



Life Stories
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WOLFGANG PUCK INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON TWO

Wolfgang Puck, Chef and Restaurateur
August 28, 2023
Interviewed by: David Bender
Total Running Time: 30 min and 17 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

WOLFGANG PUCK:

My mother was also a chef, so I used to help her out sometimes in the summer when I was not in school. So for me, being in the kitchen with the pastry chef, tasting all the sweets and it was a lot of fun. And so my mom found me this job as an apprentice, and my mother told me when I was leaving, and said, "You know, I know you — what I know is you just have to make more money than you spend. Then you will be okay." And you know, we got paid very little. So — and when I started my business, I said, you know, I looked at the calculator and said, I have to make more than I spend.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Thread

Wolfgang Puck

Chef and Restaurateur



00:00:57:00

INTERVIEWER:

Let's talk about family. You started off in a difficult way. Can you explain that?

00:01:02:00

WOLFGANG PUCK:

I'm one of the only person I know who does not talk that much about their childhood. And I don't talk too much about it because it wasn't a happy part of my life. Because I had a stepfather who was like a terrorist. He was so abusive, both mentally and physically to me. Also, my sister Christine. So it was really a very difficult upbringing and all I wanted to do is leave my house. So my mother found me a job as a cook apprentice about 50 miles away from where we live, which was at that time pretty normal. Maybe at 15, 16. I was a little on the early side at 14. And so I left my house, with a little suitcase, took the train, and my grandmother was crying. My mother was crying, "You're leaving?" And I was not even five foot tall at that time. So I went there. I started to work, and the chef at this hotel called the Post Hotel was just as crazy as my stepfather. He used to drink all the time. About two months into my job as an apprentice — and I was doing potatoes and cleaning spinach, peeling, peeling onions and so forth, and I was making the mashed potatoes and the parsley, the potatoes — and on Sunday at lunch, which was our biggest service, we ran out of potatoes, we ran out of mashed potatoes, and the chef got crazy screaming, "What an idiot" I am, "What am I or I am I," he said, "Go back to your mother." And at the end of the service he calls me over and says, come on, I have to talk to you. And he said, "You know, you're good for nothing. Go back to your father and mother. "You know, my stepfather told



me at that time. He said, "You know, you're good for nothing, and I know you're going to be back in a month because you're good for nothing." So and when the chef told me that I freaked out, I said, "I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't want to go home and, look at my stepfather and, see, he was right." So that evening, then I said, you know what? I might as well kill myself. So we had a big bridge going over a river, and I was standing on that bridge, and it was an early winter and looking down, and I remember said, "What will happen if I jump in, if I die or, you know, will I go to heaven or die or whatever?" And I said, "But I don't want to go home for sure not." So then after like 45 minutes standing and looking down, all of a sudden he came to me and says, you know, I just going to go back tomorrow and see what happened. So I go back the next morning. I went home, couldn't sleep all night. At 7:00, I went to the restaurant and, I said, "I'm not going home." And then, the owner said, you know, "I'm going to send you to our other hotel, and if you don't do well down, then you'll have to go home." Oh god — a stone fell from, and I said, "All right, now at least I don't have to go home." So they sent me to the other hotel. There, they had a woman chef. It was called the Park Hotel, a woman chef there. And she was a little bit more understanding. And she said, "Just do your work, don't make any noise and you'll be fine." And sure enough, I did that. I peeled my potatoes, stemmed my French fries, made mashed potatoes, cooked rice. And then about in the third year of my apprenticeship, we had the French restaurant from Dijon come to to do a weekly — a week long gastronomic thing from Dijon, from Burgundy. So we had this amazing chefs coming from France, from Dijon. And I never saw people cook like that. You know, I didn't see escargot bourguignon. I didn't make beef bourguignon — beef cooked in a lot of red wine or chicken



