

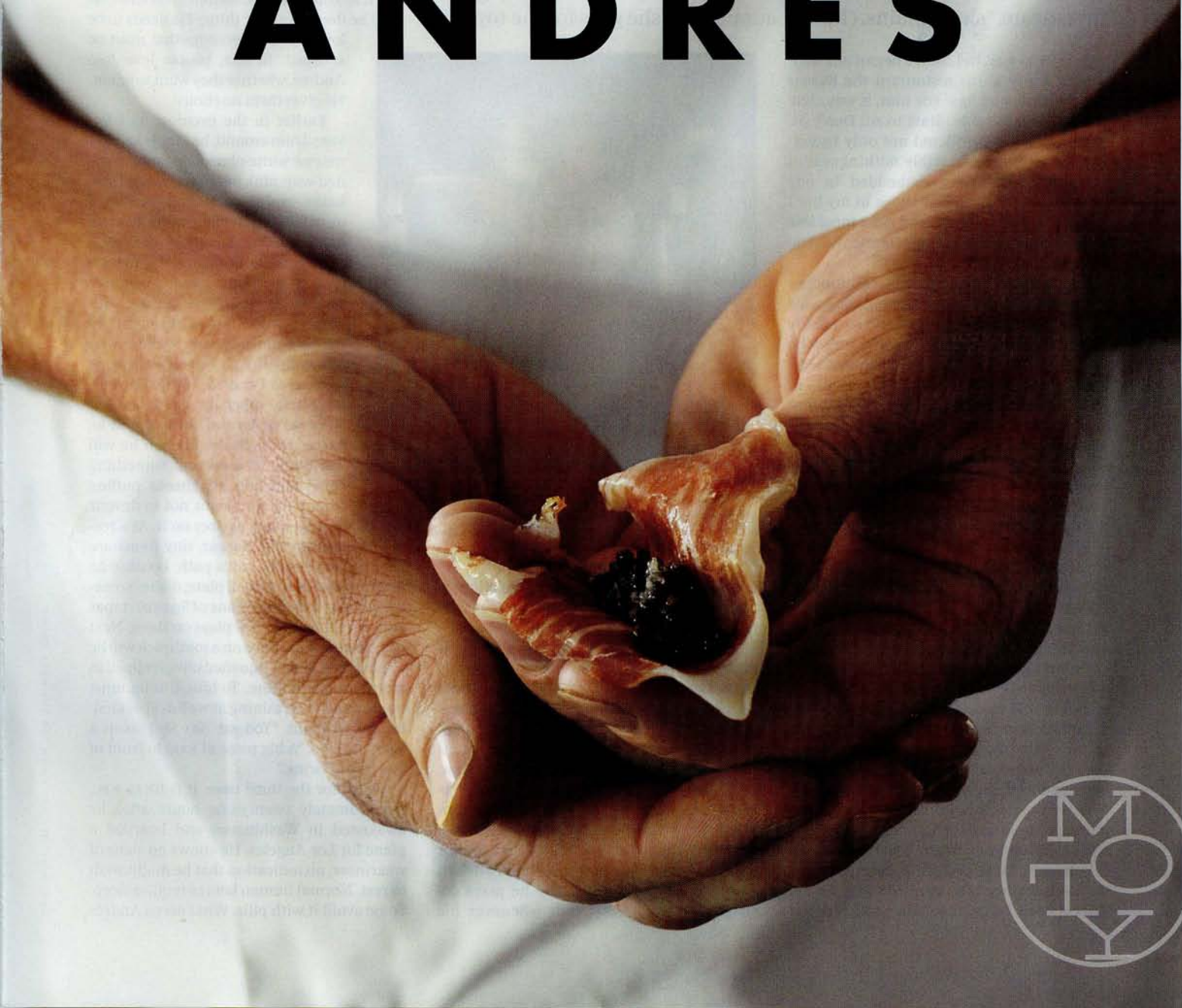
CHEF OF THE YEAR



The Bazaar World of

José

ANDRÉS





When José Andrés came here in 1991, he had \$60 in his pocket and little knowledge of English and was nursing a bruise to his ego from the great chef Ferran Adrià. Twenty years later, with eight restaurants in D.C. and L.A., the man who has a habit of texting while cooking and can't sit still long enough for a proper meal may be the best thing that's ever happened to Spanish cuisine in America

