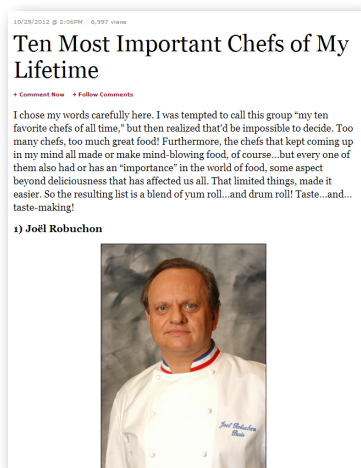




TEN MOST IMPORTANT CHEFS OF MY LIFETIME

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I chose my words carefully here. I was tempted to call this group "my ten favorite chefs of all time," but then realized that'd be impossible to decide. Too many chefs, too much great food! Furthermore, the chefs that kept coming up in my mind all made or make mind-blowing food, of course...but every one of them also had or has an "importance" in the world of food, some aspect beyond deliciousness that has affected us all. That limited things, made it easier. So the resulting list is a blend of yum roll...and drum roll! Taste...and...taste-making!

1) Joël Robuchon

Whenever I'm asked which meal stands out as the greatest meal of my life, I say without hesitation...well, I'm not sure exactly which one it was...but it was certainly one of the three meals I was lucky enough to have in the 1980s at Jamin, in Paris. Oh...mon...dieu. Jamin was Robuchon's little spot, his only little spot, before he exploded onto the world stage. All of the big-deal chefs in France were grappling with the implications of Nouvelle Cuisine, sometimes in similar ways...but Robuchon's food had a vastly distinct, idiosyncratic character. Is that what he taught us: be brave and be yourself? But his prodigious talent, his absurdly refined taste, pushed it way beyond that. If he made a surprising juxtaposition, it always made cosmic sense on your palate. Anything served on a Jamin table was a triumph of precision; you felt as if he was cooking JUST for you, and you were being treated like a powerful restaurant critic. Through la cuisine Robuchon, to this day, there is a dependence on great products, sure, like all the others...but this guy really means it! How else could I have had the greatest oysters ever-raw, plain, and really the greatest-at a Robuchon restaurant in Paris in 2004? (From Cancale, he told me.) Set him loose beyond the products themselves, and a customary place for Robuchon (which I love)...is decadent richness that makes sense. The hollow noodle gratin at the Victor Hugo circa 1995...each noodle stuffed with foie gras by hand. The signature Jamin dish in 1985...langoustines wrapped in cabbage leaves with an ambrosial foie gras sauce. Sure, he has lightened up somewhat in recent years, at his Ateliers around the world...but even in a Robuchon sashimi dish there's always a core of decadence, maybe based on nothing more than which fish he chose and how brilliant that fish is. The point is...you can always tell it's Robuchon, and you can always feel the lift above all other contenders. I'd say that for us old-time foodies from the '80s...Robuchon was the moment that we started believing chefs could be gods. Robuchon was a rapturous leap to divinity, and there will never again be a leap like this in my lifetime. Well, actually going to heaven would be the next opportunity.

2) Alain Chapel

Ten years before Robuchon started astonishing the world in Paris (early 1980s), Alain Chapel was building his own god-like credentials in Mionnay, twelve miles outside Chapel's birthplace of Lyon. I had the chance to dine at Alain Chapel only once, in 1983, and I will never forget the aura of that incredible meal. Neither will anyone else who experienced a meal there;

one of the old-time foodie's hugest heros. (I attended a class at the CIA in Hyde Park a few years ago in which the students were asked to research Chapel, and write a fictitious "review" of the restaurant, so legendary is it!) All the history books call Chapel a founder of Nouvelle Cuisine, but that, to me, is reductive: none of the star chefs of that day, to my knowledge, with the possible exception of Bocuse, fought so hard to preserve tradition. My main course that night was stuffed pigs' ears with fried parsley, and I am forever grateful for the time travel to 1932 or thereabouts. Chapel had roughly the same effect in the business that Robuchon had: long before chefs were stars, he made all around him reach for the stars. He died, of a stroke, in Avignon, in 1990...so we'll never know whether his later-in-life work would have been as scintillating as Robuchon's. I'm guessing yes. And I'm averring that these are the two guys from the '80s who changed the world.