cocovan, brown chicken in the red wine. And they made patés and they made amazing desserts so different than what we had in Austria. And then I said, I want to go and learn in France. So I wrote them a letter and I said, I would like to do "a stahj" [an apprenticeship] there. And, the restaurant Aux Trois Faisans in Dijon and they accepted me. So again, I took the train. It took like forever, like a day and a half — took the train from my town. Arrived in Dijon. Couldn't really speak French except saying "bonsoir" and "bonjour," and "merci" and "S'il vous plaît." And, I started to work there and about a year into my job there, and I really liked it they actually liked me too. The owner actually gave us a party, and I didn't know at that time what it was. So we were all down drinking some cheap white wine, probably. And, then I saw this red book that it was the Michelin [Guide], and that's what was the party for, because we got one star to get Michelin. The Michelin Guide is, you know, the Bible of restaurants. You know, if you get one star, two star, three star, it's really a great achievement. And at that time, they had maybe 12 or 15 three star restaurants in France. So it wasn't like you had them everywhere, you know? So I took one book and took it upstairs. I was sleeping upstairs from the restaurant in a tiny little room with cold water only and no shower — nothing! And I looked through it and I said, oh my God, there are two star restaurants and three star restaurants. So I said, I'm not going back home until I gonna go work in a 2 or 3 star restaurant.

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INTERVIEWER:

And you started writing letters, right?



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WOLFGANG PUCK:

Yeah, so I wrote letters to Le Board, Bookers, Troisgros and Lancer, and La Tour Rajon. And then, Baumanière, in Provence and South of France in Les Baux-de-Provence, actually near Marseilles and Avignon. And there Mr. Thuillier wrote me back. "Okay, you can start in April." Okay. I said, oh, my God, now I can work in a three star restaurant. And that changed my life. I arrived at Baumanière. Their owner and chef was so passionate about food, about the ingredients. We had like six gardeners. He bought this baby lamp. He got the best fish right from the port in Marseilles and even in the kitchen, he was so amazing and his cooking really, really changed my life. He was pretty tough in the kitchen, you know, if something didn't come out right, like I remember I was working with him on the sauce, on the sauce stage, and we were making the sauces because in French cooking that is really the best part is being like the first violinist in the orchestra. And, so I was making the sauces and I wasn't scared because I wrote him the letter that said, "You don't have to pay me, if you don't like the way I work." So for sure he didn't pay me. So one day he said, "I made a sauce." I tasted it, and I said, "Okay, put a little more salt and pepper in it." And then he made his sauce and I tasted it, and I said, "Oh, it's very good. But it needs a little bit more pepper and maybe a little lemon juice." He looked at me and says, "Okay." He put that in. And since that, he really liked me because I wasn't worried about them not saying you are perfect, you know, and I think his passion really got into me. And for me, that was really the best thing ever happened in my profession.

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INTERVIEWER:

And his trust in you was the opposite of what you had growing up.

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WOLFGANG PUCK:

You're absolutely right, you know, to get — to get that feeling that somebody actually trust you and somebody appreciates what you do and says, you know, you are really good. And he made me feel good because he made me work with him. So for me, that changed my life. And since I started to work there, finished after two and a half years and I said, this is what I'm gonna do for the rest of my life, hopefully, you know, you never know what happened, but I think I got so excited about his cooking style and also his personality. And also I remember him bringing Elizabeth Taylor in the kitchen and us little guys, we were just like looking wow — look at Elizabeth Taylor. Amazing.

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INTERVIEWER:

This is the 1960s, the late—

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WOLFGANG PUCK:

The late 60s. Late '69.

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INTERVIEWER:



Yeah. So Elizabeth Taylor is—

00:09:32:00

WOLFGANG PUCK:

—in her prime.

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INTERVIEWER:

A goddess—

00:09:34:00

WOLFGANG PUCK:

Catherine Deneuve and Marcello Mastroianni, they used to come in the kitchen. I mean, it was amazing for me. I said, I want to be like him. So he really became my mentor. And to me, I said, one day, I want to be like him. I want to own my restaurant, write a book. If you can find your mentor who can design a way for you, or you can feel that's the way you want to go, I think it's an important part.

