), Larry Forgione (who *The New Yorker* calls the godfather of American cuisine), and Arnaud Berthelier (who came from Ducasse). Voltaggio has a Michelin star under his belt, along with a constellation of others in his pocket (three for Palmer's Dry Creek Kitchen, a practically unheard-of four stars from *L.A. Times* critic S. Irene Virbila at Andrés's Bazaar). And



*Baba au rhum* cake with compressed kiwi, pineapple jelly, coconut milk bowl and pineapple ice cream



**FOR THIS SHOT:** To make the frozen coconut bowl holding the scoop of pineapple ice cream (pictured), Voltaggio coated the back of a ladle in coconut milk, then plunged it into liquid nitrogen. It steamed and bubbled. He grabbed at the frozen milk, and it stuck to his finger. *Does it happen often?* "Every day," he pouts. *Does it hurt,* "It doesn't feel good," he says, finally prying the frozen milk from his fingertip.



"There are a lot of people out there who call themselves chefs but really they just play one on TV. And I don't want that to be my career. Would I do TV again? Yes, I would do something like a docu-series where it's about food and cooking and about my life and career as a chef, I wouldn't just do it just to do it, just to be on TV again. I never want to be that guy who's just on TV saying, 'I'm chef blah blah watch my show,' and that be my life and my career, I'll always have a kitchen I'll call home..."

**MICHAEL VOLTAGGIO**

earlier this year, he and his brother were nominated for James Beard Awards (the epicurean equivalent of an Oscar).

At thirty years old, he's got major cred with the foodies, so why is the Langham's Dining Room only doing twenty-four tables a night, when Voltaggio easily did 200 to 400 covers in an evening at Andrés's übersexy spot Bazaar in the sleek, modern, luxurious SLS Hotel in Los Angeles?

Voltaggio, sitting in an empty Dining Room in his chef whites during the predinner lull, shakes his head. "Denis called me after *Top Chef*. This job had been taken for eight years and it opened, so of course you have to look at it," he says, scanning the room, once presided over by the locally beloved chef Craig Strong. "My first impression was no. I don't want to go

back and work in an old hotel, in an old dining room."

He had his share of old hotels. He and Depoitre worked for the Ritz-Carlton for years. They were the guys the Ritz brought in when other chefs were screwing up, or to get a new spot up and running. Many locals refer to The Langham as "the old Ritz-Carlton," and some people not familiar with the new name have shied away from coming. They miss the Ritz, the name, the stamp. Voltaggio felt the opposite.

"I wouldn't have come back if it was a Ritz," he says. "And I think what people don't realize is that the Langham is what the Ritz was when the Ritz first got started. And the Ritz was the best when it was just five, six, seven hotels. The Ritz used to be a real food and beverage company, and they used to

grow these great chefs within the company and not farm out all their restaurants to the Eric Riperts and all the Van Akens. But the company sold out, original shareholders moved on, and any Ritz right now, for me, is mediocre."

Depoitre and The Langham's general manager, Martin Nicholson, changed Voltaggio's mind about working in an old dining room with the promise of a massive remodel, scheduled for January 2010, and the company's commitment to creating a new standard in luxury travel. "So I did it. I bought into the vision," says Voltaggio. "This restaurant was probably pretty avant garde for its time," he says, checking out the wooden sailboats in glass cases dotting the walls. "I mean, it's the fine-dining room of the Ritz-Carlton: it has to have some sort of

luxury feel to it. But I think luxury today is more about style, whereas before luxury had a certain look and certain feel, and to be luxurious meant you were in a suit, you were in a restaurant, there was classical music playing in the background, there was stuffy service. But today, what I call the next generation of luxury is more about style and it's more about feeling comfortable, and it's not so much about being pretentious but about being approachable and fun."