3) Michel Bras



The one other French chef who **MUST** be mentioned among the universally revered of the last 40 years...is Michel Bras, still high on a hill in Laguiole, France, in knife-and-cattle country, near the center of France. Going to Bras is a pilgrimage, and many serious foodies have made it. I first heard of Michel in 1989, when I met a young chef in a long-forgotten NY restaurant who, without even being billed as the chef, was making dazzling food. Some of us noticed. I found out that his name was Tom Colicchio, and I went backstage. I asked him who influenced him. He said "I did an apprenticeship at Michel Bras. I will never be the same again." I went to Bras ten years later, and now I will never be the same again. Bras holds many miracles for those who know his work. In some ways, he is a 21st-century Chapel, spreading his supernaturally talented gloss over traditional local food. His part of France is known for aligot, a kind of mashed potato with cheese whipped in. (In his town, they use same-day curds of Laguiole cheese.) My aligot at Bras was the greatest ever. Visiting the kitchen during the meal, I saw an elderly lady preparing the dish. I commented to Michel how nice it is to have tradition like that in a three-star kitchen. "She is my *muh-ZAIR*," he said. Wow. Madame Bras. On the world-influencing side, however, Bras is even more important in what was then the dawning idea of locavore-ism. He had his chefs roam the mountain pastures of the Aveyron, finding unusual herbs and plants to incorporate into the cuisine. (The same idea was soon picked up by chef Marc Veyrat in Annecy, who did it, as he does everything, in a much louder way.) Yes, Bras served the great local steak of the Aubrac...but he also elevated stand-alone vegetable dishes to a culinary pinnacle (like his famous gargouillou, an exotic vegetable sauté, anticipating many a modern chef). Most important, perhaps, is the way Bras, building on Robuchon and Chapel, embossed the tradition of talented chefs with magic and aura. Bras kept (and keeps) scrupulous notebooks, with fantastic drawings, about his culinary ideas (picked up later by El Bulli as a working concept); I had the great fortune to look over his current scrawlings with him in 1999, and I came away feeling I had unmistakably met the culinary DaVinci.

4) Jean-Louis Palladin

And here is the man who brought that level of chef aura to the U.S., fathering a whole generation of American chefs who wanted to be Jean-Louis Palladin. I was lucky enough to have a number of interesting contacts with Jean-Louis—dining together at a restaurant I recommended to him in Dijon (he loved it!); in Las Vegas, sharing a calf's head with Daniel Boulud and Jean-Georges Vongerichten that was boiled by Jean-Louis at his restaurant there; actually dining at Palladin's legendary, game-changing Watergate restaurant in D.C. several times. On every occasion I could see his extraordinary energy and charisma; when we tasted the snail-stuffed brussels sprouts in parsley sauce at Thibert in Dijon, the Gallic flare of his nostrils (a sign of delight) immediately went on my list of indelible culinary memories. Basically, Jean-Louis took all the things that the greats were doing in France...and started doing them with the same panache in the U.S. But he did it American-style, which is why he was so important. His New York Times obituary quotes him as saying "the challenge of cooking in America is to discover the newest and best products from the different states — baby eels and lamprey from

Maine, fresh snails from Oregon, blowfish from the Carolinas and California oysters – and then to learn how to integrate them into your cuisine.” Born in the southwest of France, Palladin already was a star before coming to America; in 1974, when he was 28, cooking at La Table des Cordeliers in Condom (near his birthplace) he earned two Michelin stars. No one this young had ever earned two twinklers before. But Jean-Louis, who had a serious lust for life, wanted to play on a larger stage...and in so doing changed dining in America. He died at 55 years old, from lung cancer—never able to truly see the results in his adopted country of his innovation.