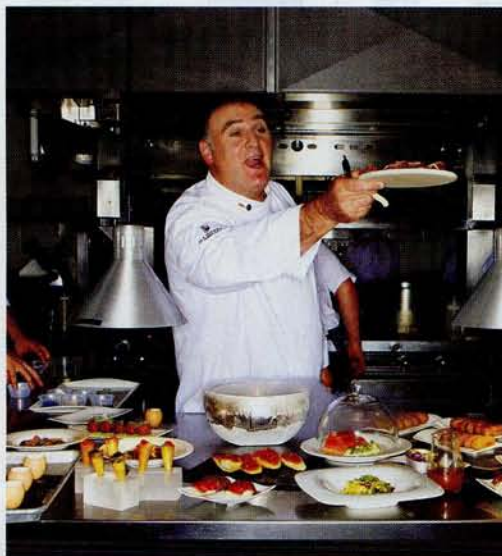


AGAIN, JOSÉ ANDRÉS SAYS he is ready to eat. Again, I believe him, although he is never ready to eat. He has added forty or fifty pounds in the past decade or so, astonishing for a man who doesn't eat, at least not by his way of thinking. "I do research," he says, explaining his impressive consumption of food. This means that whether he is in a restaurant, at home, or in one of the kitchens he oversees in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., nothing within his reach can be rightfully denied him, for he is motivated by an honest and understandable need to become familiar with every recognizable foodstuff. So convincing is he that the eldest of his three daughters, Carlota, 10, has adopted this method of defending her dining habits, perhaps the beginning of a family tradition, explaining that on the infrequent occasions that her father takes her to McDonald's, it is not to eat. "We only go to investigate," she explains. (Inés, 8, admits that she goes for the toys.)

It is 10:15 P.M. in L.A. We began our non-dining dance at his restaurant the Bazaar nearly two hours ago. For him, it went like this: Approach table. Start to sit. Don't sit. Rush off. He is conflicted not only by eating but also by the terrible nothingness of remaining stationary, embedded in one spot. "Only three or four times in my life I have seen him sit down and eat a meal like other people," says Ruben Garcia, his top culinary assistant.

I am famished. Andrés is not. He munches continually, snatching food he finds in his path and popping it in his mouth so quickly that he burns himself. He says he loves the feel of hot food, but I suspect he lacks the patience to wait for cooling to occur. In fact, he explains his relentless consumption ingeniously, saying, "My stomach is in a constant full situation. But to me, the only fullness that counts is my brain, and my brain is limitless. So if my brain is not full, I am not full. I am not talking overeating. I am talking about working."

Finally we sit down. He pulls out a bench in Bazaar's Rojo room, which is of course red and dominated by photographs of Spanish bullfighters, depictions that never get corny despite the shimmering outfits and the clownish caps. He appears ready to order. I glance toward the open kitchen, where his cooks are slyly eyeing him, understanding that to delay is to fail... But wait! A captain is whispering to him. He is up. It is our second false start of the evening—at the first, we managed a gin and tonic before he abandoned the table. I check my watch. Nineteen seconds have passed between the moment he sat and the moment he stopped sitting. Much later, when I grumble about this, he says, "You food critics complain that we chefs do not take care of every detail. That is what I am doing." His proficiency in



← Opening pages, from left, Andrés's spherified olives consist of liquefied olive trapped in membrane; the José taco—caviar wrapped in Ibérico ham. ↑ Above, Andrés presides over his kitchen at Bazaar. → Opposite, foie gras encased in vanilla cotton candy.

coming up with plausible rationalizations is extraordinary for a man who speaks heavily accented English as a second language.

The kitchen stands down. Dinner is aborted yet again. He dashes off to a party in the Garden Room of the SLS Hotel, where Bazaar is located. The mayor of Los Angeles, Antonio Villaraigosa, has gotten up from the table, and Andrés must be in attendance to bid him farewell. I try to follow, but I cannot match his speed. Few can. His feet are as quick as castanets. He is not simply gone; he has disappeared from sight. He has managed to put on all that weight without losing his quickness in the kitchen or on the soccer field, where he plays occasionally and boasts that whenever his

restaurants play one another, whichever team he chooses to join is the one that wins.

The party is for the birthday of the owner of the hotel, and the attendance of the mayor does not amaze me. Top political figures commonly materialize around Andrés. Most of his restaurants are in Washington, and while he is not a Beltway insider, he is by all means a Beltway intruder. He goes anywhere he wishes, never considering that he will not be welcomed, and he is correct. Who doesn't love the arrival of a circus? Two weeks earlier, the ambassadors from Spain and Mexico showed up at his surprise fortieth-birthday party in Washington that turned out not to be a surprise after all. "Of course I knew," he says. "I see my wife's e-mails."