His food reflects that philosophy. If anything, Voltaggio's bad-boy exterior (tattoos, leather jacket, rides a motorcycle) hides a bona fide food geek with a mad scientist streak. There is no set menu at the Dining Room. Voltaggio is constantly at work, inventing and reinventing. He created an eggless fried egg for his tomato tartare



**MEAT N POTATOES:** a post modern pot roast cooked *sous vide* with braised carrots and cubes of deconstructed and reconstructed potatoes (La Ratte a waxy variety favored by master chef Joël Robuchon)

over easy. The “white” is made from Parmesan broth, carrageenan seaweed, and a touch of milk. Poke at it and it stretches and gives like cooked egg white. When you break it open, a yellow liquid about the consistency of a runny yolk oozes out; it’s a sauce made from yellow tomatoes. It’s a mind trip: your brain thinks egg, but it’s refreshing and tart like gazpacho. He took out the grill in the kitchen and cooks all his meats *sous vide* (French for “under vacuum,” it’s a slow and gentle way of cooking proteins). His favorite kitchen tool is a six-foot tank of liquid nitrogen. He uses it to flash-freeze liquids, like the palate-cleansing bits of frozen piquillo pepper that taste like Dippin’ Dots, served after the last main course. But what inspires him to deconstruct a Reuben? Or create an eggless fried egg?

Simply, it’s his desire to create the unexpected. “But it has to make sense,” he says. “Like if it didn’t taste right or it almost looked like the real thing but not really, there’s no point doing it,” he

says. “I think food that is memorable is food that creates that wow factor. You walk away and think, ‘That was really cool. I’ve had that before,’ or, ‘I know that flavor. I can remember that from something in my life, or it was never this good or never in that way.’ Food requires a little more thought than I think some people actually put into it.”

Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t, but he’s constantly tweaking and fixing. “The pigeon dish that we have on the menu kind of resembles the idea of eating a Reuben sandwich—sauerkraut, cheese, and rye—but it’s a lot more refined. The flavors are there, and there’s a memory that’s evoked. If I don’t achieve that, then the dish doesn’t make any sense. At the end of the day it has to make sense. . . . It’s still cooking. You still have to cook the food. You still have to work with precision, you still have to create recipes, you still have to be consistent, and you can’t treat the guests like guinea pigs. I learned that from Charlie [Palmer]. He wouldn’t

allow you to do things that were gimmicky. He’d say, ‘Maybe you should make it and eat it first, then see.’ Nine times out of ten he was right. That’s where I learned it has to make sense. That’s what made Charlie successful: his food just always tasted good.”

Palmer e-mailed in his thoughts, calling Voltaggio (and his brother) a talented and accomplished chef. “Michael definitely embraces modern techniques and trends,” Palmer wrote. “This results in very inventive dishes that are still grounded in classic technique.”

Zanne Stewart, a longtime executive food editor for the late, great *Gourmet* magazine, gave Voltaggio a glowing review in 2007. Voltaggio said it was the best one he’d ever gotten. He had left Palmer’s Dry Creek Kitchen for Hemisphere in the Greenbrier (before it ran out of money), which paid him to do research and development in its kitchens. (It eventually became his first laboratory). You can still read Stewart’s review online at

*gourmet.com*, where she excitedly wrote about the preview dinner:

