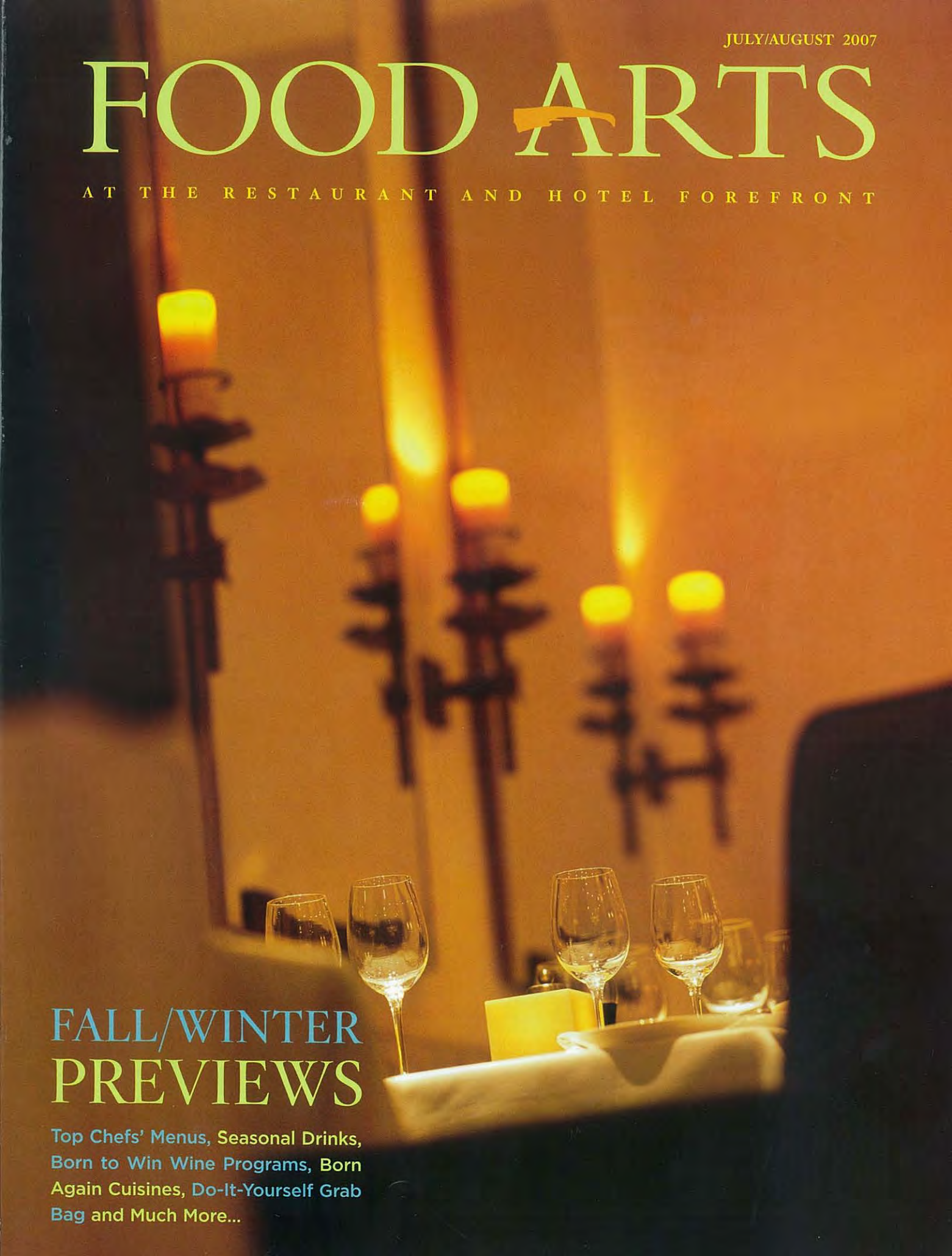


JULY/AUGUST 2007

FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT

A photograph of a restaurant table setting. In the foreground, several wine glasses are arranged on a white tablecloth. In the background, several lit candles in holders are visible, creating a warm, ambient glow. The overall scene is dimly lit, emphasizing the light from the candles.

FALL/WINTER PREVIEWS

Top Chefs' Menus, Seasonal Drinks,
Born to Win Wine Programs, Born
Again Cuisines, Do-It-Yourself Grab
Bag and Much More...

MEETING AND EATING

EVENTS & ATTRACTIONS A FOOD-OBSSESSED ENTREPRENEUR ORGANIZES BEHIND-THE-SCENES RESTAURANT FORAYS FOR THE YOUNG AND AFFLUENT. JANE YOO SURVEYS THE SCENE.

It was a Monday night, and the temperature was flirting with below freezing; even the reservations book at 66, **Jean-Georges Vongerichten's** take on a Chinese restaurant that he recently announced he was transforming into **Matsugen**, a Japanese restaurant, was feeling the chill. By eight o'clock, almost half of the tables were still empty, but despite the plunging mercury the bar and lounge were crowded with a large and lively group of well-dressed Manhattanites. Lisa Mamounas, the founder of Culinary Insiders, written up in the *New York Times* as "a food-oriented social group," warmly greeted everyone who had braved the cold for her Chinese New Year celebration and introduced old friends to new ones. Around her, the crowd grew so thick that the held-high food could hardly reach those craning their necks on the periphery.

"We touched all the highlights of Chinese cuisine," says Vongerichten, who came out to speak to the group even though he was battling a sore throat. Together with 66's executive chef, **Josh Eden**, they had created the special menu of passed hors d'oeuvres for the event; it included Peking duck rolls, crispy pork dumplings, and Shanghai noodles in white take-out cartons. All were snapped up as soon as they came out of the kitchen.

