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French chefs of top-rated three-star restaurants raise glasses with champagne in October 1998. Profession-acclaimed "Best Chef" Jean-Georges Vongerichten is in the second row, third from the right. (Jean-Christophe Kahn/Reuters)

The Frenchman of Shanghai

Meet Jean-Georges. Chef.

By [Jordan Calinoff](#) - Special to GlobalPost

Published: April 13, 2009 22:36 ET

Updated: April 14, 2009 09:26 ET

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SHANGHAI — It's not every day that a chef tells you not to go to his restaurant, but Jean-Georges Vongerichten is not just any chef. The world-renowned French culinary master is sitting in the stylish bar area of his namesake fine dining restaurant in Shanghai's exclusive Three on the Bund — and he's raving about Shanghai's street food.

"I wouldn't recommend an American tourist coming to my restaurant in Shanghai, because I'm already on every street corner in New York. I would go for street food for breakfast, and I would look for all the Shanghainese food and soup dumplings I could eat," said Vongerichten, who is here for his semiannual visit.

His advice may be sage: After all, China is not known as a fine dining Mecca — yet.

But the Alsatian-born and New York-based Vongerichten is part of a growing crowd of chefs looking to change that image. He is a pioneer in bringing Western-style fine dining to a country fiercely proud of and devoted to its own culinary tradition. He is finally making some headway after putting in nearly a decade of work and opening his only fine dining restaurant outside of New York here in Shanghai.

Eight years ago, when he first arrived to begin opening Jean-Georges Shanghai, the idea was to serve an international clientele living in and visiting the city. But like everything from clothing to cars, Chinese citizens are looking for the best from the West, and they've flocked to his restaurant.

"For the first four years, the restaurant's clientele was around 80 percent expats. Today, it's 90 percent Chinese," Vongerichten said.

In fact, business is going so well that Vongerichten has converted the restaurant's large bar area into a new casual dining venue called Nougatine, similar to his restaurant of the same name in Manhattan. The hope is that the cheaper menu might attract new Chinese diners to the Jean-Georges worldwide brand, which includes 25 restaurants on three continents.

"I'm probably not as well known here as in the U.S.," he said. "But I have been working in New York for 22 years now. In China, it is just a matter of time and exposure."

Despite an increasingly wealthy Chinese populace, few fine dining chefs initially followed Vongerichten to China. Recently, though, the scene has begun to change.

In the past three years, Daniel Boulud and Joel Robuchon, two giants of French cooking, opened restaurants in Beijing and Hong Kong respectively. In addition, several promising young chefs, like Paul Pairet and David Laris, are making their mark by opening independent restaurants in Shanghai.

Vongerichten believes the economic downturn in the United States might prompt more chefs to make the move.

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