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THE ENTERTAINMENT ISSUE

Starring

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George Duran

Profession: **Chef/TV Host**

Shows: ***Ultimate Cake-Off* and *Chocolate Wars***

Location: **New York, New York**



A
PASSION
FOR FOOD
with
A SIDE OF
HUMOR

Celebrity chef and entertainer George
Duran reinvents career and cuisine

“
EVERYTHING I DO ENCOMPASSES
HUMOR,” HE INSISTS. “IT HAS
TO! IF YOU CAN’T LAUGH
ABOUT YOUR PROBLEMS, THEN
THEY WILL ONLY STRESS YOU OUT.
”



As the sun begins to rise over his New York City apartment, George Duran is already wide-awake and in the kitchen preparing an appetizing breakfast for his family. There's usually little time, however, to savor the morning meal. Before long he's heading off to Meredith Video Studios in midtown to film a pilot for a new cooking show, jumping aboard an Alaskan cruise as the celebrity chef or hopping on a flight to Toronto for a guest appearance on The Shopping Channel—Duran's hectic schedule is constantly changing and that's just how he likes it. "I am the type of guy that gets bored sitting on the beach, watching wave after wave," he admits. "I need constant action and excitement."

Among the ever-growing number of celebrity chefs, Duran easily stands out—and not just for his talent to transform bland comfort food into unimaginably wild and palate-bewildering creations with tantalizingly explosive names, such as his Coffee-Rubbed Bacon-Wrapped Tater Tot Bombs, Pina Colada Pancakes, or Pizza Fondue. His own recipe for success starts with a lifelong, unbridled passion for food. Mix with a colorful and hyper-

friendly personality that relishes social interaction in English, French, Armenian or Spanish. Then top it all off with a prodigious, first-rate sense of humor. And voilà, the end result is unmistakably George Duran.

Indeed it's not hard to see why he's a familiar face on the daily television talk show circuit and advertisers such as Hunt's Tomatoes and IMUSA cookware are lining up to have Duran front their products on TV, larger-than-life billboards in Times Square or in person with live cooking demonstrations in Macy's department stores. For Duran, though, the greatest reward he says is "when someone comes to me and thanks me for a recipe I made many years ago, that's something special. That means I did my job right."

That passion for food is something the 40-year-old chef credits to his mother Zovig's savory Armenian cuisine. Born Kevork Guldalian in Caracas, Venezuela, he remembers as a young boy once watching his mother knead sweet dough, then swiping a few pieces for himself, he ran back to his room where he pressed the dough onto the light bulb of his reading lamp and waited for it to "cook" into a mini-pizza. To this day whenever he's asked where to go for good Armenian food, he always has the same reply: "My mother's house!" While his cooking style has since

grown more sophisticated, he retains a special relationship with traditional Armenian dishes, including his favorite—sarma with bulghur and sumac.

When Duran was fifteen, his family moved to the US, where he fondly remembers attending AGBU Camp Nubar. "[It] made me appreciate the outdoors more than ever. I was a kid from the urban streets of Caracas and experiencing a natural environment was pure therapy. Today I'm an avid camper and hiker and, of course, grill master!" After graduating from high school, Duran majored in communication studies at New York University where he hosted the HYE Time Radio Show on WNYU, winning an award for Best Radio Talk Show from the National Association of College Broadcasters in 1996. A natural entertainer, he then went on to produce and perform his own comedy sketches in radio. "Everything I do encompasses humor," he insists. "It *has* to! If you can't laugh about your problems, then they will only stress you out."

Putting his comedic talents to the test with a new audience, Duran moved to television in 2000—first with MTV, then later as a host for the Latin music channel HTV in Miami. It was then that producers told him viewers would have a hard time pronouncing

his last name, so he adopted the name of one of his close friends, and Guldalian became Duran. Despite his growing popularity as a TV personality, he says he knew then in order to make his mark, he had to carve a new path to success that would merge his on air talents with his passion for food. In 2002, he surprised friends and family by putting his hosting career on hold and moving to Paris to embark on a three-year culinary journey at the Ecole Supérieure de Cuisine Française (ESCF)—Groupe Ferrandi. The prestigious culinary school offered the opportunity to experiment and expand his palate, refining his innovative Armenian and Latin American-inspired cooking with haute cuisine. He quickly became as comfortable and skilled making filed mignon with vidalia onions as pumpkin pie tamales.

It was then that Duran met a producer looking to create a food network cooking show called *Pop Cuisine*. Always up for the next challenge, he tested his skills on a new audience, and Duran's affable nature and foreign accent quickly charmed viewers. Within two seasons, *Pop Cuisine* garnered a nomination for a 7 d'Or, the equivalent of an Emmy Award in the US, and won a 2003 Silver Grape Gastronomic Award. Marrying his career as a TV host with his passion for cooking was a natural progression. "Combining different passions and making a living out of it," he insists, "is the best thing you can do in life." And if you're not sure yet what stirs your passion, that's ok too, says Duran. He advises college graduates to go out and intern at as many places as possible while young. "Work for free! Yes! When you find career paths you dislike, move on to another road. The best thing that can come out of failing is the realization that this career was not for you. That's worth millions."

After returning to New York in 2005 Duran pitched his idea for a funny take on a cooking show to the Food Network, who agreed to let Duran loose on the public with his own show, *Ham on the Street*. His next project involved taking over hosting duties on another popular Food Network program *The Secret Life of...*, a light-hearted look at the history of food. In 2008 he published his first cookbook, *Take this Dish and Twist It*, which featured innovative and savory variations on everyone's favorite comfort food, along with highly useful tips and amusing anecdotes. Since then he has hosted the popular *Ultimate Cake-Off* and *Chocolate Wars* on TLC, along with various culinary segments, including on *The Better Show* and *All Recipes*.

Along the way Duran managed to bal-



George Duran gained widespread recognition for combining his talents as a comedian and entertainer with his passion for food as a host on the Food Network's *Ham on the Street* and TLC's *Ultimate Cake-off*

ance the demands of a successful career with a young family—he has a 3-year-old son Bodi with wife Ilana. Fatherhood also reinforced the importance of cooking healthy foods. As an ambassador for the Healthcorps program to prevent childhood obesity, founded by Dr. Oz and his wife, Duran encourages teens to make smart choices when it comes to food. And if you think healthy means compromising flavor, he suggests you try one his favorite recipes: stuffed endives wuth orange, goat

cheese, caramelized walnuts and balsamic reduction. For busy parents who struggle to find the time to cook, he also recommends the website ReadySetEat.com, which features recipes that use minimal ingredients that can be made in 30 minutes or less. Duran is currently working on a pilot for a food talk show he hopes will take off. If his past success is any indication, expect to see the eclectic and innovative chef with a delicious new twist on the talk show format very soon.