When I at last catch up to him, he and the mayor have reached maximum conversational intensity. Andrés loves to talk about politics, about hunger, and about sports, all of mankind's universal topics, which means he can easily communicate with everybody about anything, and sometimes it seems that is all he does. Another thing: He needs to be loved. It is a necessity that must be satisfied. In fact, people love José Andrés, whether they want to or not. He gives them no choice.

Earlier in the evening, as I followed him around, he kindly handed me one white-chocolate tablet studded with pink peppercorns and one house-made dark-chocolate thin mint with a bona fide mint leaf at its center, both available at the patisserie counter of Bazaar. I gulped a slice of the hotel owner's birthday cake, white-chocolate mousse with passion-fruit puree, brought to me by compassionate waiters who felt sympathy as they watched me weaken as I trailed Andrés. He has, of course, officially eaten nothing since we've arrived, although as he passes through the kitchen he will habitually chomp on something small and hot, his cheeks puffing from pain. He seems not to devour food as much as prey on it. At a restaurant like Bazaar, tiny items are perpetually in his path, because he

is the master of the small plate, dishes sometimes true to the traditions of Spanish tapas and sometimes fanciful plays on them. Next to a conventional olive on a toothpick will be a spherified olive—liquefied olive trapped in a delicate membrane. To him, dining must be easy and entertaining as well as spectacular and brilliant. "You eat 700, 800 meals a year," he says. "A big piece of food in front of you is too boring."

We sit for the third time. It is 10:45 P.M., approximately twenty-one hours after he awakened in Washington and boarded a plane for Los Angeles. He shows no signs of weariness, no indication that he might wish to rest. Normal human beings require sleep. Some avoid it with pills. What keeps Andrés

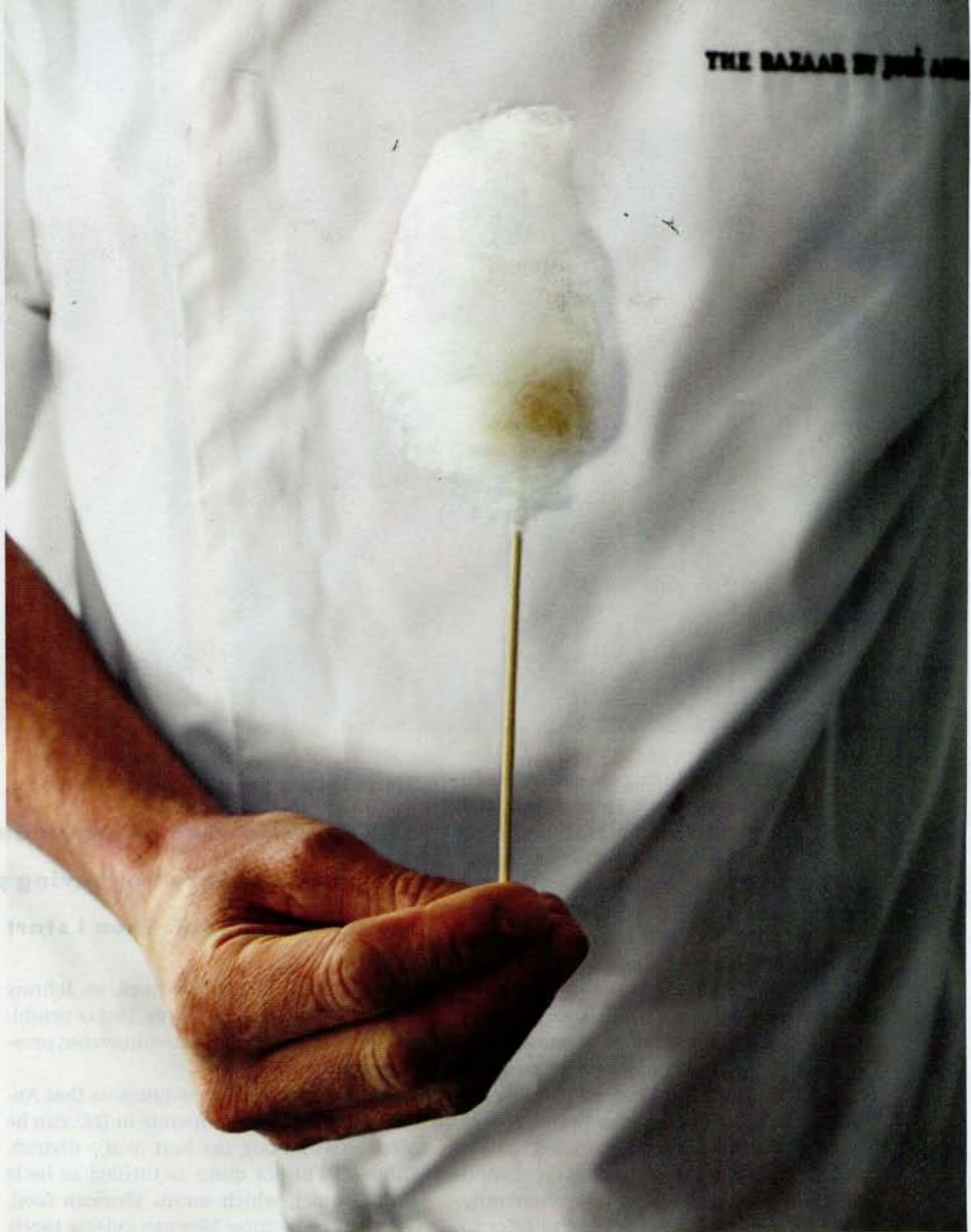
awake, says García, is a late-night gin and tonic. "Then you see another José," he says, "which is dangerous, because there is even more energy." When I complain about our dinner hour, Andrés says, "Very Spanish." And so I eat. He does not. Nothing for him. He does not ask what I might want to eat. He orders what he wants me to eat, which is a large percentage of the menu.