5) Judy Roger

There’s probably no American-born chef who gets a bigger piece of my heart than Judy Rogers, chef/owner for decades of Zuni Café in San Francisco. Judy is a chef’s chef, not known widely to non-industry foodies outside of California, but



someone who in my opinion changed everything in American cooking. Of course, that description is supposed to go to Alice Waters, another Bay Area great, who revolutionized the way we think about prime ingredients. Let us give Alice her due! She did do that! However, my meals at Chez Panisse—which one local writer described to me as akin to “going for dinner at the home of a really good cook”—never for me reached the mind-blowing deliciousness levels of my many meals at Zuni Café. And this deliciousness has had great impact on so many East Coast chefs who, as I’ve been hearing for 30 years now, come into the San Francisco airport, bring their luggage with them directly to Zuni, then go to their hotels to check in after lunch.

I once asked Judy to describe her food at Zuni, and she told me a story. “The best food of my life,” she said, “was what I ate at the three-star Troisgros in France...in the kitchen, when I was working there!” Perfect. That is the casual, informal, delicious tone of Zuni Café. And in some ways the French background is important: Zuni has arguably America’s best oyster service, as well as roast chicken of the gods (famously stuffed with bread and cooked in a wood-burning oven). But there’s a strong Italianate spin as well; pastas are great, and REAL, and I’ll never forget the way this woman gloops mascarpone on runny polenta and turns it into a masterpiece. THEN...there’s the American side! Zuni’s hamburger is glorious and, perhaps best of all, you will never in this universe find a better Caesar Salad (so crisp and lemony it becomes a permanent part of your dreams). In other words, in drawing together an all-star team of informal French, Italian and American specialties—Judy anticipated by 30 years all of the things that obsess us today. Not to mention—Judy codified all of this in a cookbook that I believe to be, in terms of passion and an original world-food-view, the most important American cookbook since the first tome by Julia Child.

6) Nobu Matsuhisa

For most of my early culinary life, the American restaurant scene was dominated by French restaurants, Italian restaurants, Chinese restaurants...and, from Texas/Chicago on west, Mexican restaurants. Sure there were other kinds of restaurants decades ago...but the Big Four WAS the waterfront. Still is. But...there has been one major addition: the sushi bar! Look around. Sushi bars are ubiquitous now, in every major city, in every minor city. Japanese restaurants are now part of the new Big Five. And I would argue that one man had almost everything to do with this: Nobu Matsuhisa. Nobu, basically, figured out how to get Americans to love sushi. I, personally, didn’t need his guidance; I first had sushi in New York in the 1970s, and it was love at first bite. But not so much for my friends, as I recall so well. It’s hard to realize this now, but the typical response to sushi was “yecch!” My dad, great 1950s eater, said...“that’s bait!” as I tried, over and over, to get him on the hamachi highway. For a few decades, I contend, Americans wanted to eat sushi: so healthful, so chic. But they didn’t love it. Then...out of the blue...along came Nobu. I first encountered him in the early 1980s, at Matsuhisa, his place in Beverly Hills—where I saw Billy Wilder, Hall & Oates, Warren Beatty, dutifully doing the raw. I knew something was up. Out came the uni roll, wrapped in shiso, battered and fried, tempura-style...OMG...and I said...this dude is different! He is

Japanese-born, but he has awesome assimilative powers....unlike most Japanese chefs of his era, who fiercely stuck to tradition. Before coming to the U.S., Nobu spent some years in Peru—where he fell in love with chiles, where he started to experiment with them at the sushi bar. Later, first in L.A., then in New York at Nobu, he waged a revolution. Americans who didn't really dig "raw fish" flocked to Nobu...where your sashimi might be flash-fried, or drizzled with oil (olive, even!), or tossed with garlic, or partnered with chili heat, etc. He won the revolution because the radical thinking was just right for its time...but also because his food was so disarmingly, sexily delicious. Today, the waterfront is dotted, everywhere, with Matsuhisa heirs. Though others have gone beyond Nobu in their Japanese creativity, he will always be the man who paved the way for Japanese food America.

