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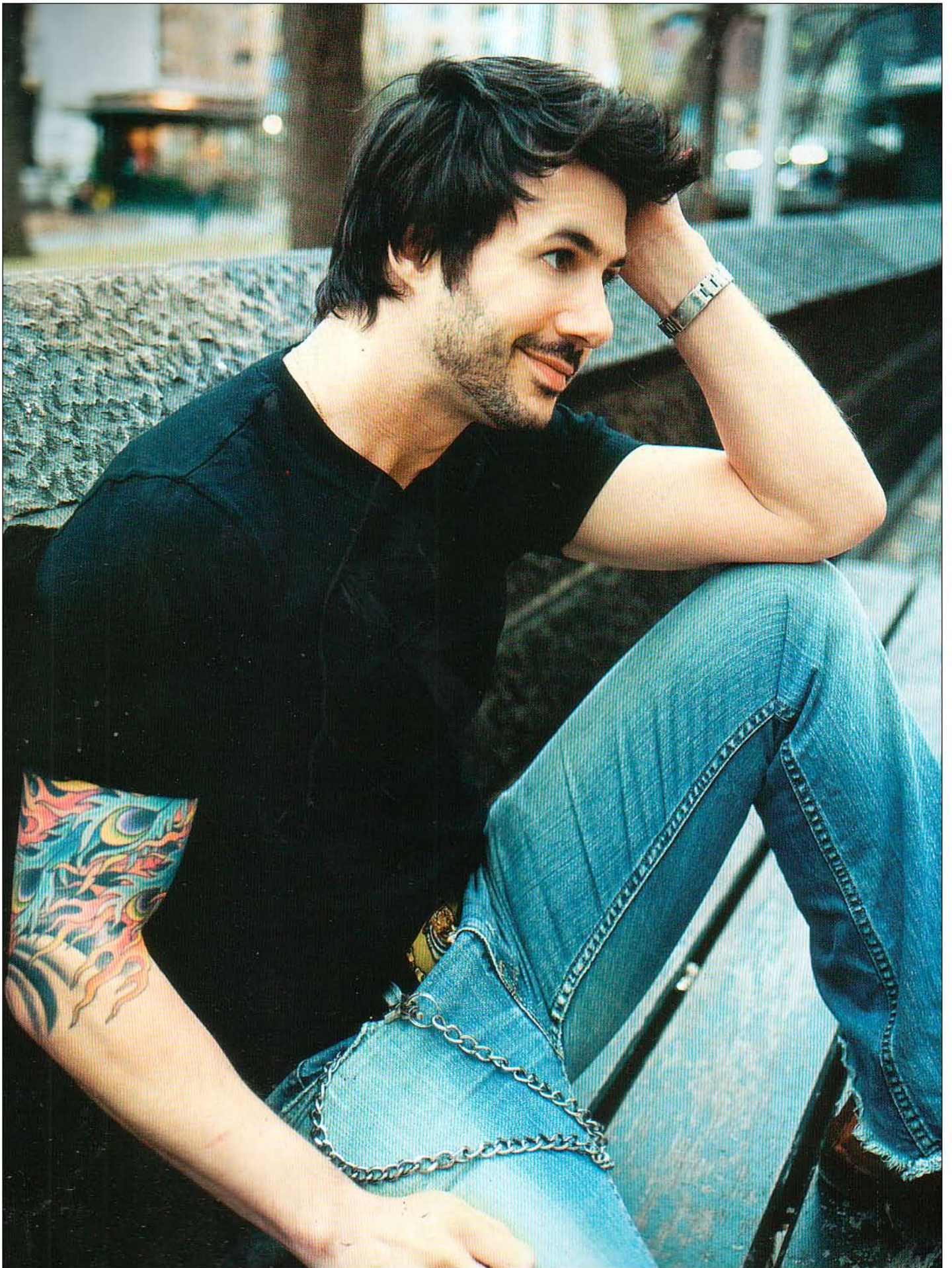


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"It's only hard to work in the kitchen after getting tattooed if your fellow chefs find out and play the slap game all night." —*Johnny Iuzzini*





JOHNNY LUZZINI

The desserts at New York City's Jean Georges are some of the most sought-after sweets in the world. Tasty dishes, such as a citrus quartet featuring delicious innovations like halvah powder and a gelled Meyer lemon curd with lemon poppy cake, are the work of pastry whiz Johnny Luzzini, who honed his sweet craft at a list of the city's most-hallowed culinary temples. "I did whatever I had to do to work with the best," he explains.

Raised in rural New York, the star chef built his career from the butcher's table up. At 17, he got a job at Brooklyn's River Café but struggled with butchering meat. Growing up outside the city with a mother whose career involved nursing sick and injured animals back to health made him sensitive to animal suffering. "I said a Hail Mary every time I had to boil a lobster," he says.

Across the kitchen, Luzzini noticed River Café's pastry chef, Eric Gouteyron, spending hours creating chocolate sculptures. "I apprenticed for him for free after my 10-hour shift," says Luzzini. "I saw how creative and precise pastry work could be. I was already enrolled at the CIA [Culinary Institute of America], though I hadn't started yet. I called and asked them to transfer to the pastry program."

Before coming to Jean Georges, Luzzini was mentored by a string of culinary luminaries, including François Payard and Daniel Boulud, until a series

of major life crises several years ago nearly derailed his growing career. "In a single year, my father had three heart attacks, my mother was battling cancer, and my fiancé left me and married someone else," he says.

At the time, he considered quitting. "I'm not the type that creates from misery," he says. But a book that referenced the story of the phoenix, a mythical bird that burns and regenerates from its own ashes, inspired Luzzini to soldier on. Part of his renewed commitment to himself and his work involved getting a phoenix tattoo, an intricate three-quarter-length sleeve designed by Chris O'Donnell of New York Adorned. "It took a total of 17 hours. My mother passed away just before it was completed," says Luzzini. In her honor, he's now working with O'Donnell to design a piece for his other arm that will depict a griffin, the mythological creature that stands for protection and strength.

In the meantime, Luzzini is back in the kitchen, where he shuns the concept of signature dishes and claims he doesn't care about customer favorites. "People have expectations for appetizers and entrées, but with dessert they are willing to take a chance," he says. "They'll try anything. Dessert is a fantasy, a bonus." —Joy Manning