



42° OF GUENTER SEEGER

HE'S THE CITY'S MOST CELEBRATED CHEF, AND FROM BADEN-BADEN TO BUCKHEAD, THE DEGREES OF HIS INFLUENCE ARE FAR-REACHING

BY SARAH GLEIM & SARAH CROSLAND

PHOTOGRAPHY BY YVONNE BOYD & KARA BRENNAN

Sitting in the lounge of his Buckhead restaurant Seeger's, internationally famed chef/owner Guenter Seeger sips Illy coffee from a white Philippe Deshoulières cup. His demeanor is calm and collected—quite the antithesis of what you might expect from a chef who, in a few short hours, will be serving his evening's guests as many as 12 different courses. In an eloquent German accent, Seeger speaks fondly about growing up north of the 42nd parallel in Baden-Baden, Germany, and his classical French training in the culinary arts. He admits he has a love-hate relationship with caviar and truffles, and proudly tells how his former restaurant, Restaurant Hoheneck, became one of the first in Germany to receive a Michelin Star. But it's his connection to Atlanta's dining scene, and his restaurant's role in this city, that he discusses most passionately. "A city like Atlanta needs balance when it comes to dining," he says. "We need more than just chain restaurants that are here to make money. We need world-class restaurants, too." Now, with more than 30 years of experience mastering his craft, he's not afraid to push the boundaries. And that is exactly what 56-year-old Seeger says he is here to do.

Chef Guenter Seeger

POINT OF ORIGIN

Seeger is from Baden-Baden, the area known as the fruit garden of Germany. An affinity for food is part of his heritage—his parents ran a fruit and vegetable business and both his grandmothers grew and cooked with premium produce. But, Seeger says, he never dreamt of culinary greatness. “I didn't know I wanted to be a chef,” he says. “My mom just said ‘In two weeks you start an apprenticeship.’ End of story.”



Seeger's heirloom beet salad

“TUCKER IS GOD”

Ask anyone who's worked under him and they'll tell you Seeger is passionate about produce. In the 20 years he's lived in Atlanta, he has pioneered the farmer-restaurateur relationship and persuaded local farmers to grow specialty produce just for him, an essential ingredient of his success. One of his favorite farmers is Tucker Taylor, who oversees the organic micro-gardens at Woodland Gardens in Athens (706.227.1944). “Tucker is God,” Seeger says. “When he brings in his vegetables, it is an amazing day.” Seeger selects from Taylor's produce daily, and allows what's fresh to dictate his menu. The heirloom beet salad (shown above) with caviar, beet gelée and horseradish snow (low-fat milk that is infused with horseradish and whipped), is a prime example of that relationship put to work.

“When my grandmother cooked, the house would smell so good. She cooked only small portions and her little stove was so clean you could see yourself in it. Amazing.” —Guenter Seeger



Seeger's private dining adjacent to the wine cellar

MAGNUM OPUS

If we had to choose one restaurant in Atlanta that truly sets itself apart, it would be Seeger's. Many of Atlanta's fine restaurants serve excellent food, but executive chef/owner Guenter Seeger's goal is to create a customized, unparalleled dining experience that begins the second his guests arrive. (Where else in Atlanta does the restaurant hostess greet you at the “Marquise de la Porte” outside by your car?) When we dined there, we began the evening in the über-chic lounge area where we sampled tiny goat cheese canapés, sipped Champagne and mingled with chef Seeger and the evening's other diners. While in the lounge, sommelier Dorine Buche presented us with a choice of prix-fixe menus (the restaurant offers five, eight or 12 courses) and then escorted us to our table after we ordered, as if we were guests in Seeger's own home. Throughout the evening, we dined on a series of delightful *amuse-bouches*, including a chilled pea soup topped with a delicate baby carrot. Our main courses were culinary masterpieces cooked to technical perfection. The sashimi yellowfin tuna tart with Asian emulsion and nori crisp was our favorite dish, but the Vidalia onion tart and beet gnocchi with lobster were close runners-up. But what elevated the evening to a world-class dining experience were the brilliant wine pairings of sommeliers Buche and Scott Turnbull—don't dine without them. We were also delighted with the results of last year's renovation, which includes new blue and yellow carpet, taupe velvet and ivory sheers, and Garnier Thiebaut table linens. The fine details are what Seeger says sets his restaurant apart. “A great restaurant exists out of details. The details are what make a big difference,” Seeger says. “Some diners get it and some diners don't.” We get it, Guenter. *Seeger's*, 111 West Paces Ferry Road, 404.846.9779 or www.seegers.com.



LA GRANDE DAME

Seeger's sommelier Dorine Buche is a quiet, French woman who knows her wines. She studied in the Rhône Valley and was sommelier at Les Loges de L'Aubergade, a three-star Michelin Restaurant in France, before she joined Seeger's. So what does she consider the best wines to complement Seeger's cuisine? German Rieslings and Burgundy Pinot Noirs.

"There is no perfect food without a perfect product," Seeger says. He creates his menus daily, and prepares the dishes à la minute, or "at the moment" they are served.

