AN AMERICAN SUMMER

Michael Kors and PALM SPRINGS Style
The Secret Chic of MILLBROOK, NY
A Wild Weekend in VEGAS with Four Superstar Chefs
Tour de France à la TENNESSEE
Woody Allen Does SAN FRANCISCO
COOKS’ NIGHT OUT

Starring

GEOFFREY ZAKARIAN, MARCUS SAMUELSSON, SCOTT CONANT, and BOBBY FLAY, with appearances by AGENT SCOTT FELDMAN.

IN 72 WILD HOURS IN SIN CITY

BY FIONA MURRAY

Photographs by Meredith Jenks

Styled by Tasha Green
At the pool at the Cosmopolitan (from left), Geoffrey Zakarian wears a BOTTEGA VENETA sweater ($1,350); Margaret Zakarian; Marcus Samuelsson, a SALVATORE FERRAGAMO suit ($2,660) and BURBERRY PRORSUM shirt ($495); Scott Feldman; Scott Conant, an ERMENEGILDO ZEGNA shirt ($495) and tie ($195) with his own ERMENEGILDO ZEGNA suit; Bobby Flay, a BOTTEGA VENETA jacket and pants ($2,800) and an ERMENEGILDO ZEGNA tie ($195). For more details, go to page 155.
The men slowly make their way back to the Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas. The newest of the mega-hotels, it caters to more urban tastes (think Blue Ribbon Sushi and Marquee nightclub) and is currently the hottest bed in town. As the guys sweep through the tourist-clogged entrance and across the gold-flecked marble floors, guests sit up and take notice, like prairie dogs, their necks collectively following the men. Even for those who don’t recognize the chefs, there’s something familiar about the scenario; something dimly, wonderfully retro about five men walking and laughing and back-slapping in suits. “What’s cooking, Bobby?” a fiftysomething blonde asks saucily as she walks by. “I dunno,” he laughs. “What’s cooking with you?”

A recent warm evening in Las Vegas, a group of snappily dressed men stroll the cartoonish promenade that is The Strip. Past the Chrysler Building, past Monte Carlo and the Eiffel Tower and past the undulating gold fountains, graceful and obscene, spurting in climactic choreographed motion to the piped strains of Celine Dion. At the insistence of a wedding party, the men stop to huddle around a sturdy bride as she poses in front of the Bellagio’s dancing waters. She smiles broadly, only too willing to have her photo taken with some stylish out-of-towners. Her face starts to darken, however, as a growing crowd begins to snap iPhone pictures behind her photographer. “We love you, Bobby!” screams one giddy bystander. With that the bride pulls away; she is done. No one wants to be princess for a day and have Bobby Flay wander into her spotlight.

Accompanying Flay in this roving band are fellow star chefs Geoffrey Zakarian, Scott Conant and Marcus Samuelsson, along with manager Scott Feldman, a reputed power Chihuahua in the restaurant industry. The longtime friends are a tight-knit food fraternity conceived more than 20 years ago: Flay, 48, met Feldman in the early 1990s when he was an account executive for restaurants; Zakarian, 53, was one of Feldman’s first clients when he started his agency in 2004 and remains with him today; and Conant, 42, and Samuelsson (both Chopped regulars alongside Zakarian) work with Feldman, 45, on various projects. “This is a very special group,” says Samuelsson, 41. “We all have deep European roots, but we all have a different narrative; this makes it exciting to me.”
ne recent warm evening in Las Vegas, a group of snappily dressed men stroll the cartoonish promenade that is The Strip. Past the Chrysler Building, past Monte Carlo and the Eiffel Tower and past the undulating gold fountains, graceful and obscene, spurtling in climactic choreographed motion to the piped strains of Celine Dion.

As the insistence of a wedding party, the men stop to huddle around a sturdy bride as she poses in front of the Bellagio’s dancing waters. She smiles broadly, only too willing to have her photo taken with some stylish out-of-towners. Her face starts to darken, however, as a growing crowd begins to snap iPhone pictures behind her photographer. “We love you, Bobby!” screams one giddy bystander. With that the bride pulls away; she is done. No one wants to be princess for a day and have Bobby Flay wander into her spotlight.

