

The Puck Stops Here



Star chef Wolfgang Puck raises the bar on animal welfare.

By Mat Thomas

CELEBRITY CHEF WOLFGANG PUCK IS A veritable culinary institution who presides over an international epicurean empire encompassing 43 catering venues and nearly 100 restaurants, a line of frozen and canned entrées, best-selling cookbooks and signature cookware products. A frequent guest on TV talk shows, Puck has even played himself in cameo roles on syndicated sitcoms, from "Frasier" to "The Simpsons." Given his notoriety, people were bound to take notice when he announced plans to eliminate some of the worst factory-farming practices from his operations as part of a wide-ranging wellness program that formalizes his all-natural and organic standards.

In line with the program announced in March 2007, Puck's restaurants have already stopped serving foie gras, and, by the end of this year, they'll be using neither battery-cage eggs nor veal or pork from animals raised in crates. The company now works directly with suppliers to ensure they can meet the new humane treatment standards, and is contracting with a consultant to help audit farming methods. The plan also calls for progressive animal-welfare standards in the raising of poultry, expanding the use of all-natural and organic ingredients, and more vegetarian- and vegan-adapted selections on all their menus. Wayne Pacelle, CEO of The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), calls Puck's program "the most far-reaching and comprehensive ... in the restaurant industry."

Perhaps that's because HSUS created the nine-point animal-welfare program at Puck's request. "I wanted to celebrate my 25th year in the food business by doing something really special and responsible," says Puck, "so we

asked HSUS to partner with us to guide our standards. I am proud of the program because it embodies what I stand for—humane treatment of animals, environmental sustainability, and serving our customers the most healthy, tasteful food possible, lovingly prepared from the highest-quality ingredients. This, to me, represents the very best in eating well."

Growing up on his family's farm in Austria, Puck learned the importance of knowing where food comes from, a principle that continues to drive his business today. "One of the reasons that many of our restaurants feature an open kitchen is so my guests can see what they're going to get and how it's prepared," he says. Puck believes that standardizing welfare is consistent with such openness because it allows him to assure customers that animals raised for food have a decent quality of life—even if they ultimately end up on one of the master-chef's menus. Farm Sanctuary and HSUS, the two animal protection organizations most involved in efforts to influence Puck, support his decision. "By speaking out against cruelty, Puck has stood firmly against a dominant mindset in the food industry, which asserts that they should be free to use and abuse animals however they see fit," says Gene Baur, president of Farm Sanctuary, which began pressuring Puck in 2002 to drop crated veal and then later foie gras. "This will raise awareness of the fact that farm animals suffer, and cause some to question the ethics of eating animals." **VN**

Mat Thomas pens *NewsBeet* in every edition of *VegNews*. Read more of his writing at animalrighter.org.

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