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INTERVIEWER:

I want to go back to your journey. When I heard you tell the story about standing there on that bridge at 14, I'm sure you know the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. That was your moment.

00:10:15:00



WOLFGANG PUCK:

Yeah.

00:10:16:00

INTERVIEWER:

And whatever Angel was there that said, go back. And it doesn't matter if they try and throw you out, you're staying.

00:10:23:00

WOLFGANG PUCK:

Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

That's an extraordinary thing. Here it is. It's now the early 70s, I think '73, if I'm right. And you decided to come to the United States.

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WOLFGANG PUCK:

Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

How did that happen?

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WOLFGANG PUCK:

Well, I was working in Paris at Maxim's, another three star restaurant. You know, at that time, it was like the greatest restaurant in Paris. So it was really amazing. But then one day, a friend of mine who was a waiter, he had a friend who was opening a restaurant in New York, and he asked me if I want to be the chef there. And I said, "I want to go to America." You know, when you watch TV, you see America, everybody drives a Chevrolet or drives a Cadillac or just big cars, and they are super expensive in Europe. So I thought, in America everybody is rich. And, so I came there after working in all these, three star restaurants. And I looked at the menu. I said, they are making steak frites, they are making all this bistro food. And I said, that's not what I like to cook. So I went to see Charles Manson, who I knew, who I met in Paris too, and I told him the story. I said, I worked at Baumannière, at Maxim's, Hôtel de Paris in Monaco. So he said, "I will find you a better place somewhere." I said, "Okay, I'm happy." So he called his friend Pierre "Pio" Aci in Chicago and because he had a big restaurant on top of the John Hancock Tower. And Aci said to him, you know, "We don't need a chef here in Chicago, but we have a restaurant in Indianapolis called La Tour, and I'm looking at your résumé from Wolfgang. He would probably be good to be the chef there." I hear I have to go to Indianapolis — I saw that's the best city in America. Because I used to live in Monaco, and I love Formula One! I love auto racing. And the Indy 500 is the most famous race in the world, probably. And, so finally I went to the station to Penn Station, got a ticket with Greyhound, took the Greyhound bus from New York City to Indianapolis and arrived in Indianapolis. And look, I said, "Shit!" That's Indianapolis? It's nothing like Monaco, you know? It's like what I imagined. It's going to be this really amazing city because of this



other race, you know? And, so I looked around, but I had no money to leave, so I checked into a motel because I could not afford an apartment. I had no credit card, nothing, and started to cook there. I just told him I work at La Tour. They said, "Okay, you can stay here." And finally, after 2 or 3 months, I had enough money to pay for the motel and a down payment for an apartment. And I started, you know, to apply for a green card. And, after one year or so, I got, my green card there because nobody immigrates to Indiana except me. Maybe a few more, probably. But when I went to the immigration, I was the only person there. So it was really—

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INTERVIEWER:

A short wait—

00:13:36:00

WOLFGANG PUCK:

A short wait. Yeah [LAUGHS]

00:13:38:00

INTERVIEWER:

How long did you stay?

00:13:40:00

WOLFGANG PUCK:

I stayed about a year, a little over a year, until I got my green card. And then their owners told me and said, "Maybe you can go to Los Angeles." I said, "Los



Angeles? Okay, Los Angeles." I said, "I hope it's on the beach." They said, "Yeah, Santa Monica. You can go to the beach and everything." So I said, "Okay, I'm gonna go." I started to work downtown in a restaurant called Francois for probably three months. And then a friend of mine said, you know, I'm working in this restaurant called Ma Maison, and the chef needed somebody so he can take some time off because he was working lunch and dinner. I said, okay, and he said, you know, the owner is the nephew of the owner of La Tour which I knew from Paris, a three star restaurant. So I said, okay, I want to work at night downtown, and in the morning I do my Ma Maison, so that way I can save money to open my own restaurant because that was my dream since I was at Baumannière, since I worked with Mr. Thuillier, I said, I want to be like him.

