

RECIPE FOR DELICIOUS SUCCESS

It takes a chef to cook a meal, but it takes a culinary virtuoso to orchestrate the symphony of tastes into one dish. The exquisite Zov's is blessed to have an owner – Zov Karamardian – of such taste who has a strong passion for both cooking and helping the underprivileged in Armenia.

Text Verzhine Nikoghosyan



It all started when she was in her teens. “My mother would call me when I got home from school, and she would explain over the phone what she wanted me to cook and how to prepare certain dishes. I would go and buy the ingredients and would cook dinner,” said Zov Karamardian, the owner and founder of the Zov’s restaurant chain.

It was then and there that she decided cooking was going to be her career. The path from learning how to cook over the phone to attending the culinary program with Julia Child was not easy or glamorous but possible. “I was literally mesmerized by her,” said Zov about Julia Child. Julia has been an inspiration, a mentor and a good friend for her, but it was her love for cooking that drove Zov to explore different dishes, mixing them with Armenian tastes and flavors. She moved to Orange County after getting married, and worked from home while raising her two children. She catered events from her home for a long time, but then she had to make the next step forward.

“Once my children started driving, I had to make a decision whether this was going to be me working out of the house or a professional career. So I decided to move out of the house.” She found a gift shop for sale in a nearby center and convinced her husband to purchase the site. “I looked around at this whole center, and I started designing the restaurant in my mind. And that was the beginning of my story,” she said.

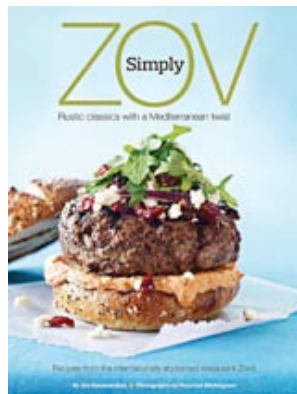
The restaurant was opened in 1987. The area was only 1,300 square feet, but it



soon grew not only into a restaurant with different rooms but also into a chain. It was never a glamorous life for Zov. The restaurants are the product of her hard work and perseverance. She would drive to downtown Los Angeles from Orange County at 2 a.m. to buy her produce, come back, cook, and be ready to greet the guests in the morning.

"I will be 70 soon and I am working harder than ever, but I am very passionate about what I do. I love to cook, and I love to teach. I have published two cookbooks now, and they're doing very well. The first one is *Recipes and Memories From the Heart* and the second is *Simply Zov*. People love the books. That means everything to me," she said.

Being Armenian is not only reflected in her food but also in her life. She has been a supporter of many Armenian causes such as the Paros Lighthouse Foundation, an Armenian charitable foundation in the U.S., for which she raised \$25,000. She has also been a strong supporter of the work done by the Plastics Foundation in Armenia, collecting approximately \$30,000 for the volunteer doctors who travel to Armenian orphanages to operate on children with cleft palates. The Armenian Relief Society is also on her list of charities along with many others. Her daughter Taleene and son Armen are in business with her, and Garbis Karamardian, Zov's husband who retired recently, has also joined the family business. The original restaurant in Tustin has now grown into 12,000 square feet and includes different banquet rooms. In addition, she has expanded her



← Karamardian's second recipe book, *Simply Zov*

business with two new restaurants called Zov's Neighborhood Café and Bar, one in Newport Coast and the other in Irvine. Zov considers herself a teacher, and as a chef/restaurateur, she regularly conducts cooking classes at her own restaurants or venues like Sur La Table. She has received a number of awards. The prestigious Angel Award from the James Beard Foundation was given for her "independent vision, dedicated support, and significant contributions" to the culinary world. She was named California Chef of the Year by the Governor's office, Restaurateur of the Year by the California Restaurant Association, Chef of the Year by the Southern California Restaurant Writers, Business Woman of the Year by the Orange County Business Journal, and Business Women of the Year by the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO). She received the Pace Setter Award from the Roundtable for Women in Food Service, was selected as a

Woman of Valor by the American Diabetes Association, and was awarded the Profile In Excellence Award from the Executive Women's Forum of Newport Beach. Her restaurants have been praised by many national culinary magazines including *Bon Appétit* and *Food & Wine*, countless television shows including *EXTRA*, *KTLA Morning News* and *Good Day L.A.*, and the Food Network recognized Zov's bakery as one of the nation's best. Among all this, Armenian food for Zov is her background, her history and who she is.

"I think Armenian food is one of the best in the world – I love it. It is absolutely exquisite because it is so balanced. In order to get the flavors you have to know how to combine the spices and the amount of the portions," she said.

Incorporating her love for this food with the flavors that the locals enjoy makes her cooking so unique. People from different countries and backgrounds equally enjoy her international menu. ■