To the table comes caviar from Spain, along with sour cream and tiny soft buns. He stuffs them full, shoves them in my mouth, the feeding habits of a man who was abandoned in the woods as a child and raised by robins. Earlier I mentioned to him that I preferred the creamy, moist *patatas bravas* at his restaurant Jaleo, in Washington, D.C., to the *papas canarias* at Bazaar, and so we must have them to prove me wrong, because, he says, they are Bazaar's number one seller. He boasts, "A woman here said to me, 'I don't like these potatoes—they're salty and dry.' I said, 'Bingo!'" He is proud of these *papas canarias*, which are indeed salty and dry, as they are supposed to be. It is the only food I tried at the critically celebrated Bazaar that I did not like.

He picks up a slice of Ibérico ham, the kind made from pigs that eat only acorns, shoves it under my nose, and says, "Take a look at the quality!" He has now moved into Jewish-tailor mode, insisting that I inspect the goods. He rolls up some of that Spanish caviar in *jamón ibérico*, indeed the softest and nuttiest I have eaten, the fat as delicate as lace, better ham than I've had in Spain. He shoves it in my mouth and exclaims, "José taco!" The food cannot come rapidly enough, and I cannot possibly eat fast enough to please him. It is as though a famine lingers on the horizon and everyone—except him—must eat. We have ten dishes. Our meal is done in twenty minutes.



BAZAAR IS THE most acclaimed of his restaurants, even though it has been open little more than a year. The history of Los Angeles dining seems to incorporate fewer restaurants famous for their food (Spago, Matsuhisa) than for a quirky design (Brown Derby) or a celebrity clientele (Chasen's), and Bazaar was quickly given a top rating of four stars by the *Los Angeles Times*. The review correctly credited the dining as being absolutely first-rate. What was not said is that almost all the dishes, dazzlingly repackaged, were brought west from his more sedate Washington spots, in particular Jaleo and Minibar. What the Philippe Starck-designed, giddily random Bazaar does, besides give Los Angeles a dining option exquisitely suited to a city where fashion and style are always welcome, is demonstrate that the José Andrés onslaught is under way. When I told him that I didn't think Bazaar was his finest possible work, he replied, "I take that as a compliment," and it assuredly was.



It's not so much that L.A., a city severely challenged for top-flight cuisine, is settling for less than Andrés at his best. It's that the best of Andrés has yet to be let loose on the rest of America.

He has been in this country for nearly twenty years and is surely our most outrageously outgoing chef. Those who know him use words generally applied to forces of nature, natural disasters, and explosions of energy: "spark plug"... "twister"... "earthquake" are a few I heard. Robert Wolffe, an author who collaborated with Andrés on two books, affectionately refers to him as "a gargantuan." Always it is the maximum expression that comes to mind. He is a founding father—as any Spanish chef might have been—of small-plate dining, so momentous over the past few years. And though this might be an honor without significance, since little competition for the title exists, he is unquestionably the greatest Spanish chef to work in America. Nonetheless, he has remained relatively unknown.