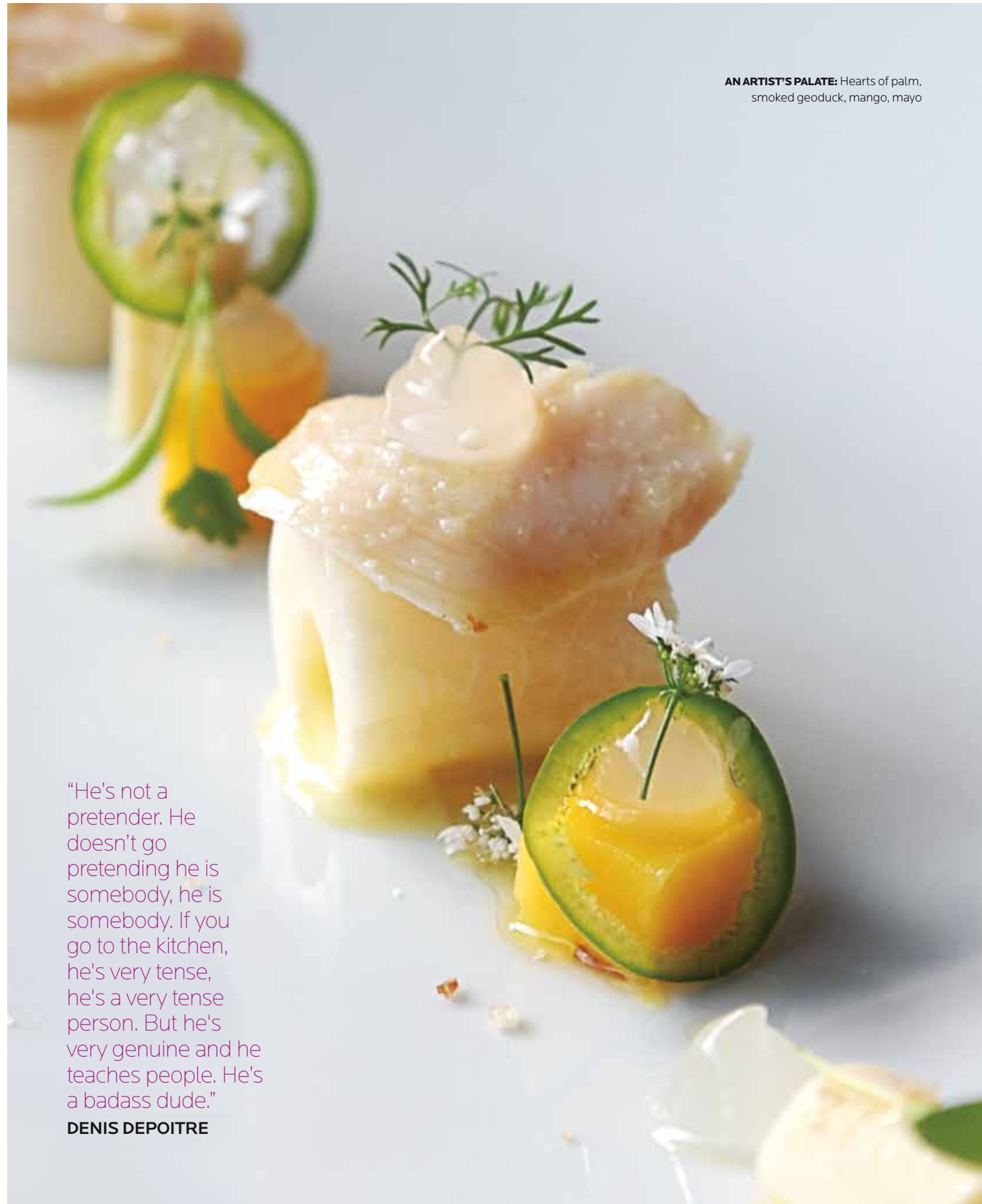
“Lunch went onward and upward from there, without a single misstep in any of the six courses. Even ‘banana pasta,’ which sounded like one of those frat-boy foods young Bulli-esque chefs might dream up, was neither gross nor silly, just exotically delicious. As a Greenbrier veteran, I couldn’t help thinking, ‘This from a staid old hotel in West Virginia that bills itself as ‘America’s Resort?’ Now I can’t wait to go back.”

Here is Voltaggio in a staid hotel in Pasadena, running a dusty dining room with boats on the wall. Boats. In landlocked Pasadena. The Dining Room feels like Grandma’s house. It has an air of mothballs. And it certainly doesn’t match Voltaggio’s sultry, intellectual and playful modern cuisine. Maybe after the renovations, he’ll see throngs rivaling The Bazaar.

What he offers is an experience: his tastings are the event of the evening. They can last hours, especially with pairings. The food is so sexy because you have to play with it, composing each bite from the various elements on the plate—a little foreplay on the fork. It’s everything you want it to be: delicate, robust, fulfilling. At the end of an epic seven-course meal, you feel ravaged and satiated. And like having a cigarette. But you’ll have to settle for the exploding chocolate Pop Rocks lollipop that is presented with the check.

Depoitre says, “What we want to achieve having him here is to be a place to come, to say ‘Hell, L.A. you’re good, but we got something good going on in Pasadena.’ And I think Pasadena needs to have that kind of recognition, as a destination place. People go to Chicago to have that, or they’re going to go to London or to some restaurant in New York, and there’s nothing in L.A. besides even Bazaar, but he’s here. That kid is here, and he’s creating that now in Pasadena. He’s right in your own backyard. To me that’s huge.”

**AN ARTIST'S PALATE:** Hearts of palm, smoked geoduck, mango, mayo



“He’s not a pretender. He doesn’t go pretending he is somebody, he is somebody. If you go to the kitchen, he’s very tense, he’s a very tense person. But he’s very genuine and he teaches people. He’s a badass dude.”

**DENIS DEPOITRE**