

Going After Gagosian: The Feds Sue the City's Most Flamboyant Art Dealer

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UNDER FIRE

THE BLAIR AFFAIR: A MORALITY PLAY ON WEST 43RD STREET
BY MICHAEL WOLFF

PLUS: INSIDE A NEWSROOM UNDER SIEGE BY CARL SWANSON

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(SWEET SENSATION)

by Sarah Bernard

Jean Georges pastry chef Johnny Iuzzini is sugar-shocking diners with flavors and textures never dreamed of. What happens backstage is sometimes shocking, too.

STYLING BY LIZA JERNOW.

As late lunchers tuck into their lemon-poached lobster with Gewürztraminer foam in the decorous calm of Jean Georges's cherry-blossom-filled dining room, the pastry kitchen, down a flight of stairs, through the Trump International Hotel's kitchen, past management offices and a dry storage closet, is in sensory overdrive. 50 Cent is blasting from the radio. Sous-chefs wielding gooey truffles elbow past culinary-school interns making crispy lemon macarons while 28-year-old executive pastry chef Johnny Iuzzini tests a new recipe.

"Look what I got!" Iuzzini says, unwrapping an alarmingly unappetizing-looking brown log. "I've been waiting for this forever"—forever in Iuzzini time being about a week, since everything he does, especially talking, is done in sugar-charged hyper-speed.

The log is chocolate goat cheese, something Jean-Georges Vongerichten, or J.G., as Iuzzini calls him, heard whisperings of. Scoring the best and often the most obscure ingredients first is a favorite chef's game, one that occupies much of Iuzzini's time, since each of his painstakingly crafted desserts is actually made of four labor-intensive "tastings," or interpretations of an ingredient. Typically, new tastings are rotated in every two months. But Iuzzini's current chocolate tasting—too popular to mess with—has been going strong since December. Today, however, he is determined to take it down.

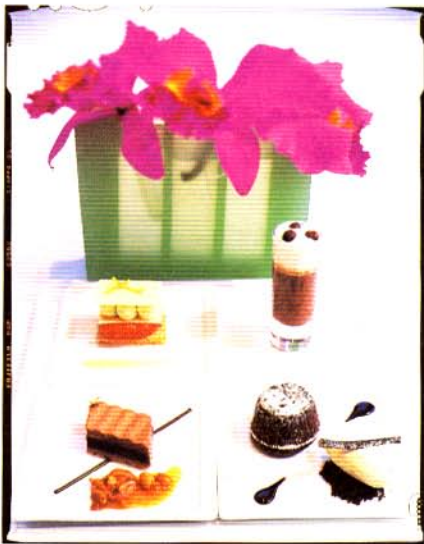
He spoons the brown cheese into a bowl next to his laptop and notebook (all of Iuzzini's desserts start on loose-leaf paper) but is interrupted when a slab of lime-green marshmallow catches his eye. He watches skeptically as his partner in crime, sous-chef Jason Casey, along with a host of interns, pours it onto a baking sheet. "It's cardamom," says Casey, offering him a taste. "It's perfect."

"Dude, it's burning my nose," says Iuzzini. "It's like Vicks."

WITH HIS BLACK, SPIKY HAIR AND IMPISH, dimpled face, Johnny Iuzzini looks like a cross between a *Risky Business*-era Tom Cruise and *Will & Grace*'s Sean Hayes. In fact, he looks like the hard-living club kid he was—and to some extent still is. If the Jean Georges kitchen is a temple of haute cuisine, Iuzzini regularly desecrates it with constant pranks and lewd banter. But Iuzzini's madcap persona belies an impeccable culinary pedigree: Four-star kitchens are all he knows; he's worked only with the often volatile Daniel Boulud and the stereotypically exacting pastry king François Payard since he was 19 years old. Iuzzini, whose Runyonesque patter is delivered with a Gallic overlay, is one of a small handful of young

pastry chefs, like Sam Mason at WD-50, Lincoln Carson of Steve Hanson's B.R. Guest empire, and Jehangir Mehta at Aix, who are declaring their freedom from their imperious French mentors. "We all understand French technique, but we're American—we're not wound as tight," Iuzzini says in a supersized understatement. "We don't take ourselves as seriously."