I asked two prominent chefs, both James

Beard Outstanding Chef winners, why Andrés lagged behind them in acclaim, and I expected to hear that the glacial pace of his fame was an inevitable result of too many years of isolation in Washington, the culinary capital of nothing. Neither brought that up. Both admired him as a cook, an individual, a restaurateur, and a personality. They assured me that within the business, he was highly regarded. One said his predicament was that Spanish food in America lacks both an audience and the status of French or Italian cooking, with Ferran Adrià's El Bulli being the only Spanish restaurant that Americans recognize. The second pointed out that Andrés had always been in partnerships in Washington and hadn't earned the esteem that comes from being a chef struggling alone in a small, self-owned restaurant with only the passion of his cooking to keep his career and his vision alive. "He never had the platform to be noticed," this chef said. Bazaar, a brilliantly marketed four-star restaurant in a high-profile city like Los Angeles, should



put an end to his enduring obscurity, as will Andrés's plans for growth. He has ideas, and a very large country to embrace them.

Jaleo is the most popular of his five downtown Washington restaurants. (He has two more Jaleos in the suburbs.) It almost certainly offers the best tapas in America, although one of those chefs added, "I don't think you can get famous serving tapas, no matter how good it is. What's so exceptional about pushing up against thousands of people standing at a counter trying to get to the stuffed eggs?" Minibar, which has only six stools and accommodates twelve people a night, is surely his most significant restaurant, the pinnacle of his personal expression and perhaps an exception to the anonymity of Spanish cuisine. Andrés likes to refer to it as "the only restaurant in America that is always full." There, he and Garcia have brilliantly melded avant-garde and old-school, transforming molecular gastronomy into a joyous experience not achieved elsewhere in America, not even by the pioneering Chicago chefs cooking in that style. For that matter, his foams are like no others, and who doesn't do foams these days? His are more substantial and delicious, the most interesting being a warm, meringue-like froth atop a pisco sour cocktail.

Of all that Andrés does passionately—open restaurants, crusade against hunger, encourage nutrition programs, toil as unofficial American attaché to Spanish legend Ferran Adrià, text-message, play with his children, drive his wife crazy, make his wife laugh, appear on television, dress badly, and (I am certain he would like it said, although it is an exaggeration) excel at soccer and impress at golf—it is occasionally forgotten that cooking is one of his gifts. For what cachet it brings, Andrés means as much to Spanish cuisine in this country as Wolfgang Puck meant to pizza, as Alice Waters meant

"How do you become part of a country where you are living? I will tell you. One day your daughter says to you, 'How come we are not having pancakes?' We do not have pancakes in Spain. Then I start making pancakes."

to vegetables, maybe as much as Johnny Appleseed meant to orchards. He is a combination of all three of them—innovator, proselytizer, celebrity.

Each one of the five restaurants that Andrés and his partners operate in D.C. can be considered among the best in the district, although I'm not quite as thrilled as he is with Oyamel, which serves Mexican food. (It might be because Mexican cuisine rarely tastes authentic outside Mexico.) His wife, Patricia Fernández de la Cruz, says, "What I love is that I can say to him, 'José, there is nothing in the pantry,' and he comes out with the best meal. That's when I appreciate being married to a chef." To that I add the endorsement of Roberto Álvarez, formerly an active partner in Andrés's restaurant group and until recently the ambassador of the Dominican Republic to the Organization of American States. He says, "When things are all set up, he will prepare an exceptional show, but come unexpectedly to his house and you will have the most spectacular meal when he whips up something. I still remember the morel-mushroom paella he made from nothing. It was to die for."

It is worth noting that this praise comes from a man who battled Andrés for most of the nearly twenty years they were together. Álvarez says of the partnership, "It did not take long for things not to go well. We had so many fights." It is worth noting that the two remain close friends, texting each other steadily. Andrés is, as I said, almost impossible not to love.