Accompanying Flay in this roving band are fellow star chefs Geoffrey Zakarian, Scott Conant and Marcus Samuelsson, along with manager Scott Feldman, a reputed power Chihuahua in the restaurant industry. The longtime friends are a tight-knit food fraternity conceived more than 20 years ago: Flay, 48, met Feldman in the early 1990s when he was an account executive for restaurants; Zakarian, 53, was one of Feldman’s first clients when he started his agency in 2004 and remains with him today; and Conant, 42, and Samuelsson (both Chopped regulars alongside Zakarian) work with Feldman, 45, on various projects. “This is a very special group,” says Samuelsson, 41. “We all have deep European roots, but we all have a different narrative; this makes it exciting to me.”

The men slowly make their way back to the Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas. The newest of the mega-hotels, it caters to more urban tastes (think Blue Ribbon Sushi and Marquee nightclub) and is currently the hottest bed in town. As the guys sweep through the tourist-clogged entrance and across the gold-flecked marble floors, guests sit up and take notice, like prairie dogs, their necks collectively following the men. Even for those who don’t recognize the chefs, there’s something familiar about the scenario; something dimly, wonderfully retro about five men walking and laughing and back-slapping in suits. “What’s cooking, Bobby?” a fiftysomething blonde asks saucily as she walks by. “I dunno,” he laughs. “What’s cooking with you?”
A bachelorette and her friends ask to have their photo taken with Conant and Zakarian—who is famed for such... hat ($230). Opposite: Drinking on the terrace at Comme Ça restaurant at the Cosmopolitan.
A bachelorette and her friends ask to have their photo taken with Conant and Zakarian—who is famed for such fashionable Manhattan dining spots as Forty Four at The Royalton and the Lambs Club. They oblige. The women flirt with Conant. He flirts back. “You think I’m giving you Blue Steel? That’s just how I look,” he laughs. Zakarian leans in to look at the photo. “It looks like you’re getting your bag changed,” he says.

The guys have converged on Vegas for a three-day playdate (plus a bit of business: Flay and Conant have local outposts—Mesa Grill at Caesars Palace and Scarpetta and D.O.C.G. at the Cosmopolitan, respectively). Half Rat Pack, half Entourage, they commune like men of an inner circle, and over the course of 72 hours, the insults, counsel and shenanigans rack up. “We’re all career-driven and in a competitive industry, but our camaraderie is stronger,” says Flay.

“We love to come here, eat good food, play craps, stay out late and know that somehow we’re going to be separated from our money. Vegas is Disneyland for adults.”

Before dinner, the men share cocktails and cigars on the open-air terrace of Comme Ça restaurant, overlooking the neon tomfoolery of the Paris Las Vegas. They’re looking sharp in their evening finery (a fact not lost on them), immaculately pressed and coiffed with nary a pocket square out of place—only Flay has his double Windsor artfully askew.

There is an oft-repeated saying among the group, at different times directed at any one of its party: “You have come a long way.” Considering the newfound fortune of a celebrity chef, one doesn’t doubt this to be true. “Dude, you’ve gone from Members Only to Zegna in under a decade,” says Flay to Conant. Flay, the owner of 21 restaurants and one of Food Network’s biggest stars, is more likable in person: wry, smoother and more insecure than his grinning cookbook mug suggests. “Fuck Network’s biggest stars, is more likable in person: wry, smoother and more insecure than his grinning cookbook mug suggests. “Fuck you,” says Conant, a half-Italian Connecticut native who cemented his reputation by creating unfussy, elevated Italian food. Broad-shouldered and barrel-chested to boot, he gives off a whiff of Tony Soprano as he tugs the lapels of his jacket over his bulk, mock-offended. “I once had a business partner who said, ‘You’re the only guy I’ve ever met who went from a Toyota RAV4 to a Maserati,’ ” he admits.

Exhibiting a signature take on sartorial flair, Samuelsson arrives wearing a fedora, Ethiopian scarf, checked silk waistcoat and suspenders hanging down over his jeans. The most thoughtful, artistically intense member of the group, the Ethiopian-born, Swedish-raised chef of Harlem’s Red Rooster and Sweden’s Norda was the youngest ever to receive a three-star review from The New York Times. Feldman, looking down at what appear to be vintage gold tap shoes, says, “Ah, Mr. Bojangles is here. Let’s go to dinner.”