Pastry legend Jacques Torres, who left Le Cirque in 2000 to open Jacques Torres Chocolate in Brooklyn, has paid close attention to their ascent. "There are more and more young Americans in the market," he says. "A lot of times when I go to a



FOUR TOPS: At Jean Georges, desserts come four to a plate. Iuzzini's chocolate tasting is the most popular.

restaurant, I'm thinking, *Thank God I got out of it*. You go into Jean Georges and see what Johnny is doing, you're thinking, *Wow, this guy is good. He's young, and he has way more energy than me*. It's going to be tougher and tougher for someone like me to make a name now. It's true. There's a lot of talent out there, I tell you."

In fact, François Payard sees in Iuzzini a kindred spirit. "I don't make toys," he says. "I make food. And he is the same way. He is not like a clown on the plate."

Iuzzini worked in Payard's kitchen, but he developed an even closer relationship with Boulud. Leaving Boulud a year ago to work for Vongerichten, Boulud's main competitor, was painful. But while Boulud's food is French state-of-the-art, firmly in a classic tradition, Vongerichten's palate is more exploratory—sometimes a little psychedelic, even—like Iuzzini's. "With the marriages Johnny puts together now," says Bill Yosses, pastry chef at Citarella and formerly of Bouley, "he finds a way to make a kind of harmony, the same way Pierre Hermé can take green tea and grapefruit and make it work with proportion and ratio."

As Iuzzini scribbles out proportions on his notepad, next to him is the yield of yesterday's labor: sugar plums marinating in lemongrass, kaffir-lime leaves, and ginger, alongside rhubarb soaking up muscat wine and grenadine. He'll often consult Vongerichten on such combinations. "We'll talk about spices," says Iuzzini. "I told him I was thinking of doing pineapple and saffron. He said no, green coriander. He knew the acidity worked well with coriander."

Since he moved across the park, the buzz on Iuzzini has been steadily building. This spring, he was named one of the ten best pastry chefs in America by trade bible *Pastry Art & Design*. That same week, he received a James Beard award nomination—the foodie equivalent of the Oscars. Editors have been calling about book deals, and the Food Network has also approached him, but Iuzzini's being careful. Overexposure is definitely a danger. So is encroaching on your chef's territory. "You have to be very careful not to hurt the ego of a big chef," notes Torres. Iuzzini is well aware that he has reached a tricky point. He will now share the same dilemma as those rock-star chefs before him who were stuck between wanting attention and staying on course in their kitchens. Mention Rocco DiSpirito and he rolls his eyes. But he can do only so much to slow the momentum down.

Today he is channeling such anxieties into his new dish. Iuzzini's envisioned the goat cheese as part of a filling for a chocolate ravioli along with mascarpone, robiola, vanilla bean, and orange zest. There's only one problem—being a pastry chef, Iuzzini's never actually made *pasta* before.

He steals a pasta roller from the kitchen next door and stares at it. "How does this thing work? It isn't turning right," he says, trying to crank the handle with one hand while shoving in the block of chocolate dough he'd made the day before with the other. Chef de cuisine Tony DiSalvo comes in to help. "You should know how to make this, man," DiSalvo says, shaking his head. "This isn't even the right handle!"