HE COMES FROM a coal-mining town in Asturias, an obscure strip of a principality in the far north of Spain. He says his mother was a fine cook and that his favorite food remains her *huevos a la cubana*, which is fried eggs with rice, tomato, sausage, and fried banana, a dish that dates from the Spanish rule over Cuba, but he does not immediately speak of family meals as the centerpiece of his upbringing. In fact, he does not speak easily about his family. He visits often, although he says, "I love my mother, but that is one of the reasons I have always been away. My mother and father gave me everything a mother and father could, but—" he pauses, not wanting to say too much—"the relationship was always tough." Certainly, that is one of the circumstances of his life that caused him to leave for America. Another was the advice of an uncle who was medical director for the Ford Motor Company in Valencia, Spain. He said to Andrés, "José, if you can, make America your home and do not come back."

His mother and father were nurses who moved the family when he was 5 so they could work at a major hospital near Barcelona. The country then was in an era of hardship under Francisco Franco, but he says his parents always had jobs and he did not suffer. He clearly recalls moments of childhood when he feels he was mistreated, but the events are minor, perhaps trivial, such as when a teacher sent him home with a note after he complained that an older opponent had cheated in a chess tournament. He is a man of unexpected sensitivity, those feelings

coexisting with enormous presence and confidence. He did not do well in school, a fact that he mentions often, and it might be the reason he reads so much, talks to so many people, has upped his intellectual (as well as culinary) curiosity. His academic self-evaluation: "Bad—but nobody had to push me to learn the things I love." After eighth grade, his father sent him to cooking school, somehow finding a way to bypass regulations that said students had to be 18. He immediately found work as a cook when he was not in classes, which he admits was most of the time.

He has vivid memories of the restaurants that took him in, especially L'Antull, in Roses, the Catalan town where El Bulli is located. One day Ferran Adrià walked in, sat at the bar, and ordered shrimp with garlic sauce, which Andrés personally made for him. Back then Adrià was barely known nationally and not at all internationally, but he was still the most important chef in Roses. Adrià's sitting at the bar and not at a table had an enormous influence on Andrés, who recalls, "He walked in alone. He ordered garlic shrimp at the bar. He ate it. He left. I didn't speak to him. But it tells you the way I like to eat, he likes to eat." Not long afterward, Andrés was offered a job at El Bulli. It was a significant step up, even if the restaurant lacked the prestige it has today. It was not, he concedes, the brilliance of the garlic shrimp that earned him the attention of Adrià. He remembers the celebrated chef being asked why he hired him, and the reply was, "There was nobody else."

He later joined the Spanish navy—it seems

that running off to sea isn't only for Americans. When he returned, he went back to El Bulli. The restaurant was not open year-round, and Andrés was working in Madrid, learning about cuisine in diverse kitchens while remaining on Adrià's payroll, when the decisive event of his life occurred. He returned to Barcelona to be paid by Adrià and showed up for their appointment early enough to slip away to a nearby bar and make a telephone call. When he returned, Adrià had already arrived and was unhappy that his apprentice had kept him waiting. "I think it was unfair," says Andrés. He claims he was punctual and it was Adrià who was late. It is a great and mysterious question—which one of them was at fault? What is known is that being misunderstood by Adrià so distressed the supremely sensitive Andrés that he left for America. Within forty-eight hours, he was on a plane, \$60 in his pocket and a position awaiting him at El Dorado Petit, a Manhattan branch of a well-regarded Spanish restaurant.

He did not stay long, because those were the years when he tended to leave everything. Not much later, in 1993, while he was settled in La Jolla, California, not making much money but happily living by the beach, he was invited to D.C. by the Washington partnership of Álvarez, restaurateur Rob Wilder, and chef Ann Cashion. They were looking for a Spanish chef to add authenticity to a new tapas restaurant. It was to be called Jaleo, after John Singer Sargent's celebrated painting *El Jaleo*. "He didn't realize he had come for a tryout," says Álvarez. "He was perplexed and pissed when he found out. He cooked at a frenetic pace, and we were impressed enough to offer him the job."

Jaleo remains the core property in the collection of restaurants now named Think-

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FoodGroup and headed by Andrés. It is in some ways the most triumphant. "Jaleo is my way of telling America what Spain is," he says. "It is closest to my heart." Still, it is clear that the joyous Minibar is the model that most intrigues him. It's clearly his most original accomplishment, a wonderfully accessible amalgam of Adrià's impressionistic cooking melded with food that Americans unhesitatingly accept. While many of the cooking techniques originated with Adrià, the flavors are exuberantly American. For that matter, so is Andrés, despite his accent. He says, "How do you become part of a country where you are living? I will tell you. One day your daughter says to you, 'How come we are not having pancakes?' We do not have pancakes in Spain. Then I start making pancakes."