The men snake through the dining room of the Greek restaurant Estiatorio Milos, securing watching diners in their choice for this evening’s meal. They are ushered into the glass-encased VIP room, to the side of the main dining floot. Waitstaff appear in lockstep and stilly begin pouring multiple wines from multiple sides. Signature dishes deftly appear: paper-thin slices of crispy zucchini and eggplant with tzatziki and kefalotyri cheese saganaki (or the “Milos Special”), skewers of plump scallops and the showstopping Lavraki, a slapping-fresh pearlescent sea bass nestled in a puddle of olive oil.

Confused by varying reports of the steps used to create the particularly palatable Milos Special—is zucchini really coated with water, flour, water, then dipped straight into hot oil?—the chefs decide to storm the kitchen. The guy manning the deep fryer is silent but wide-eyed as he watches Bobby Flay in Tom Ford flouring and deep-frying zucchini slices next to him. One minute you’re working your station, the next you’re on Throwdown! with Bobby Flay.

Once back at the table, Feldman, who as a kid worked behind the bar of his family’s Irish pub on Long Island, receives a belated compliment from former client Conant. Short, punchy and Jewish, Feldman has been labeled the Ari Gold of the restaurant industry and is known for going that extra mile to keep clients happy. “That deal you got me with Valentino,” says Conant, “is still the best deal I ever had.”

Zakarian clarifies, “You could go into Valentino and pick out anything you wanted for two years.” “Fantastic,” says Conant.

Feldman currently represents ten female chefs on a roster of 40 clients, which includes such top-seeded talent as New Yorkers Tom Colicchio and Andrew Carmellini.

Apart from the fact that women have to cut through the noise of a male-dominated industry, one wonders if investors are simply less willing to back female chefs as restaurant owners. “I don’t think it’s hard from an investment standpoint. I think it’s hard to find great women in the forefront,” counters Feldman. “It’s horrible to ask the question, but who are the top five women in the industry right now?”

Conant: “April [Bloomfield].”

Flay: “Michelle Bernstein.”

Zakarian: “Nancy Silverton.”

Flay: “For sure, best hands in the business.”

Conant: “That’s not even a female thing. Nancy’s just a great chef.”

Flay: “It’s the physical respect she has for ingredients. She puts them on a plate unlike anybody else.”

Conant: “Suzanne Goin is spectacular. A.O.C. is wonderful.”

Zakarian: “So that’s four….”

CONTINUED »
Samuelsson: “In Boston you have some good ones: Barbara Lynch, Jody Adams…”

Feldman: “Good call. So we have a top six!”

Flay: “I was married to one. My first wife.”

Zakarian: “Debra [Ponzek] was amazing. Her salmon and lentils with red wine sauce… My first wife and I married in 1992 and went to Montrachet for dinner—just the two of us. And I had the salmon.”

Flay: “Let’s talk about our first wives—good idea.”

After dinner, the guys wind across the Cosmopolitan’s concourse to Marquee nightclub. (It is just like New York here, except you don’t have to leave the building.) They are walked past the hundred or so patrons waiting in line, shown to a VIP table and rewarded with two complimentary magnums of Veuve Clicquot for being…good cooks. There’s something reminiscent of the made men who walked golden in this town before them. Like the elder statesman of clubland, Zakarian sits ramrod-straight on top of a banquette observing the throng, his silver hair illuminated in the dimness. He proudly eyes Margaret (his wife of eight years and the only spouse along for this boys’ weekend) as she dances about in front of him puffing on a cigar. Flay decides to head out, leaving the others to their whiskey and cigars. A reputed high roller (he also owns and breeds racehorses), he stops at a craps table on the way to his room. He stands alone and bets on a lively blonde throwing the dice. After ten minutes he cashes in his chips, tapping her on the shoulder as he leaves: “Thanks, you just made me $5,000.”

Samuelsson: “In Boston you have some good ones: Barbara Lynch, Jody Adams…”

Feldman: “Good call. So we have a top six!”

Flay: “I was married to one. My first wife.”