THE PROFESSIONAL

One of Seeger's top local dining spots is Joël (3290 Northside Parkway, 404.233.3500, www.joelrestaurant.com). "Joël [Antunes] brings true international flair to Atlanta, which we need," he says. He also loves "mom's cabbage soup" (*sup mang cua*) at Nam Restaurant (931 Monroe Drive, 404.541.9997, www.namrestaurant.com).



SIZZLING HOT

Seeger's list of awards is hard to beat. He's Atlanta's only Relais Gourmand chef, and Seeger's is one of just two restaurants in the city with the Mobil Five-Star and AAA Five-Diamond ratings. He's been named "best chef in the southeast" by the James Beard Foundation; was honored by the Fine Dining Hall of Fame as "best restaurant in Atlanta;" and on May 27, he'll receive the German Academy of Culinary Arts Award.

Seeger uses only the finest salt from the RealSalt mines in Utah. He selected it by venturing into the mines and licking the rocks until he found just the right taste.

SIMPLE SETTING

In Seeger's new design, diners sit on plush wingchairs and sofas in the main dining room, side-by-side on settees in the intimate upstairs space or at the chef's table with a view to the kitchen. Table pieces for each area vary, as well. Seeger's favorite setting has Garnier Thiebaut linens (www.garnier-thiebaut.com), Christofle silver (www.christofle.com), and dishes and chargers custom-made for the restaurant by Rita Ahazi.



THE ICON

Seeger's favorite chefs along the 42nd parallel include Michel Bras in France (www.michel-bras.com), Thomas Keller of California's French Laundry (www.frenchlaundry.com), Spain's Carme Ruscalleda of Restaurant Sant Pau (www.ruscalleda.com) and French chef Michel Guérard of Les Pres d'Eugénie (www.michelguerard.com).



Chef Michel Bras

FIVE-STAR LEGACY

After Seeger's three-year apprenticeship in Germany, he worked at Switzerland's Restaurant Old Swiss House in Luzerne and Grand Hotel Regina in Grindelwald. He earned a Michelin Star at his Restaurant Hoheneck in Phorzheim, Germany. Finally, he settled at The Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton, Buckhead (3434 Peachtree Road, 404.237.2700, www.ritzcarlton.com) and became the city's first chef to earn the Mobil Five-Star and AAA Five-Diamond rating.



The Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton, Buckhead

MICHEL BRAS PHOTO BY LAURENT PARRAULT



Seeger's black forest cake

SEEGER'S SIN

As a child, Seeger visited Café Koenig in Baden-Baden, where he says he always ordered black forest cake—still one of his favorites. Seeger's pastry chef, Aaron Russell, (they also worked together at The Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton, Buckhead) has created a special version of the traditional German dessert, which appears regularly on the Seeger's menu. It's portioned for one, and features a chocolate sponge cake layered with sour cherries, chocolate mousse, vanilla cream and marzipan ice cream.

Working with Seeger launched executive chef Shaun Doty, who leads the kitchen of one of Seeger's favorites, Table 1280 (1280 Peachtree St, 404.897.1280, www.table1280.com). "Shaun has guts," Seeger says. "I admire him for taking risks—chefs have to."



Chef Shaun Doty

THE RISING STAR

Another former Seeger chef who's made a name for himself is Troy Thompson. He's executive chef at Jer-ne Restaurant + Bar at the Ritz-Carlton, Marina del Rey (4375 Admiralty Way, 310.574.4333, www.troynthompson.com), where he combines fresh ingredients with traditional cooking techniques he honed with Seeger.



Seeger is an avid supporter of Taste of the Nation, and has raised more than \$150,000 hosting dinners with famed chefs Daniel Boulud, Charlie Trotter and Michel Guérard.