7) Francis Mallman



And here's a man whose influence in America is as yet small...but, starting in Mendoza, Argentina, several decades ago, he set the South American food world on fire. Almost literally. In a world-wide restaurant era obsessed with cooking showily over open fire—consider all them California grill-meisters of the '80s and 90s and today!—Mallman is unquestionably the greatest grill man of all time. I've had his food several times now in various South American venues, and I am always dazzled by the flavor and texture he coaxes out of grilled food. He also created the model of the rock star chef in South America, which is also of importance...but I think his influence on the cooking side will only grow. Why? A few years back he teamed

up with my food writer bud Peter Kaminsky (Brooklyn resident!) to create the blazingly brilliant cookbook *Seven Fires*—which is about, as it screams, seven different ways to cook with open fire. I suspect that one of the great restaurant trends all over the world, going forward, will be chefs applying fire in creative ways; I guarantee that Mallman will be the god of this activity, as he is now to those who know him.

8) Alain Ducasse

One more world-shaking impulse erupted from France in the 1990s: Alain Ducasse, who earned a third star at Louis XV in Monte Carlo (well, that's almost France) about twenty years ago. But that's the least of the story: then, Ducasse really got to work. Sure, there had been peripatetic chefs before—ever since Bocuse got famous in the 1970s, a man named Roger Jaloux was mostly guiding the Bocuse kitchen in Collonges—but Ducasse had empire in his eyes from the get-go, a unique vision of world domination, and the highly unusual skill set to pull it off brilliantly. Younger than Robuchon, he saw before Robuchon what one man can do in an ever-shrinking world—a vision that will surely continue to affect us all for decades. Foodies sometimes grouse about star chefs who are not in their kitchens—but I've had meals at Ducasse restaurants that were stupendous without a shred of Ducasse presence. He is a brilliant conceptualizer, hirer, motivator, teacher, discoverer of raw material sources—wherever he is. He restlessly visits his few dozen restaurants, and his input—which sometimes must carry his restaurants through to his next visit, months later—is like nothing I've ever seen. I had the honor of sitting with him once at his original place in New York, at 4 in the afternoon, as the restaurant's chef de cuisine presented Ducasse with the 15 new dishes coming up on the Winter menu. He tasted every one, spoke quietly to the chef, then caught a plane. I returned to the restaurant a few nights later to taste all the dishes again during dinner. Despite the fact that the first meal was cooked by the chef for only two of us at 4PM...every dish the second time around, during a dinner service for 60...was much, much better! Ducasse had spoken, Ducasse had tweaked. Sure, there have been some flat Ducasse meals over the years (he had one big restaurant fizz in Provence, a few years back)...but I think his genius continues to sparkle, and I think

he has taught many an entrepreneur how to do this (though few can be as great as he at doing it). Most important—and you can't be on this list without this element—he is a thrilling chef who has wowed me multiple times with his ability to soak up the local influences wherever he may be, then produce food that is indisputably here and now. That first three-star, Louis XV in Monaco, presented (and still presents) the apotheosis of southern European cuisine; I'll never forget the seafood salad with brilliant Taggiasca olive oil that made ME feel as if I were a big fish sucking littler fish off the rocks alongside the Monegasque coast.