A typical meal at Minibar consists of about thirty courses, each a bite or two, many of them simultaneously sublime and ridiculous, the archetypal example being caramelized popcorn frozen in liquid nitrogen. When it is chewed, steam pours from the nose of the person eating it. Andrés seems to have adapted molecular gastronomy to the small-plate concept not so much to impress as to amuse. He does the spherified olives one better by creating a Parmesan-flavored egg yolk inside the same kind of shell. At Bazaar, the Manhattan comes with a spherified maraschino cherry that's more luscious than a genuine maraschino cherry—not an enormous triumph, considering how cloying real maraschino cherries tend to be.

Zaytinya, another of the D.C. restaurants, is a combination of modestly creative Greek, Turkish, and Lebanese food. Café Atlantico is Latin and Caribbean, Nuevo Latino with frills. It was originated by Álvarez in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, in 1985. He moved it to the Adams Morgan section of D.C. in 1990. It was, by all accounts, the most exciting restaurant in Washington in those days, not particularly for the food but for the after-dinner dancing, and to Andrés it has particular significance. It was at Café Atlantico that he met his wife.

The restaurant was small, and late-night entry was coveted. Andrés had begun helping out while he was cooking at Jaleo, and one evening he saw a woman peering in the window, searching for a friend she was supposed to meet. "I saw her. I love her," he says. One thing has to be said for Andrés—he is not indecisive. He thought that if he got her inside, she would be as impressed with him as he was with her. "I was not shy," he says, "except with women."

Fernández says, "I was looking in the window when José came up to me and said, 'Want to come inside?' I (continued on page 307)

← Opposite, from left, the Philly cheesesteak, composed of barely seared slices of fillet atop a crunchy pita stuffed with Cheddar-cheese foam; the spherified Caprese salad.
↓ Below, the Rojo room at Bazaar, Andrés's West Coast outpost in Los Angeles and, at 417 seats, his largest restaurant yet.





José Andrés

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 285

said, 'Sure.' I had no idea he had anything to do with the place. The big guy at the door let us in, and I said to José, 'Thank you. Bye.' I went to look for my friend. I thought it was nice that he let us in, but nothing more. He was good-looking but not well-dressed."

Says Andrés of the brush-off, "I thought, Wow, this will be a difficult one to catch." When he finally persuaded her to go out, he bought a jacket for the event. "A month later," he recalls, "she threw it in the garbage."

Fernández says he won her over with kindness. There was the Christmas Eve when Andrés was in Miami. He unexpectedly showed up at the house where she lived with her uncle and aunt, carrying a box of stone crabs and wearing shoes but no socks, because he had brought none with him to Florida. He arrived at 8 P.M., and at eight the next morning he flew back. She says, "Those are the kinds of things José does. You ask him why and he says, 'Why not?'"

The marriage has lasted for fourteen years, despite warnings from her family that it had no chance. "I was not a good eater when I met him," she says. "As a child, I did not like spaghetti—do you know a kid who does not like spaghetti? When I told my mother that I met this guy from Spain who was a chef, she said, 'This will never work.'"

She makes him sound wonderful. I ask her if he occasionally is less.

"Oh yes, he is not an angel."

What could this wonderful man do wrong?

"Sometimes he gets angry."

Certainly not at you?

"At me. I am the wife."

I AM INTERVIEWING their children, Carlota, Inés, and Lucía, 5. All three are infinitely patient where their father is concerned. We're at their home in suburban Maryland, and Andrés is yelling for them to prepare for lunch. Naturally he insists that he does not yell. "I have a big voice. That is technically different." He gives them countdowns—"You have four minutes to be ready"—but they are used to that and remain unfazed. It is clear who is at fault. The children are ready, not him. They tell me it is always that way. The yelling, the countdowns, the demands, none of that bothers them. They understand their father.

Andrés always acts like the boss. Yet he always means well, which the girls seem to understand. They love their father. That is clear. He entertains them. He feeds them.

He takes them on excursions. "His meals are good," says Inés. "And he likes playing with us." They particularly like it when he plays mime and pretends to crash into walls and crumbles to the floor. They are astonishingly mature, the most forgiving children I have ever met. I ask them to list everything he does when he is yelling at them to hurry.

"He starts looking for books."

"He forgets a shoe."

"He's texting."

"He says, 'Get ready, get ready,' and we are ready, but he isn't."