00:14:40:00

INTERVIEWER:

Save more money than you spend.

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WOLFGANG PUCK:

Yeah. Always. But I started to work there and then, I remember after two weeks, I got my paycheck. I go to the bank, which was right there on La Cienega, and they said, "Sorry, there's no money in the bank." So I-I quit my job downtown and now they don't have enough money to pay me. So I went to see Patrick Terrail, the owner, and I said, you know, "Patrick, I went to get the money. I have to pay my rent, but there's no money in the bank." So I think he gave me some cash. And then we talked about this. He said, "Maybe I pay



you a little bit less, but I gave you a part of the restaurant." So he gave me, I don't know how many shares in the restaurant. I became a minority partner and started to make good food. He was open for a year and a half — their restaurant was almost bankrupt. So I started to make good food and people start to come in the kitchen and say, "This was so amazing. We came here a few times, the food was terrible, but this was delicious." Orson Welles came every day for lunch, and I used to make specials for him and gave him a little taste of it. I remember Jack Lemmon sitting at the bar and me talking with him. We had a famous lawyer named Greg Balzac coming every.

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INTERVIEWER:

We're in the 70s. You're in your 20s?

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WOLFGANG PUCK:

Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

At this point at Ma Maison. You're now a part owner because the check bounced. That helped you to get to the place where you would be able to fund your own dream.

00:16:10:00

WOLFGANG PUCK:



Yeah. So, you know, it was an interesting way, the way Patrick was thinking, he was thinking it's only he is the important part that people came because of him. And, you know, he was in a nice three piece suit with a little carnation on here, everything, and I was saying, and when he went on vacation, he had the dining hall manager sign the checks, not me. And I said, this is really interesting. I'm his partner. I do 65% of the business. It's food. Why he doesn't trust me? It was like a weird thing for my head. And I said, you know, I have to look out for myself and see what I'm going to do later. So five years into that, the restaurant was packed. Lunch and dinner. You know, it was hard to get the reservation. For a while, we had an unlisted telephone number so that we only can get the people who knew us because we had so many regular customers. I said, "I have to do something, I have to find my own place." But I felt guilty to leave because Ma Maison was so successful then. So I went to Patrick and I said, you know, we have to create a management company where I own 50% and you own 50%. And I told him I found already a space up on Sunset, and we're going to do like some Italian trattoria. So it's not in competition with my Ma Maison, which was a famous French restaurant. So then when we talked and talked and then at the end he says, "You know, Wolfgang. I'm always going to own 51%." I said, "All right, then I give you three months. I'm leaving in three months because I already looked at that place we could have had together." So then I talked to my real estate guy. I said, you know, "My plan changed. Now I have to raise money to build a restaurant." So I also had a cooking school at Ma Maison called Ma Cuisine, and I had a lot of lawyers and dentists and doctors and shrinks. They used to come have cooking classes. And then one day I then announced to them, I said, you know, "I need some money to open my own restaurant." And, so we



set it up and, \$15,000 a share, and I borrowed \$60,000 from the bank cosigned by at one of our other customers. And then we raised the money, and one guy, Don Salk, a dentist, he's still around, and he had been with some other people to find the money. And we got 500-10,000 or so together. And we started building, which is now Spago. When we opened Spago, Patrick said, "Wolfgang gonna come back in three months and beg for his job back."

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INTERVIEWER:

Here it is again. You've heard this before as a 14 year old.