9) César Ramirez

I don't think this quiet, humble man from a Mexican family in Chicago is a household word just yet—but Ramirez's work at Brooklyn Fare in New York's hippest food borough has earned him a rare position in the New York foodie pantheon...and, singlehandedly, coaxed me out of my recent disdain for fancy restaurant food. I was dragged to his industrial-feeling space about 2 1/2 years ago, where a horseshoe-shaped table seats a grand total of 18 diners; I didn't want to go because I'd heard the chef had creative, fusionista tendencies...and like so many world-weary foodies today, I do not want to experience yet another chef expressing his soul in foie gras. I am Kellerized, Bouludated, and Ripertofied beyond despair (though I greatly respect them all). But as soon as the first amuse at Brooklyn Fare hit (a warm glass of raspberry/beet juice), my friends recall, I sat up, wide-eyed, and softly said: "he has my attention." Twenty glorious courses later, I was a raving fan. A few months later, Michelin jumped on the bandwagon with two stars, astonishing for such a low-rent place. One year later...holy fuck...three stars from Michelin. He is a wrecking crew...turning out some of the most delicious food I've had, anywhere. For sure, for my money, there is no high-end restaurant in New York that compares today. But beyond that, on the historical side, Ramirez (ex-head of David Bouley's amazing kitchen) is anticipating with antennae a-quiver the next verities of big-deal food. Much of what he does is grounded in the Japanese aesthetic; other chefs flirt with it, but Brooklyn Fare is a non-Japanese restaurant that moves Japanese to center stage. Much of Ramirez's dazzle is flown in each day from Japan, or Italy—putting him at the cutting edge of the anti-locavore backlash, sure to grow. "If the best piece of yellowtail I can get comes from Japan, why can't I serve it?" he seems to ask with many courses. Like the Japanese, Ramirez is a texture freak, moving us all towards the tactile mouth experience that many Asians prize over the flavor experience. Lastly, Ramirez's restaurant is a restaurant in control of flow. The days when we expected to indulge ourselves at a restaurant, at our pace, may be over; Ramirez, cooking right in front of you, offers a show—but it's HIS show, at HIS pace. Mesmerizing, and very 2015.

10) Angelo

There is a high degree of wack in this one. But despite the fact that nobody knows Angelo...hell, I can't even remember his last name!...I MUST put him on my list. For Angelo's restaurant, on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn, was the first restaurant where I can recall bursting out of my pants with unbearable pleasure. I've had many a fine meal since....but the joy of that first restaurant love has lasted me a lifetime, and forever pushed me on. The food, of course, was Italian-American...back in the day when the best Italian chefs in America cooked Italian-American, way before they wanted to climb Mount Radicchio. Imagine ten-year-old Davie sitting there every weekend, with his dad and uncle (both fixtures in the Italian-Jewish garment center), demolishing anchovies and pimientos on the world's best garlic bread; moving into linguine white clam sauce, and other Italian-American monuments; hitting high gear with intense chicken cacciatore before the descent into spumoni/tortoni. But here's the thing: every morsel had just the right amount of garlic, oil, seasoning, texture. This guy was a simple cook from Naples, but so great was his flavor-creating skill that I don't think I've ever taken more pleasure in food. I submit that many of us, of my generation, learned to love food at Italian-American tables like these...and I put Angelo on this list not so much in a literal sense, but as a tribute to all the great Italian immigrants who kept cooking alive in America during some of its darkest years.

BONUS ROUND: Ferran Adria

I decided to leave Ferran off my top ten list...but, Lord knows, he must be mentioned. Founder of what is widely called molecular gastronomy, and indubitably the most influential chef of the last 15 years, Ferran doesn't quite make my cut. "Food not delicious enough?" you may wonder? Not at all. I had the great fortune to go to El Bulli twice during its run...and I was dazzled by the deliciousness of it all. "If Ferran had not invented molecular," I always used to say..."he'd still be counted among the world's great chefs." The problem is...I wish he hadn't invented molecular. Yes, it influenced many....but, in my view, it led most of them down the wrong path. Ferran can make a "foam," or "air"...because he's Ferran, and it will be mind-blowing in his hands. But all the others, all those tortured souls trying to copy him...they should have spent that time learning to cook delicious food that expressed their souls. Ferran, I trust, now on hiatus...will be back within a few years on a new path that will be beneficial for all.