"He just forgets that we are supposed to leave."

He does not pick on his children. He is this way with everyone. Garcia, acknowledged as the cook in the restaurant empire who understands Andrés best, says of his boss, "His mind reminds me of restaurant kitchens. You know they are a mess, but the dishes when they go out are sharp, clean, perfect. José is like that. His mind is trying to be organized, but his world doesn't allow him to be organized."

This once simple Spanish chef is no longer uncomplicated, although the obvious answer as to why he so often seems out of control is that he attempts too much and never gives up anything. He is the definition of overbooked. For years his Washington partners allowed him to pursue outside projects, remarkable generosity that he appreciated. That gave him an opportunity to become the star of a cooking show that ran for three years on Spanish television. To this day, according to Rob Wilder, "when he is walking down the street in Spain, cars come screeching to a halt, teenage girls run after him."

He plays golf as often as he can, on a busy public course near his home. He does not try to overpower the ball, this bull of a man, which might seem surprising, but in spite of his size, his bluster, and his outrageousness, he is capable of great finesse—in golf as well as in cooking. He does not often ride in a cart but slings his bag over his shoulder in the style of a backpack and purposefully marches forward, the very image of a Spanish trooper in the Napoleonic War. At moments he is not happy with his performance, and then he swears in a most interesting manner. When he flubs a shot, he screams, "*Me cago en la mar*," which means, "I shit in the sea." Apparently service in the Spanish navy had a permanent influence. He could join a private golf club, of course. He can afford it. Yet he believes it is the wrong way for people to spend their money, an offshoot of the charitable work he performs with characteristic enthusiasm.

He can be found at D.C. Central Kitchen, which provides employment for the homeless and prepares and distributes food for the needy. When he arrives, it is in a distinctive manner. "There are no early-warning systems for him," says Robert Egger, the founder and president. "You hear him in the kitchen, that accent, and you realize José is in the house." He visits schools, too, where he champions universal culinary education. He says schools have computer labs, so why not kitchen labs, where children can learn what cooking means.

He knows people, senators and congressmen and ambassadors, and he doesn't mind letting others know that he knows them. Very likely no city in America is better suited to Andrés's ambitions than the capital, because of its access to powerful people. It is a city of infinite languages, interests, and cultures, and he sees possibilities where others see poverty and gloom.

He has evolved into a chef-entrepreneur of unparalleled complexities, having now come to a splendid point in his life. Just past 40, he understands that as good as he is and as famous as he is becoming, he hasn't begun to realize all that he might achieve. Bazaar is a restaurant primarily serving tapas, but of greater importance, it is possibly the beginning of what will one day be Andrés across America. He is contemplating not just more versions of Bazaar but also an arrangement with the Four Seasons hotel group, where he hopes to create a dining concept paying tribute to the history of American cuisine. He has gone into the meat-importing business, bringing in fresh pork from those acorn-eating Iberian pigs. I was in Washington when a shipment arrived, and he carted a couple of slabs to the home of a friend. He cooked them on an outdoor wood grill, deftly bringing out the melting-sweet juiciness of the meat; whipping together an instant sauce of fresh rosemary, olive oil, and mustard; dipping the grilled slices into the sauce; and handing them out, often putting them directly into the mouths of those who wandered too close to the fire. It was Andrés at his finest—standing, cooking, feeding. It was, as Álvarez said, impromptu food the likes of which I've not tasted, food that could wake Franco from the dead.

Wilder believes that Andrés's goal should be to open the great Spanish restaurant in the United States. Álvarez thinks Andrés has a vision of world cuisine more profound than that of Ferran Adrià and he will peak once he has broken away from the influence of his great mentor. "That is the day he will say, 'I am ready to open a restaurant in Spain.'"

AND NOW, OF COURSE, the answer to the momentous question: What really occurred that fateful day when José Andrés met Ferran Adrià in Barcelona and one of them showed up late?

Andrés is not certain whether all that has come to pass would have happened exactly as it did had Adrià not snapped at him, hurt his feelings so deeply that he left for America. Had that argument not occurred, he certainly would not have been in this country so quickly. Nevertheless, he says, "I think my destiny was always to leave Spain."

The question, restated: Was Andrés wronged by Adrià, or was it the opposite? The answer comes from Ruben Garcia, the man credited with the deepest understanding of Andrés.

Garcia says incredulously, "You want me to believe that José was on time?"

ALAN RICHMAN is a GQ correspondent.