



GUESS  
WHO'S  
COMING TO  
DINNER

By Rocky Rakovic Photos by Austin Hargrave

Guess who's coming to dinner. For starters, the man on the opposite page, chef Michael Voltaggio will be there. He and veteran war correspondent, Mariana Van Zeller are traveling to hot zones and inviting both sides of the conflict to break bread together. For Travel Channel's *Breaking Borders* Voltaggio and Van Zeller are visiting places such as Israel, Sarajevo and Rwanda to learn about their struggles and society. Part of the culture is cuisine, which the *Top Chef* winner Voltaggio soaks up, blends with his taste and spoons out in the culminating meal. Thanks to American foodies and half of the people on Instagram meals have become fashion statements but at their core meals are nourishment. Food is essential to life. By sharing a meal you are promoting life and through *Breaking Borders* Van Zeller and Voltaggio are showing to the viewing public and the opposing sides sitting across from each other that all lives matter.

**INKED: How did this show come about?**

**Voltaggio:** I didn't want to do reality TV or competition cooking. If I'm out of my restaurant I want to do something that is meaningful and real.

**Did you ever think that you'd be in a war zone?**

When I was younger I never thought that I would ever get on an airplane. Now my passport looks like a tagged wall.

**How does the food come into play?**

I get to experience cuisines from different places, but we also use food to bring people together. I'm getting exposure and learning about different cuisines and at the same time I'm using food to unite people who otherwise wouldn't be.

**How do you get people to agree to a meal?**

We are not looking for good TV personalities. We are looking to bring people together who want to share their perspective on their conflict.

**What's your goal with the show?**

We're not making World Peace, I think it is more like "world awareness." We aren't trying to get a resolution by the end of the episode, just some common ground. People inherently don't want conflict. The show is more about gaining an understanding of what these conflicts are.

**Do you come in with a planned menu?**

I realized that if I came in with a plan I wouldn't get the true experience of these cultures, so I just rolled up some knives, threw them in my suitcase and whatever I experienced when I was there, I'd try to incorporate into the meal. When I was in Israel, they're Kosher, and I don't know how to cook without butter, so I thought: I can't mix meat and dairy, I can't cook with pork. Then I started getting inspired by the meals while I was there. I would go out and eat and try to do my version of something or use local ingredients or use a local tool that I had never used before.

**What are the reactions to your food?**

I'm a cook, I cook every single day so I don't get to hear all of the stories about how food affects people.

It's not like I serve each dish and sit down with people and hear what they think about it. Now I get to hear what people think about my food while talking with them. I'm connecting with people on a much more intimate level than I ever have in my career. I'm learning about their culture, their food, and I'm learning about the hardships that they are going through. I'm trying to connect with them through my hands that work on a stove or a chimney. I feel so blessed to be able to have that experience with those people, it is more than just great conversation—there is a connection happening.

**Is sitting at a dinner table more important than being in another setting?**

I feel like nobody sits down at a dinner table anymore. Look at your dinner table—there is probably mail and laundry on it. In these situations these people would never have dinner together. They are not supposed to be at the dinner table and we are bringing them together.

**What do you hope the viewers take away?**

I hope they take away the balance between food, culture and the political situations. Despite the conflicts, look at the cuisine you can eat, look at the culture you can experience and the people's outlook on life, it's amazing. When we talk about Israel and Palestine, most people just think of rockets going off. Now, when I think of those places, I think about the coolest people that I have ever met, and some of the best food that I have ever experienced. I walked where Jesus walked—the experience was amazing. We just hear "Today in Gaza rockets went off." As important as it is to hear that, it's also important to know that these places are not just about the violence.

**What have you brought back from the meals?**

When I am out of the restaurant I think that I should be bringing something back to the restaurant, it is my duty to justify why I've been gone, whether it be equipment or a technique. What's different about this show than, say, the other guys who have gone around, be it Anthony Bourdain or Andrew Zimmerman or those other guys who have told these stories, is that I am going and actually cooking. There is nothing produced about it; I show up, I learn and write a menu on a note pad in my hotel room and I wake up the morning of the meal and I work my ass off cooking for those people.

**What do you add to the traditional meals?**

It is about me trying to understand what their cuisine is without trying to replicate it. I am trying to do it my own way. I get inspired, I get shown the best ingredients, the best markets, the local techniques and how I can take those and mix them with my cooking experiences and produce a great meal. I'm nervous to death when we sit at the table. What if they say something like "This dish is shit?" Every meal I cook on the show is the most important meal of my life.

**Did you get tattooed during your travels?**

I did. In Israel I went to one of the oldest tattoo shops in the world. I met the guy who was in the family line with the man that started it. The shop is there for

people to document their pilgrimage to the Holy Land. People used to stand in line with wooden carvings of Biblical images. They would dip them in ink and then put it on your skin and tattoo over that. The tattoo artist told me that he does those tattoos but now they are in a book. I asked him if he had any of the blocks, and he said they are priceless, they should be in a museum but he has them at his house. I asked him to bring them and tattoo me the way people used to get tattooed back in the day. He said that he had never done it and I said, Cool I have never been tattooed that way, so lets go through this together. So he got them, he sticks it in this inkpadd and it was the archangel Michael fighting the Devil. My name is Michael so I thought it was appropriate. What I didn't realize is that because they weren't on a stencil you can't wipe while you tattoo. All the blood and ink that was bubbling up while he was tattooing me would have wiped the design off, so he was nervous as shit while tattooing me. But when he was done it was one of the cleanest tattoos that I have ever gotten. It was rad, I was really stoked to have that experience.

**Who do you go to in the States?**

Dr. Woo is a homie. He did the lion on my hand and he did the eagle on my right knuckle. Between him and Jason Stores at the Tattoo Lounge I pretty much just see those two guys now. Jeremy Swan did the rose on my right hand. The first time I got a tattoo by Woo I Instagramed it and Jason Stores texted, "You finally got a hipster tattoo from Woo." It became a back and forth kind of joke.

**How were your tattoos received in your travels?**

I just got back from Rwanda and there isn't a tattoo shop there, that I saw. People will stop me in the streets, they will grab my arms, the word "tattoo" is said a lot. Some places don't have native word for tattoo so you'll hear them speaking their language and then in the middle say, "tattoo," and I see people pointing. I find that most are complementary, I get a few dirty looks but they are intrigued by it. It's a good way to break the ice and start a conversation. It draws people in, they take pictures with their phones. Sometimes it makes me a little nervous because they are touching me and ask me questions in their language and I can't communicate back to them.

**And your restaurant is named "ink."**

We named the restaurant ink. because it was short for "incorporated" we kept thinking "inc...something, inc.", then we said lets do it "ink." with a period because anything in ink is permanent. Some people come and expect to see flash on the walls but that's us. We're a fine dining restaurant. There are guests who are tattooed and there are guests who are in a suit and a tie. In the kitchen, I want people to be themselves because I think people perform better that way. When my brother and I worked for Williams-Sonoma the associates told us, "We want to thank you because you made it so we can have our sleeves rolled up or have an earring." Because we were associated with them, their workers across the board felt freer to be themselves. Everybody should be able to express themselves no matter where they are. ■





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