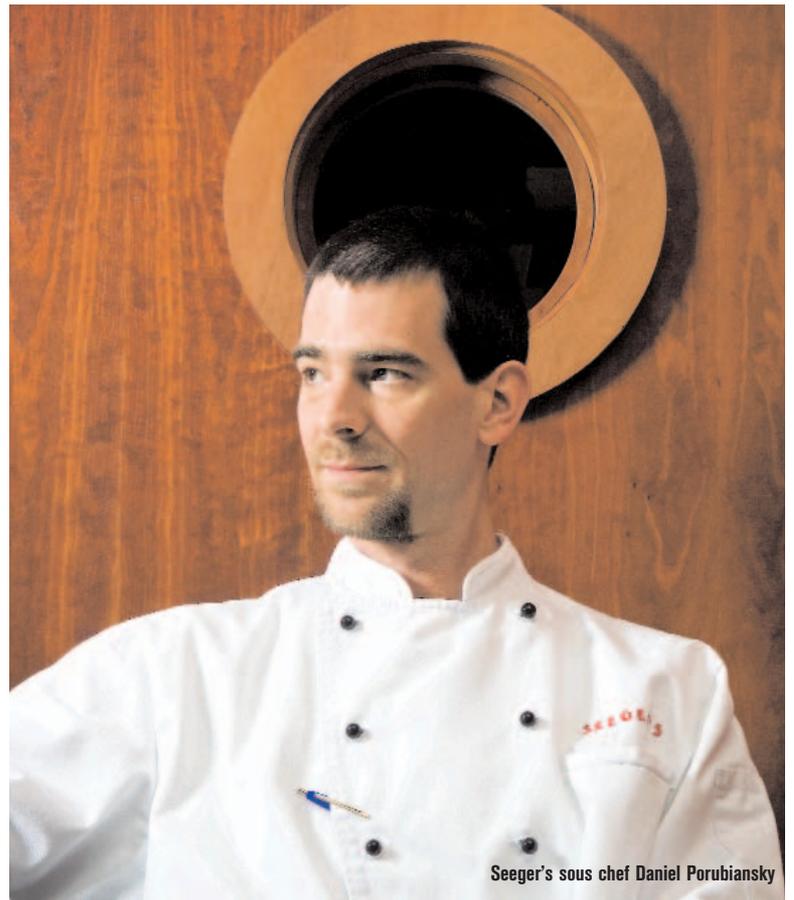
FAB FOUR

Only fresh ingredients grace Seeger's plates—whether he's cooking at the restaurant or for himself. When it comes to buying fresh produce, he heads to the Morningside Farmers Market in Virginia-Highland (www.morningsidemarket.com), as well as Harry's Farmers Market (www.wholefoodsmarket.com). He loves the fresh breads from Alon's Bakery (www.alons.com) in Virginia-Highland and the cheeses from Thomasville, Georgia's Sweet Grass Dairy (www.sweetgrassdairy.com).



A-LIST LOUNGE

In 2005, The Johnson Studio (www.johnsonstudio.com) renovated the restaurant's locale, a 1920s brick house. The intimate space now accommodates just 32, and includes plush Donghia settees and wing chairs, and a velvet drape separating the lounge from the dining room.



THE PUPIL

So just where is the original team that opened Seeger's in 1997? Daniel Porubiansky—the restaurant's original sous chef—is once again Seeger's right-hand man. He also spent several years at the Ritz-Carlton under Seeger, who eventually sent him to train in New York's Le Bernardin (www.le-bernardin.com), and in some of Germany's Michelin-starred restaurants. Porubiansky has worked with many other top chefs, including Anne Quatrano and Clifford Harrison, owners of Bacchanalia (1198 Howell Mill Road, 404.365.0410, www.starprovisions.com), and former Ritz-Carlton chef, Bruno Ménard. Seeger's original sommelier, Fabrice Langlois, is now at Château du Beaucastel in the Côtes du Rhône (www.beaucastel.com), and his pastry chef, Chika Tilmann, now owns New York City's ChikaLicious (203 East 10th St., 212.995.9511, www.chikalicious.com), an intimate, 20-seat eatery offering a prix-fixe menu of desserts and cheeses.

"In this business, you either consider every restaurant a competitor or none of them. But the only one I'm really competing with is myself." —Guenter Seeger

“I have a love affair with caviar,” Seeger says, lamenting today’s scarce supply of the world’s finest varieties. “Beluga sturgeon is out because it’s an endangered species. The best caviar used to come from Iran, but not anymore. And buying Russian caviar is a Mafia deal—it’s ugly.”

EGG-STACY

One of Seeger’s signature dishes is the farm egg custard. He varies the dish’s components, but when we tried it, the flavor was incredibly light and fresh, with just a hint of sweetness. For our dish, Seeger prepared the custard by carefully cutting off the top of the shell with an egg cutter. He removed the egg from the shell and mixed it with truffle jus and vegetable consommé and returned the mixture to the shell. Finally, it was steamed and topped with maple syrup, chantilly cream and shaved Bottarga (salted, pressed and dried roe of gray mullet).



Seeger's farm egg custard

PHOTO OF TROY THOMPSON BY VIRGINIA CONESA; PHOTO OF SCOTT CARSBERG BY FEYMAN OREZY



Nothing beats a fine wine paired with Seeger's haute cuisine. His personal picks include a 1995 Salon Champagne, Le Mesnil; 1997 Riesling Auslese Three Star, Nackenheimer Rothenberg, Gunderloch; and 1992 Montrachet Grand Cru, Domaine Leflaive. Sommelier Dorine Buche loves Veuve Clicquot Demi Sec Champagne; Vouvray Moelleux Clos Du Bourg, Domaine Huët; and Gramona Vino Blanco, Domaine Gessami, Penedès, Spain. Sommelier Scott Turnbull favors Cornas, Domaine Auguste Clape, Rhône; Cuvée l'Alycastre Rosé, Domaine de la Courtade, Provence; and L'Avion, Stolpman Vineyards, Santa Ynez, California.

THE PROTÉGÉ

Scott Carsberg, chef of Seattle-based Lampreia (2400 First Ave., 206.443.3301, www.lampreiarestaurant.com),



Chef Scott Carsberg

says working with Seeger was invaluable—he considers Seeger a father figure. The two met more than 20 years ago working in Washington, D.C., and relocated together to The Ritz-Carlton, Buckhead. “Scott is the most talented chef I’ve ever taken through my kitchen,” Seeger says.