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WOLFGANG PUCK:

Yeah. So — and I couldn't sleep. I used to wake up during the — then I used to wake up in the middle of the night sweating and said, "Oh my God, I opened a restaurant and nobody shows up." I was there trying to talk to the waiters, but no customers. I said, "Nobody gonna show up, nobody gonna come." So we opened the 16th of January in 1982, and I went to the fish market, and, I was doing the grille, the vegetables, the sauces. But I remember we were in the weeds like crazy people. I had to wait for an hour to get their main course or their appetizer. But Nancy made such great dessert, and I always said, "Nancy, just make them a big platter of dessert and send it out so that people at the end had a great time because they had all these free desserts." And I think when we opened Spago, what really made it different — I thought it would be great if I built a kitchen in the dining hall so that I can say hello to the customers. They can see me, I can see them. I know where they are — the



table is almost ready. Okay, let's fire it and let's send out their main course. And then the press took to it like crazy. I remember there was a write up for The Hollywood Reporter called George Christie, and he was writing a column called The Great Life, and he came to the restaurant and ate there and said, "That's a new way of dining in L.A. It's fun. It's great food. It's not complicated, it's not stuffy." And he said, "And here is the reservation number," and you better call today. If not, you won't get it a table. Then all of a sudden, everybody showed up. I was already friendly with some people like Orson Welles and Jack Lemmon and one Austrian, Billy Wilder. So Billy Wilder used to come to Ma Mason, and I used to cook for him there. And then he started to come to Spago. And for me — he's one of my idols, you know, to be from Austria, too originally, and then be as good as he was in writing comedy and directing and producing. I mean, he's one of the great filmmakers of our time, so I always looked up to him.

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INTERVIEWER:

You're still not that far away from being a young teenager—

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WOLFGANG PUCK:

Yeah—

00:21:24:00

INTERVIEWER:

—in Austria. And here's Billy Wilder and Orson Welles, these legends!



00:21:28:00

WOLFGANG PUCK:

Legends. And, you know, Johnny Carson used to come every Friday night. And, if it was Richard Gere who made the famous movie, you know, here at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel —.

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INTERVIEWER:

Pretty Woman.

00:21:41:00

WOLFGANG PUCK:

Pretty woman. Yes. And then, a lot of, like, Linda Evans used to come and eat the duck sausage pizza, like, three times a week with her boyfriend, then. So, also there was no wood burning pizza oven in Los Angeles, so I built not one, but I built two, and people said, "Wow, we never had a pizza like that!"

00:22:03:00

INTERVIEWER:

At each stage of this, and particularly in Spago, you're creating something out of your mind. You're imagining something that hasn't existed before, an open cooking space where you can see and they can see you. Where did that come from?

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WOLFGANG PUCK:

Because one of the things I tried to do — take all the secrecy or whatever you might call it, out of the preparation of food. I want people to see we use the best ingredients. We cook it over a charcoal grill or in our wood burning pizza oven. So there are no secrets, really, because you could see us actually in front there. And people love to walk by the kitchen and look what everybody is doing and so forth, so—

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INTERVIEWER:

Let me ask you about something, a quote of yours. You have said that for you, "Food is family." I want you to speak to what that means to you.

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WOLFGANG PUCK:

You know, to me, food is the most important thing because without food, we can't go far. Without water, we can't go far. So — but to see in somebody's eyes the joy good food brings...that to me is really the most important part of what I do. If it's at home with my family when we have dinner. To me it's an amazing thing because I didn't really have that as a kid very often, you know? And then the same thing is our restaurant family. So I think like when I come to the restaurant, we have so many people who come to us for years and years and years, like I remember, may he rest in peace, Sidney Poitier — he became a great friend of ours. He became the godfather of my children. And I still remember the day we were sitting at Spago. And then he knew my wife, Gelila, was pregnant. And he said, "Wolfgang, it would be a real honor if I



could be the godfather of your son." And I started to tear up and I said, "Sidney, I wouldn't have dared to ask you that." This is like, for me, the most amazing experience. You know, this was worth having a job just so I have the best godfather in the world.

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INTERVIEWER:

You build family both by the people you related to, but the people who are important in your life. You've created in these restaurant, people who've come back and back, famous people, dentists.

