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Sauntering Through Thanksgiving Service

By SOPHIA HOLLANDER

Geoffrey Zakarian lived in Greenwich, Conn., for four years, but it wasn't until he moved to New York City that he opened his first Connecticut restaurant, the National.

"It's the way it is," he said.

It follows the National's first location in Manhattan's Midtown area, and Mr. Zakarian, who is also chef and partner at the Lambs Club and culinary director at the Plaza, hopes to open more around the U.S.

He spoke with The Wall Street Journal about how his restaurant will be preparing turkey, the country's best pizza, and what he thinks of waiting in line for food. Edited excerpts follow.

Why Greenwich?

It's sort of like the Beverly Hills of Connecticut. It's like the best of every world.

Do you cook for Thanksgiving?

This year we're having Thanksgiving in Greenwich at the National. Breaking it in.

Is it hard to eat in your own restaurant?

Very stressful. All I see is mistakes. So what I usually do, if I'm having guests and that's the dining room, I sit looking this way [turns back to the room] so I don't see.

Any standby Thanksgiving dish?

The turkey is the mainstay. This year we're going to hopefully do some turkeys on the grill, spatchcock them. Take the backbone out, and you open it up so it lays flat. It cooks in half the time over the grill, on the wood.

What's Thanksgiving like in your restaurant?

Packed with friends. They'll be paying friends, but it's not like people are critiquing me on Thanksgiving.



Geoffrey Zakarian at the National, which opened this month in Greenwich, 'sort of like the Beverly Hills of Connecticut,' he said.

ing. It's big tables, it's a lovelier sense of—it's a longer day, and it's a one-seater day. It's not like you go in for a quick bite.

You're not cooking, right?

I'll be helping [in the kitchen] this year.

Running back and forth between your table and the kitchen?

I'll be sauntering. We don't run. We don't want to hurt anybody.

What's a food you wished you loved, but you hate?

Durian. It's a tropical fruit that smells like vomit. Once you get past the smell it has a sweetness to it, but the smell is vile.

How about something you love but you wished you hate?

Anything raw I love, but steak tartare—that and french fries. When I walk into Balthazar, they don't even give me a menu. Martini, steak, french fries. Nothing good about any of that.

What restaurant do you celebrate in?

I love going to Polo, Ralph Lauren's new restaurant. I think it's great. It's so civilized. I love Bond Street downtown. I think it's a really fun restaurant. Friends come to New York, I take them there. I love Felidia, which is a small restaurant by Lidia Bastianich on 58th Street. It's a beautiful little gem in a townhouse. I go to Balthazar because I love to drink the joy of that room in. It makes me feel good.

Nowhere too fancy?

It's not relaxing for me to spend four hours in a restaurant. I don't have four hours, first of all. And I don't eat like that. I like to sit at the bar and have, like, one course.

What's your go-to place?

La Mangeoire. They make an amazing roast chicken, probably the best in the city. If I have pizza, I go to Franny's in Brooklyn. The best pizza, I think, in the country.

That's a bold statement in New York.

If I'm wrong, who cares?

When was the last time you waited in line?

I wait in line for two reasons: someone's giving away

something that I want, or there's a vaccine for my child that I need. That's it. Not for food. It's not important enough. I mean, I have a job.

What's the first thing you remember eating in New York?

I was in culinary school. I went to a place called Café 58 on 58th Street, which is, strangely enough, 100 feet from where I live now. It was an old-world French restaurant. And I remember having, like, a pepper steak, a steak frites with red wine. It was made table-side, and I just thought it was fantastic. The place isn't there anymore.

What should everyone coming to New York try?

The Oyster Bar at Grand

Central. It's really something. I just had brunch at the Rainbow Room because they redid it.

Classic places. When you think of New York, that's what I think of.

Do you cook for your kids?

Breakfast, every single day, seven days a week. At night when I tuck them in at night, I ask them what they want, and whatever they want, I make. One thing. They don't get multiple things. I'm not a short-order cook.

What's the neighborhood with the best restaurants?

I think Midtown is strangely underrated. It's always been where I have all my restaurants, but a lot of people are migrating to Midtown because there's a lunch crowd here.

What's the next restaurant on your list to try?

I have to narrow the list down. So I don't go to the fried-chicken sandwich thing—Fuku. I don't go to those, what do you call it, sort of pop-up—they're media-sensational, wait-in-line little joints. I don't have time.

I want to try Chefs Club, which is downtown in SoHo. They have a very nice rotation of chefs. I haven't been to the restaurant at the Bacarat, Chevalier. I want to try that.

What's your favorite dish you ever created?

My three children?

But you don't want to eat them.

No. My favorite dish I ever created hasn't been created yet. But for the meantime I'll give you one: the poached salmon tartare at the Royalton in 1987. It was a half poached salmon, half raw, before tartare was a big deal. It was our best seller and I've carried it through with every menu I have.

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