

RAMSAY IN DUBAI

Gordon Ramsay is in a hurry. He is in the midst of preparing lunch, and strides out for an obligatory photo op. "I've got work to do," says the chef, and then, under his breath, "Pissing around." Ramsay, a 3-star Michelin chef who oversees an international team of over 1,000 in soon-to-be 13 restaurants worldwide, is in Dubai for three days to promote his upscale Verre restaurant, which opened in 2001, his first international venture. In this most cosmopolitan and luxury-addicted city of the Arab world, he is hosting an intimate media luncheon, not at Verre, but at a private villa in Jumeirah.

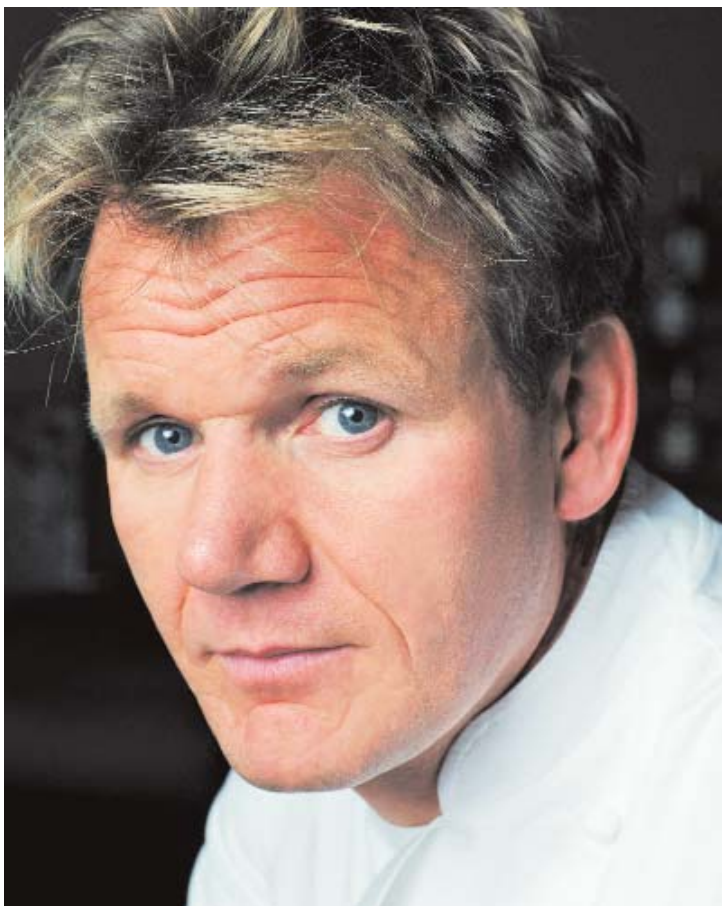
The Glasgow-born restaurateur, 38, is clearly the gastronomic superstar of the moment with international media fighting to get him on television or in print; even though he blew a handful of flour into Jay Leno's face earlier this year, *The Tonight Show* host told him it was "fantastic" and invited him back on the show. He's got real personality but it's not just hype: Ramsay can cook.

We sit down at the dining-room table, set in an alcove off the kitchen, to a starter of plum tomato gazpacho, avocado purée and poached shrimp, which is sublime. A main course of pave of wild sea bass with truffled broccoli, baby fondant potatoes with chervil veloute, is immaculate. I've been offered a magical glimpse of Ramsay's lightness of cuisine that has made him one of the world's leading restaurateurs.

I ask him, what's the big idea behind Gordon Ramsay? "God," says Ramsay in return, surprised. "First of all, we don't come into this game and, you know, have a set plan; each and every project we do is of great excitement." But Ramsay is a canny entrepreneur and clearly has a strong game plan, enabling him to challenge daunting odds with a winning attitude. "Every time we go into a city, we've been there a year before we open, so we're part

of the set-up. The research and development is extraordinary."

Ramsay says, "Everything I've done has been with the understanding of pushing something extreme." He knows that in addition to exquisite cuisine, the intangibles, such as design and innovation, are essential to success. Ramsay defends his empire by making it clear that he gives full



The infamous Ramsay glare.

responsibility to the executive chefs in all his restaurants; he only oversees the concepts and menus. This strategy has helped to blunt criticism that he may be overextending himself. "I know that New York is the biggest opening I've got coming up (September 2006) and I will be in the first few months of that opening. My Chef Neil Ferguson (who has been head chef under Ramsay protégée Angela Hartnett at The Connaught) left on the first of August and he's now at per se (Thomas Keller's New York restaurant). He's coming back on the first of December to go to Barcelona for three months and then we go global really—around the world in 30 days—from

Vietnam to Sydney to California to do our final R&D so we can come up with something really exciting regarding the menu."

Ramsay says he hates the word "brand" because "it makes you feel like a concept as opposed to the reality of it." The reality is that Gordon Ramsay screams brand building. He recently opened restaurants in London (Maze) and Tokyo, his first in Asia. I ask him what he thinks about the recent assault on Michelin's mystique in France with two top chefs renouncing their "stars" just as the Guide is expanding (Michelin published its first New York guide in November). Ramsay says that for a chef the Michelin Guide (and the Zagat Guide) remains the arbiter of restaurant dining, "like the Oscars being key to the film industry. It's a confirmation of what you cooked the year before; don't lose sight of that." Ramsay bristles and says the chefs in France found out they were having a [expletives deleted] year because the inspectors had told them how inconsistent their restaurants were, and they in turn gave back their third stars before they lost them. "Well, screw off, they're not yours to hand back, there's no such thing." He says the chefs were not courageous (rejecting the rigid rules of the "star" system) but cowards. He says he was asked

recently in Japan what he would do if he lost a star and he immediately responded, "I'd win it back. If Ducasse can do it twice (in 2003, famed chef Alain Ducasse regained his third star at world-renowned Louis XV in Monaco for a second time after he had lost it, again in 2001), I'm damn sure I can."

When I ask Ramsay whether he would consider opening in Canada, he says, "I love Lumière (Rob Feenie's Vancouver restaurant) and what's happening in Toronto now, but you can only do so much. But. Never say never." Ramsay is soon on his way to Verre to get ready for dinner—he's got work to do. ☛