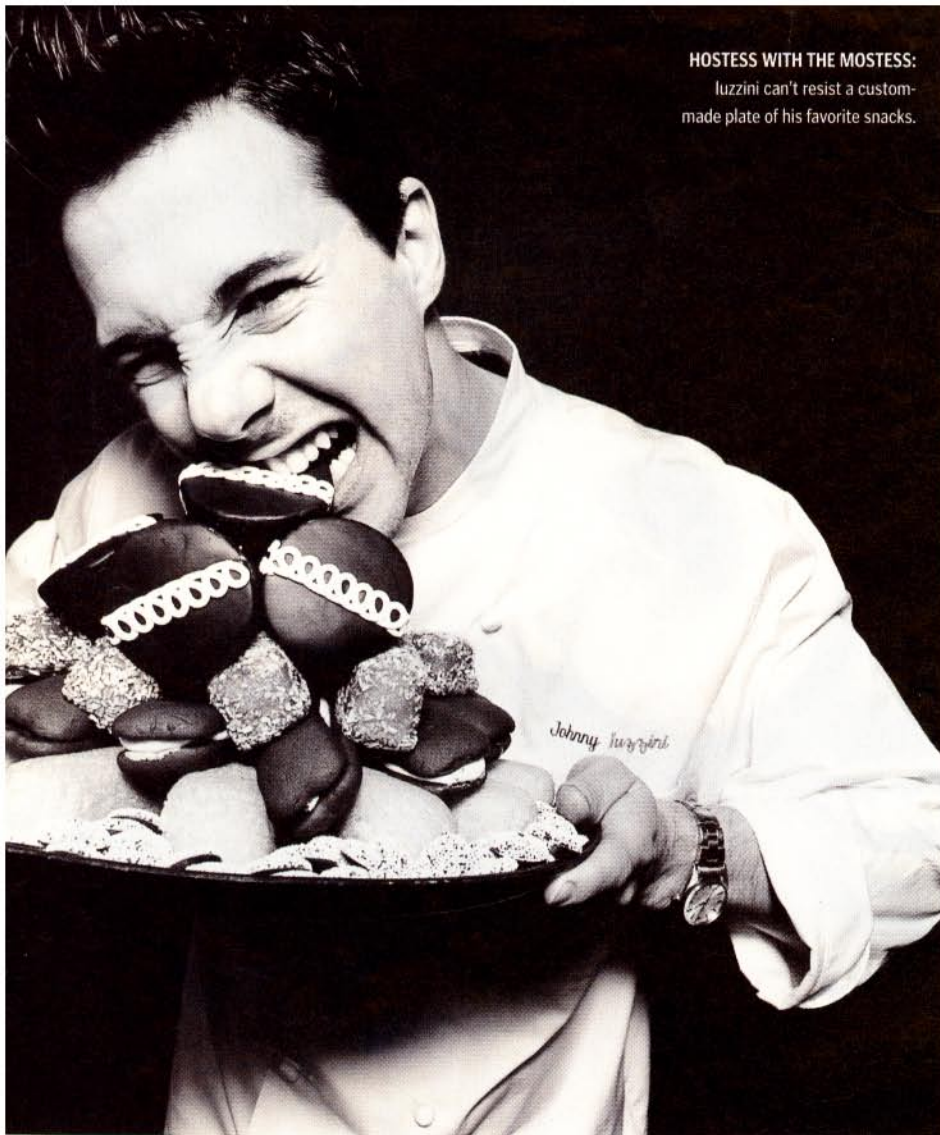
"Can you believe this?" says Iuzzini,



POUR SOME SUGAR ON ME:
The human S'more; opposite,
luzzini covered in 42 jars of Fluff.



PLAY WITH YOUR FOOD:
luzzini sees the world through
Krispy Kreme doughnuts.



HOSTESS WITH THE MOSTESS:
Iuzzini can't resist a custom-made plate of his favorite snacks.

who glares at DiSalvo, then laughs. "He's tearing me up!"

Moments later, Iuzzini is brushing egg yolk on the paper-thin dough like an old Italian pro. He dots the tiny pockets with his cheese mixture, pinches them closed, and perforates them with a pizza cutter. "It's all about trial and error," he explains. He heats the first batch gently in simple syrup flavored with orange peel. Even though he sweated the fact that the dough was too hard—or too something—the result is a silky texture followed by a burst of sweetness, salt, and orange tang. When "J.G." comes by, he pops one in his mouth and stands expressionless as he pauses to absorb his young chef's work. "Sexy," he pronounces, and heads back up to the floor.

IT'S NOT JUST THE SUGAR that makes pastry chefs crazy. With cooking, you often have chances to fix things, make adjustments; with pastry, if you don't nail the technique precisely, your work is doomed. Then there's the fact that where

dinner is sustenance, dessert is fantasy. "Pastry chefs tend to be a little more out there," says Brad Thompson, one of Iuzzini's best friends from Daniel, who's now the chef at the swank Phoenician resort in Arizona. "This business has always been fringe types—lunatics, crazy French people, psychotics with bad temperaments. But pastry chefs are outsiders even to us. They develop these personalities almost like jazz musicians in the twenties and thirties who played for themselves because no one appreciated what they were doing."

"If you look at the kitchen like a hospital," says Torres, who's also a dean of the French Culinary Institute, "the chef is like the emergency room. The pastry chef is more like a specialist with the knee. We can't do anything last-minute. You don't see a pastry chef cook a cake and decorate a cake and send a cake out; that's not the way it works. Pastry needs more planning. Everything is labeled and done in advance. At FCI, we give a personality test to our students to tell them if we think their person-

ality is better suited to pastry or to cooking."

There are other idiosyncrasies. Iuzzini, like most of his pastry-chef colleagues (most of whom are skinny like him), doesn't actually like food. He has eaten a full meal at Jean Georges only once, before he took the job. Every evening at 5:30, he eats dinner in the hotel cafeteria with the rest of the Trump International Hotel staff. It is a spread of cold cuts and limp steamed vegetables, below the standard at any midtown deli. "I eat to survive, you know?" says Iuzzini. Unless he finds himself face-to-face with a Hostess cupcake or a McDonald's, that is, where he'll easily drop five bucks on a dollar menu. He doesn't drink water—"I don't like the taste of it"—unless it's spiked with Kool-Aid-colored vitamin-C powder, which means most of what he eats and drinks is sugar.