Mamounas acts as a liaison for chefs and their ideal customers: young professionals who love food. Tickets to one of her events usually cost about \$100, less for those with memberships. The "Inner Circle" membership is \$125 and the "Connoisseur Circle" \$250, with the added benefit of reduced admission for two guests.

"How did we not know about this?" exclaimed one attendee, who had come with his wife and another couple. They had heard about it through the American Express In:NYC card, and it was the first time the two young couples had experienced one of Mamounas' events.

The cocktail party at 66 was the second to be promoted through Amex, and, thanks to a mention in the *New York Times* Dining In/Dining Out food calendar, the turnout, a gathering of 93 people, was the biggest to date.

"It started with the same people in the beginning. I'll admit we were all friends," says Mamounas, with a laugh. "Now we have over 400, and it's growing rapidly. It's unbelievable, the growth."

Mamounas launched Culinary Insiders in the fall of 2004. A

bubbly fast talker with blond hair that falls below her shoulders, she's made a living out of networking; she even made the connection with Amex over lunch with a friend of a friend.

"This is my fun company," says Mamounas. "I already have put in my hard work, you know, with my serious companies."

She began her first venture, a building restoration and scaffolding company, about 20 years ago when her then boyfriend convinced her it held more promise than a degree from a community college. She dropped out, and he was right. After selling her partnership in that business, she cofounded the online voting service Election.com in 1999; it was later sold to Accentur.



Jean-Georges Vongerichten steps out of the kitchen to wish Lisa Mamounas (far right) and her coterie of food lovers a happy Year of the Pig.

"Election.com was founded with a great group of people," she says. "When we were bought out I had two years to figure out what I wanted to do with my life."

It was her involvement with the Museum of Modern Art's Junior Associates group that served as inspiration. "I tried to use it as the model," says Mamounas. "For example, instead of going to museum openings, we go to restaurant openings. Instead of going to artist studios, you go behind the scenes with the chef."

Organizing dinners came naturally to her. "I was almost doing it at the museum. After some of these MoMA events, they'd be like, 'Where should we go for dinner?' I started putting together little things. In Miami, I put together little dinners for us, and the chefs would come out. It kind of evolved from that."

Chef/restaurateur **Daniel Boulud** thinks it was a great idea. "Lisa

had been a passionate diner for quite a long time," says Boulud. "I told her that it was a good idea to be an authority on creating special events with good taste, profiling a chef and his cuisine, and relaying it to the young and affluent. We did the first party she ever had at **Daniel**. It was the launch, so she didn't know too much about where this was going to go."

Boulud is now a board member, along with New York City restaurateurs **Mauro Maccioni (Le Cirque, Circo)** and **Drew Nieporent (Tribeca Grill, Nobu, and others)**.

Building on the success of the first Culinary Insiders trip, to Las Vegas, Mamounas now has a trip to Dubai in the works. She got the idea when a friend opening a restaurant in Dubai asked her to come and visit. (Through doing research for the trip, she was asked to be on the committee for the Dubai Gulf Art Fair, and she became the unofficial spokesperson for Dubai dining; the tourism board refers journalists to her.)

Also contributing to its growth is the corporate division of Culinary Insiders, the source of her profits. Mamounas won't reveal how much the Young Presidents' Organization paid to do an event with her, but that organization's membership requirements are no secret: applications must be approved before candidates reach their 45th birthday, and if they run corporations their financial institutions must report average annual assets of at least \$160 million.

The popular online wedding site The Knot (it has a magazine of the same name) and its sister site, The Nest, are also planning

events through Culinary Insiders. The connection is another one that Mamounas made through a felicitous lunch.

Four days after the cocktail party at 66, it was my turn to have lunch with the professional gadabout. She suggested we get lobster rolls in Chelsea at her friend's kitschy surf shack restaurant **Bongo**. It wasn't yet open for service, but its sunny vibe made it the perfect destination for an escape from the wintry gusts punishing the streets, and Mamounas cajoled her friend into serving us. It was the second art hangout Mamounas took me to in the gallery-heavy neighborhood.

Before she obtained publicity and the partnership with American Express, Mamounas relied on her friends to bring their friends. "The demographic is 20 to 40, mostly from the hedge fund world and the investment banking world, and there are a lot of people from the art world." It's a demographic that she would like to cultivate.

For Mamounas, the night at 66 wasn't exactly perfect. She recalls there were a few older men lurking around the party's perimeter reminiscing about the \$6.99 shrimp special at **Beefsteak Charlie's**. "It wasn't the crowd we always get," says Mamounas, "and maybe they weren't all so aware of what we were doing."

But by all other accounts, the event was a success. Asked whether he would do another one with Mamounas, Vongerichten replies with an emphatic "Yes, absolutely!"

Cindy Pace, a clinical researcher who lives in Manhattan and who attended the 66 outing, has been a loyal Culinary Insiders member for one year. "Scientists love food, and anything they love, they study it to a whole other level so that they become experts," explains Pace. "I had a wonderful truffle tasting with Culinary Insiders at Alain Ducasse last year. That was fantastic."

She did not know Mamounas before she joined Culinary Insiders and cannot recollect how she got involved, but after attending one event Pace recruited her college friend Charissa O'Neal, brand development manager at CNN, to sign up as well.

Pace agreed that the social aspect was a huge draw. "At the **Blue Hill at Stone Barns** event, we actually met a young lady who ended up giving us a ride back to the city," says Pace.

While Pace may not be involved in the financial or the art world, people like her, with her irrepressible enthusiasm for food and making friends, are ultimately Mamounas' ideal members. Thus, even given the growth of the Culinary Insiders membership, the perfectionist in Mamounas shouldn't be too concerned. "You know," she admits, "people who love food usually are great people, too."

Jane Yoo is a New York City-based freelance writer.

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