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WOLFGANG PUCK:

Yeah — from very walk of life! You know, I know a lot of people saying, oh, you have to be famous to come to Spago, to Cartagena, one of our restaurants. But, you know, to me, a customer is a customer. There might be people who made a reservation two weeks out or maybe two months for their wedding anniversary. So if I were to go in the dining room, I will say hello to them the same saying — the same way I would say hello to, Brad Pitt or anybody.

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INTERVIEWER:

There's something else that I've read that you said that your purpose in life is making people happy.

00:25:06:00



WOLFGANG PUCK:

Totally. And I think what I see is maybe almost egotistically, because what makes me happy is seeing other people enjoying their dinner, enjoying their time in the restaurant, and have a happy moment in our place. And that for me is better than money, you know? And the great thing is, I can do that every night. I can go to three of our restaurants here in LA and see people being happy, enjoying their food and enjoying their hospitality. So to me, that's really special. Now, obviously to stay in business, we have to make money. If not, I would give the food away for free. But already early on when I opened Spago after probably eight months, we were already very successful. And I looked on Melrose Avenue, you had all these old people sitting outside and, not getting really food, and then some other people are being homeless, not getting any food. So we started a program here in L.A. called Meals on Wheels. I invited, like, ten chefs from all around, from Alice Waters to Paul Virant and Bradley Ogden, then Lee Fang and Larry Forgione and Jonathan Waxman. In our big parking lot in Spago, we put up an enormous tent, and I brought in — maybe it's 30 minutes from Napa, Sonoma — and, we had all the kitchen stations around. And again, people walked around and all the proceeds went to Meals on Wheels. So for me, giving back was such an important part of my life. To give back — to give back because I think I got lucky. I worked hard, but I got lucky to be so successful. So there are many people out there who don't have that luck, and they might be talented in different things, but they end up with not much.

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INTERVIEWER:



You've also done things for school children to help them. Talk about that.

00:27:06:00

WOLFGANG PUCK:

So when we started Meals on Wheels, I found out that there were some schools where they cut the food out for the kids. So I said, you know, not only we're going to give food to the older people, to the homebound people, bread and so forth, but we're going to have the schools, too. So we sent out, sandwiches, soups and salads to different kind of schools. So that way the kids got something to eat. If we don't take care of our kids and we don't take care of our older people, you know, who brought us in this world, what kind of a society are we?

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INTERVIEWER:

You haven't shied away from addressing social issues, whether they be charitable or your own point of view. You-you've taken a stand. And that's part of what being an American is, is speaking up.

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WOLFGANG PUCK:

Yeah. I think it's a very important part to speak up. And yet we also speak up together and say this is unacceptable, unacceptable in a country like this. Let's what I always said, the richest country in the world? We have kids in school with no food. We have old people in the street with no food. That's unacceptable. You know, we have to do something about it. So I think being



socially responsible is an important part. And, you know, I don't carry a sign [saying] I'm a Democrat or a Republican. I wait for —I vote for people who I think gonna do a great job.

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INTERVIEWER:

I am sure in any of your restaurants you can go from table to table and have Republicans, Democrats, people who disagree on everything else but agree on your food. It's finding common ground and-and that's-that's been tougher. Are you optimistic? How do you see the future and how are you hopeful?

00:28:52:00

WOLFGANG PUCK:

I am very optimistic because as an immigrant, you're generally optimistic to leave your own country and go to a country of your choosing, you have to be optimistic. And I really believe, yes, we are going through a bad time now in being so polarized, but we all want the same thing. You know, we are here for a very short time. We all want to be happy, you know? And it says in the Constitution — you have the right for happiness. So I think, why the politicians don't go out and says, what can we do to make this place better? Not what it's good for a few people and bad for other people. And everybody does good things and bad things in politics because everybody has different convictions and different things, what they think is important. But what is really important, only what is really important. You know there are very few things are that important when it you know, we are here for a very short time, so we should take care of each other.



END TC: 00:30:17:00