"I am a sugar freak," he says with pride. His love for sugar has long since worn down his real teeth. Nowadays, he has to replace his laminates every year even though he brushes four times a day.

WHILE IUZZINI WAS MAKING A NAME FOR himself in the pastry world, he was doing the same thing in the club scene. Most nights, he could be found on the dance floor of the Palladium and Disco 2000. While working as a sous-chef at Payard, he secretly got a job manning the door at Sound Factory and then Tunnel from 11 P.M. to 4 A.M., and was occasionally flown to clubs in Miami and Vegas. Known as Johnny Quest, he sported a silver body-suit with bell-bottoms, platform boots, and a derby hat as his signature ensemble. "I was a bitch," he says, recalling how he'd send partygoers home to change if their outfits were too bland. His club-kid friends had no inkling of his growing pastry prominence. "They knew me as Johnny," he says. "I'd make up something different every night. I was a stuntman. I'm part of a traveling circus. I'm a concert roadie. Not to be serious: That was the whole point."

THESE DAYS, Iuzzini's metallic getups are languishing in the closet, but his fetish for Gaultier mesh shirts continues. His penchant for mischief is also firmly intact: For birthdays, friends are likely to receive a cake in the shape of, say, a giant joint—or, for a particularly lucky fellow, a giant, elaborately rigged penis. Iuzzini ran PVC tubing down the center, filled it with whipped cream, and attached it to a bicycle pump. When the birthday boy posed for a photo, he splattered the guy with the filling. "I have the whole thing on video," Iuzzini says gleefully.

He also has pictures of the time he hog-tied one of his cooks, crowning him with a Krispy Kreme deli hat. Sous-chefs who mouthed off got locked in the freezer. Others got rolled in rubber floor mats, which Iuzzini and crew then jumped on, elbows first, like WWF champions. His favorite form of torture is actually a French tradition. On a chef's last day, it is customary to ambush him and douse him with the grossest thing you can find. "For one guy," says Iuzzini, "we threw him in a garbage can in the walk-in and covered him with egg whites, beet soup, and horrible-smelling fish juice."

Sometimes, he would convene a "fight club" in the Daniel basement. Iuzzini, sous-chef Neil Gallagher (now the executive chef at Oceana), and Thompson, known collectively as the Pyramid of Darkness, would round up the biggest dishwasher they could find. The four of them would then go into a room, and two would come out the winners, most often with torn uniforms and blood dripping down their fronts. Given his wiry frame, it seems doubtful that Iuzzini would survive. "He has two brothers," says Thompson. "He's scrappy."

Even Boulud was a target. "Whenever Daniel would stand in between us, we'd crush him," says Iuzzini. One night, hours after a particularly violent encounter, Iuzzini's cell phone rang while he was decompressing at the movies. It was Boulud, claiming to be at the emergency room. "You punctured my lung, you fuck!" he yelled, and hung up. Iuzzini quickly called the restaurant in a panic. Boulud answered, victorious.

GROWING UP IN WALDEN, NEW YORK, IN Orange County, Iuzzini spent most of his time racing three-wheelers with his younger brother or planning keg parties in the woods and drinking Rumpelintz. The closest he got to a kitchen was watching his mom, a veterinary technician, make her famous Black Forest cake. His dad, a plumbing and heating contractor, once worked in the family's former restaurant, called the Club, but Iuzzini was too little to remember.

At 15, Iuzzini took a part-time job at a Catskills country club washing dishes. He was quickly promoted to prep work. At Valley Central High School, he signed up for a culinary-trade program for school credit. After graduation, he put his basic cooking skills to work as a *garde-manger* at the River Café in Brooklyn, but found himself much more interested in the pastry kitchen, where Eric Gouteyron held court. When a service job opened up, Gouteyron hired him. (Unlike in the savory side of the kitchen, service jobs in pastry are the lowest on the totem pole.)

On his 18th birthday, Iuzzini started at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park. It was while spreading tuilles during his ex-

ternship at Luxe under pastry chef Lincoln Carson that he got an audience with Payard. Carson had just worked with Payard, and Iuzzini begged him for an introduction.