Zakarian: “Debra [Ponzek] was amazing. Her salmon and lentils with red wine sauce… My first wife and I married in 1992 and went to Montrachet for dinner—just the two of us. And I had the salmon.”
“Why are you leaving?” she asks. “I could make you rich!”

The next afternoon on the 70th floor, in one of the Cosmopolitan’s corner penthouse suites, complete with smoked-glass panels, plum shag rugs and a black massage table, the men gather to play pool. Sinatra croons “I Get a Kick Out of You” as they smash balls around the table, and after an hour cigar smoke begins to faintly hang at eye level. “All right, bitches, let’s play for money,” says Flay. In the distance the sun starts to set behind the Forum at Caesars, casting a grayish-pink glow over the surrounding mountain ranges.

After the game, Flay starts collecting $100 from all concerned. “You have to collect right away or you’ll never see it,” he says. Zakarian sits quietly on the sofa, puffing on a Nat Sherman cigar. There’s that palpable lull you get in Vegas, when you’ve finished playing but you’re not ready for your next meal, so it’s unclear what you’re to do. Conant sits down and watches, amused, as Zakarian picks lint from his cuff. “I’ll tell you what I learned from Geoffrey,” Conant confides of his friend of 13 years. “I learned that you work hard—the guy works his ass off—but he also takes care of himself really, really well.”

“I do,” says Zakarian precisely.

“Ask him about eye creams,” Conant motions with his head. “No one knows more about eye creams.”

“I educated most of the women friends in my life. Amanda Freitag, Anne Burrell, they’re all on my regimen. Guerlain has a great new night cream,” says Zakarian.

“It’s beautiful, it’s beautiful,” chuckles Conant, taking off his glasses to press his eyes.

“Since I was 12, it’s who I am. All my family were like, ‘What is going on with this kid?’ They all thought I was batting for
the other side. I like that I'm vain. If vanity is taking care of yourself, I'm guilty,” he admits proudly.

“`The guy is 570 years old,” says Conant. “He cooked for the original Last Supper.”

EARLY THAT EVENING, THE MEN WALK THROUGH THE FLORID carousel-colored gaming floor of the Wynn Las Vegas, the namesake mega-resort of Steve Wynn, the billionaire developer who revived The Strip’s spree of luxury gaming temples when he opened the Mirage in 1989. The suited pack moves quickly across the polished marble on its way to meet some dancers from La Rêve-The Dream, the resort’s long-running show that the men will be attending later that night. A Cirque du Soleil–style aquatic circus on steroids, it’s named after the Picasso painting Wynn famously punctured with his elbow.

Inside a circular theater, the chefs wait on a dais stage for their showgirl dates. They look like well-behaved schoolboys as five dancers in red cutout spandex dresses and heels slowly descend the staircase in single file. Introductions are made, the women tell them what fans they are, the chefs respond graciously. Music begins to play, so they partner into couples and start to dance, the men hoping to learn a few pointers.

“What are you doing?” Feldman’s partner asks him.

“I’m making a frame,” he says, preparing to lead her.

“No, you’re hugging me.”

obody starts the day looking fresher than Marcus Samuelsson. Having arrived for an early-morning tee time, he sits with The Wall Street Journal at a coffee table in the Country Club, the clubhouse attached to the pristine $100 million golf course at the Wynn. It’s 8:30 A.M., and he is wearing a white sweater, rainbow-checked madras pants, green socks and a white straw fedora turned up at the brim.

“That’s so funny, I was going to wear that today,” says Flay in a gritty tone as he sits down. The rest of the party is seated in sur-

"What are you doing?" asks Feldman, watching him fold the money into his pocket.
Marcus Samuelsson. “Vegas is an exciting place to eat right now,” says Scott Conant. “Once people came off The Strip, the French chefs came out—Jean-Georges, Joël Robuchon, Alain Ducasse is here, outposts of big-name establishments. “I tell you, man, I ran a 5K with him in Aspen. Altitude got me running, man!” he says excitedly, tapping his temple. “It’s all mental.”

