

WEST HOLLYWOOD

LIFESTYLE

CHEF MICHAEL
VOLTAGGIO



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entertainment — there's all this stuff
culturally in West Hollywood
that is very special."*

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Photo credit: Tera Linkugel

Beach Nation 8289 Santa Monica Blvd. in West Hollywood

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Chef Michael Voltaggio

on Travel, Cooking
and West Hollywood

Photography by Brooke Mason

By Jace Jacob

Michael Voltaggio has slew of new tattoos.

It's a chilly Tuesday afternoon, hours before the busy dinner service at the 36-year-old's West Hollywood restaurant, the appropriately named ink. Sitting in the back of the gray dining room, Voltaggio proudly shows off the latest additions to his collection of body art: a rose, a lion and the words "Hard Work" on his hand.

"The question I get asked a lot is 'Why you? Why do you get to do this stuff?'" Voltaggio says. "People assume that I woke up one day, and I got to be on a television show and have my own restaurants. The answer to that is hard work. ... I would add passion to that — hard work and passion for what you do."

Looking at Voltaggio, both are playing out within this talented chef. His boyish looks — accented by a first-rate hipster haircut — are at odds with his innate intensity, though the ink points to his artistic sensibility. With success comes a level of sacrifice of which few outside the industry are truly aware. "You give up holidays, you give up birthdays, you give up people's weddings, you miss funerals," Voltaggio says, rapping the table with his knuckles for emphasis. "You basically become the outcast of your family because you put work before anything else. It's kind of sad, but it's also required."

Voltaggio started cooking at 15; he worked under José Andrés at The Bazaar at the SLS before moving on to The Dining Room in Pasadena — and then came the inevitable *Top Chef* win. He's now juggling ink. and a sandwich shop sibling called ink.sack (with a second branch at LAX), appearing on Travel Channel's *Breaking Borders*, and he has just broken ground on a new restaurant in West Hollywood that we just learned will also include a "grown up" version of ink.sack next door.

Despite the culinary migration under way toward downtown Los Angeles, Voltaggio chose to remain in the neighborhood.

"West Hollywood is a very creative little pocket in Los Angeles," Voltaggio says. "There's fashion, there's food, there's music, there's entertainment, there's all this stuff culturally in West Hollywood that is very special. Putting another unique little piece into West Hollywood — it's pretty cool."

Voltaggio is working with renowned designer Thomas Schoos (Beach Nation, Herringbone at the Mondrian). The two, along with Voltaggio's brother, Bryan, previously collaborated on the Ellipsis in Mumbai. They are building the new restaurant from the kitchen out. The space, which will take over fellow *Top Chef* alum Elia Aboumrad's Gorge on Sunset, doesn't yet have a particular concept other than what Voltaggio refers to as hospitality.

"That's an art that's getting lost right now," he says. "The center of this restaurant will be the kitchen. The heart of it is going to be the cooking, with hospitality being the driving force behind it." It will be an intimate space, "20 to 30 seats maybe," which may include an *omakase*-style dining experience, something that Voltaggio hoped to achieve with ink. when it opened in 2011. (Those plans were shelved to accommodate more space for diners.) "I want the guests to be able to walk into the kitchen, maybe, and see what's going on. I want to build a place that connects the guests with the kitchen."

Voltaggio was heavily involved with the conceptualization of ink. — down to designing the china — and there will be an artistic component to the new restaurant. "I want to incorporate art into it," he continues. "I want it to be constantly evolving, as I am as a person. So to say it's going to be an Italian restaurant, it's going to be a Chinese restaurant, it's going to be a modern American restaurant — I can't, because it could be all of that at some point."

But it will, Voltaggio assures, complement the vibrant culinary scene of West Hollywood. Voltaggio recognizes that it was the support of the community that made ink. a success. "When I see the barstools full of people who are here two or three days a week — this is their spot to come and have a cocktail on their way home, or they were sitting at home and they walked to the restaurant to have a drink — we're on a first-name basis with those people. As much as we're a global dining destination, we're still very much a neighborhood restaurant."





Denim jacket, shirt, jeans: G-Star

Lately, Voltaggio has gotten further out into the world. On the hybrid travelogue-cooking show *Breaking Borders*, he uses food to bring people enmeshed in violent conflict — in such places as Belfast, Kashmir and Cairo — together for a conversation over a meal. While Voltaggio and correspondent Mariana Van Zeller are in these conflict zones to create meaningful conversation, they're often harassed by local law enforcement. Yet, Voltaggio says the threat of police interrogation isn't the most stressful element of the show.

"For Mariana, her stress would be: Are the guests going to get to the table?" Voltaggio says. "My stress is: Are the guests going to stay at the table once they get there? Because what if the food sucks, or what if I didn't capture the essence of the cuisine? I could show up and make macaroni and cheese if I want to. But for me, I owed it to the people we were cooking for to show that ... their story was being told through the food that I cooked."

Even in these conflict zones, Voltaggio encounters camaraderie ("I'm standing in Cambodia and getting restaurant recommendations!" he exclaims) and profound beauty while shopping for produce on the water market in Kashmir. "It was 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning, I was on a boat under the Himalayas buying produce from guys that had paddled out," he says. "It was equally as important for them to sell it to me as it was for me to buy it. ... With that passion, that hard work, they weren't just out selling produce, they were out surviving from selling produce."

There's hard work again.

While Voltaggio still works endless hours, he does find time to get out of the kitchen. On those rare occasions, he'll hike, eat out, or indulge in another obsession. "I just finished rebuilding an old Chevy," Voltaggio says with a grin. "I've got a 1955 Chevy, so that became a passion project for me. I don't do the physical work myself, [but I design it and drive it.] I like driving fast cars, too. Whether it's in the streets — I'm not going to say where because I don't want to tell the police — but I love cars." He'll often spend a day off window-shopping at dealerships and taking cars out for test-drives.

Life moves fast, this seems to underline, and is constantly changing, as is the chef himself. Voltaggio begs off having a personal aesthetic, pointing to the ripped T-shirt and stained pants he's wearing. (He's a "jeans and a T-shirt guy" but loves wearing a suit.) And his maverick spirit, which manifests itself in his food and artistic pursuits, can't be labeled.

"I love fashion, I love art, I love music, I love everything that comes from creativity," Voltaggio says. "Like food, my personal aesthetic evolves too. ... Today, I want to be this, and tomorrow I'm going to be that. My label is: I don't want a label. I'm just me. I'm just Michael Voltaggio."



Leather jacket, jeans, shoes: John Varvatos

Michael Voltaggio's West Hollywood Picks

EAT

Petrossian
321 N. Robertson Blvd.
(310) 271-6300
www.petrossian.com

DRINK

The Sunset
Trocadero Lounge
8280 Sunset Blvd.
(323) 656-7161

SHOP

John Varvatos
8800 Melrose Ave.
(310) 859-2791
www.johnvarvatos.com

SHOP

Theory
8428 Melrose Ave.
(323) 782-0163
www.theory.com

TATTOO

Shamrock Social Club
9026 Sunset Blvd.
(310) 271-9664
www.shamrocksocialclub.com