Instead of an interview, Payard put him to work for a day making petits fours and ice cream. "He was standing behind me the whole time to see my speed, if I worked clean," says Iuzzini, who recalls the day with a shiver. "At the end, he said, 'Okay, you start working for me now.' I said, 'Chef, I'm still in school.' He goes, 'Why you waste my time? Okay, you come work for me every weekend until you finish!'"

Payard's unsettling style of motivating by fear drove many a pastry chef to change careers, but Iuzzini took it as a challenge. "I'd say, 'What's he going to get me on today?'" says Iuzzini. "I promised myself he would never get me on the same thing twice." It was Iuzzini's father, who held down three jobs, who taught him his work ethic, but it was Payard who taught him how to handle the hierarchy of the kitchen—Iuzzini doesn't hesitate to fiercely call out his staff when they don't perform, but at the same time, he's willing to do everything and anything himself, no matter how lowly the task.

The combination of fastidious sugar artiste and wild nightlife impresario seems improbable, but there were ways in which one fed the other. At the clubs, Iuzzini learned how to handle and charm every kind of personality, an important skill for running a kitchen staffed by a constant stream of sugar-addled students and stressed-out chefs. "Today, to become well known," says Torres, "you have to have a certain look and you have to have a certain personality."

Eventually, however, the Clark Kent-Superman routine caught up with Iuzzini. After never having taken a sick day, he got pneumonia and missed an entire week. Payard rode over on his scooter in the rain to bring him soup. "I was almost in tears," says Iuzzini. "I was ashamed."

Burned out, he thought about quitting the business. He was making more money and gaining more prominence with his night job. Instead, he decided to escape the city. When he told Boulud his plans, Boulud lent him \$10,000 for a world tour, on the condition that he'd come back to help him open Café Boulud and the new Daniel. Iuzzini immediately left for Hong Kong. He lounged on the beaches in Australia and visited his grandfather's village in Italy. After months without going near a pilot light, he decided to try *stage-ing* (i.e., apprenticing for free) at the best pastry kitchens in France—with Pierre Hermé at Ladurée in Paris and the famed Hôtel de Paris in Monte Carlo, where he fell in love with pastry again.

When Iuzzini returned to Daniel, his relationship with Boulud continued not un-

like a dysfunctional father and son's. Boulud favored him, letting him get away with his green or blue or Billy Idol-yellow spikes, but at the same time, he was slow to promote him. Iuzzini was running the new Daniel pastry kitchen without the title. Managing the kitchen came naturally, even when tough times hit the restaurant business after September 11 and he had to fire people, including his fiancée. Boulud made him "Employee of the Month" for his work and eventually gave him the official title, but four months later he brought in a co-pastry chef from France, Eric Bertoia, to share it with him. Iuzzini knew he had to leave.

He was considering a move to the West Coast. Thomas Keller in California wanted to talk. Then last May, Vongerichten called with an opening but wouldn't say for what. Iuzzini wasn't interested in Vong or Mercer Kitchen or JoJo and refused to come in unless it was for a four-star post. It was. "When I hire somebody," says Vongerichten, "I go by feeling." After meeting with Iuzzini for only an hour, he notes, "that was it for me. I knew he had the basics down after seven years with Daniel. I think he just needed somebody to give him the freedom of expressing himself, finding his own turf. I think he had a different relationship with Daniel."

IUZZINI AND BOULUD still have a unique attachment. At a pre-James Beard event, when Iuzzini spotted Boulud chatting with Wolfgang Puck, he, along with Thompson and Gallagher, grabbed him, lifted him, and slammed him against the wall. "Throw these guys out!" cried Boulud, laughing hysterically as they kicked him in the back of the knees. The next night, Iuzzini offered friends a magic trick: "I can make my thumb disappear," he said before shoving it into the rear of Boulud's tuxedo pants.

When he didn't win—first-timers seldom do—Vongerichten consoled him. "It took me five years. Don't worry," he said. "Now you're on the list."

In a sense, however, Iuzzini has already triumphed. "You've got to hear this message," says Iuzzini, dialing into his voice mail like a Ritalin-amped kid. It's the message Boulud left him the night before the Beard nominations were announced. "Joneeee!" Boulud says, in his super-thick French-English. "It is your Big Daddeeee! You are still young, eh? But it would be great to win it the first time. I vote for you. Then you pay me \$1,000, okay?"

It is a message Iuzzini has replayed a thousand times since he got it. "God, I have to figure out how to save this," he says, then pauses. "Let's listen to it again." ■