But it’s the Cosmopolitan, says Conant, “where the Bellagio upped the game, and started it 20 years ago, then the Wynn, Wynn Las Vegas, Wynn Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 855-435-0005; wynnlasvegas.com. Rooms start at $200; Wynn Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 888-377-0000; wynnlasvegas.com. Fees start at $375; Wynn Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 888-377-0000; wynnlasvegas.com. The fritto misto at Scarpetta.

EARLY THAT EVENING, THE MEN WALK THROUGH THE FLORIDaire developer who revived The Strip’s spree of luxury gaming temples when he opened the Mirage in 1989. The suited pack moves quickly across the polished polished.

Descending the steps from the Wynn’s Empire Theater, Conant in an ERMANNO SCERVINO ZEPIA tuxedo ($2,695), dress shirt ($450) and tie ($220); Zakarian in an ASCOT CHANG shirt ($2100) and his own DRIES VAN NOTEN shoes and custom jacket and pants; Zakarian in a TONI FDRL cocktail jacket ($3,950), tuxedo pants ($1,990), shirt ($720), cummerbund ($450) and bow tie ($150); Flay in an ETRIO jacket ($1,845) and ASCOT CHANG shirt ($2100) and bow tie ($85). Opposite: Lunching on the terrace of the Country Club at the Wynn.
Seated outside, Zakarian is pouring wine as lunch arrives: shrimp and grits, phasant and black-truffle poppie... As they begin to eat, Feldman tells the story of a young chef opening his first restaurant and his preoccupation with celebrity.

“That’s fucking dumb,” says Conant, shaking his head. “Fame is an elusive luxury. People make stupid decisions based on popularity.”

Flay: “That’s because they became popular based on popularity. There’s a difference. Everybody at this table put their chef coat on and peeled potatoes. We understand what it takes to make it and without fame.”

Conant: “I say to chefs on Chopped all the time, the best quality is humility. If you’re humble, you’re likable. Otherwise, get the fuck out of here!”

Flay: “And there is the humility.”

Conant: “Look at Bobby. His first book came out in 1994. It’s rare that you find a guy who has been successful at such a young age and for so long. These young guys on Top Chef, any of these shows, have had this little taste of what they think is success...”

Flay: “I’ve seen it posted outside a restaurant: Third Place, Top Chef San Antonio. They spend the rest of their career trying to find that place they lived in instead of trying to stay relevant in a different way.”

Samuelsson: “Love for the craft, man. We are still talking about the same chefs in Europe even after 30 years. It should be that way, but now people want to go straight to the penthouse. You gotta use your craft, get savvy. Make some bad business deals, take some punches.”

Flay: “You can’t substitute experience and time—you can’t speed it up. You can become successful as a personality, but your repertoire will run out very quickly.”

Samuelsson: “And that comment about celebrity chefs never in the kitchen, it doesn’t make sense. I am in the kitchen every day, but you don’t define an artist by how much he paints. You judge him by his skill level and what he’s punching out.”

Flay: “You have to have your face in the food. These days people think a tattoo and a bottle of Sriracha equals success.”

All: “Whoo-hoo!”

Samuelsson: “I think all this will go away. Why do you have to be loud about farm-to-table? You’re not loud about ‘We have electricity.’ It’s natural.”

Zakarian: “It’s all bullshit. I was doing farm-to-table in 1981 at Le Cirque.”

Flay: “It’s common-sense cooking. It means nothing to me. The food people are doing today in some high-end, more modern restaurants is missing one thing: craveability. With molecular gastronomy you don’t have that.”

Conant: “The best compliment you can give a chef is that you remember a dish they cooked.”

Zakarian: “Like Jonathan Waxman’s chicken, it’s ethereal. It’s food that tastes like itself. It’s so hard to do that.”

Another Food Network fan walks over to introduce himself. Ron Perelman, the billionaire financier, is in the clubhouse to have lunch with Wynn. “I’m a big fan. Food Network is my favorite channel. I hate the network stuff,” Perelman says, then turns and wanders away.

Zakarian continues, “Everybody here is insecure. I’m insecure, so I want to take care of people, make them happy. That’s what I love about this business. We’re all innkeepers at the end of the fucking day.”

The plethora of chefs and cooking bros on the current food scene can make these alpha-male unions hard to swallow, or just seemingly ego-fueled. With this group, the mix of ribbing, respect and affection is evident, and alongside the em-