

Mark Stech-Novak

Silver Spoon *Food Arts* presents the September 2003 SILVER SPOON AWARD for sterling performance to **Mark Stech-Novak**, a kitchen designer as ideally equipped as one of his own creations with a unique constellation of experience, talent, and imagination.

"There's no university of kitchen design," muses Stech-Novak, whose fortuitously atypical career path began, unlike most kitchen designers, as a chef. While still a teenager, he ran off to a Paris just cooling down from the student revolts, "slaved in a few cheap *bôîtes* in the *cinquième*," then became the first American to complete an apprenticeship in the Auvergne and, subsequently, the first to earn a winemaking degree from the University of Dijon. By the early 1980s, he was chef at two San Francisco restaurants, Le St. Tropez and Camargue. The reviews were luminescent, citing the "exalted cookery" and "ideal chef...talented with a joyous creativity." But his career came to an agonizing halt when he landed in the hospital with a serious back injury inflicted by a stubborn pair of gothic bookcases.

With a chef's understanding of equipment and workspaces, a boundless curiosity concerning such matters as the thermodynamics of cooking, the art of metalworking, and all things digital, Stech-Novak entered his new career uniquely prepared to translate the technical into the culinary. "It's not just speaking the same language," he explains, "but knowing the way chefs see and understand." To enable that understanding, he employs animated computer renderings to develop each and every project. "Mark's 3-D perspectives and virtual kitchens allow me to walk through and actually feel the space," says **Jean-Georges Vongerichten**. "He works out all the kinks early in the design process to avoid costly mistakes. For me, it's the only way to design a kitchen today."

With projects ranging from an imaginary interstellar workstation to a kitchen for the Culinary Vegetable Institute (Milan, Ohio) and the dramatic gladiatorial ring for *Iron Chef USA*, Stech-Novak shines especially in the creation of custom ateliers for chefs with ambitious ideas. If no other kitchen designer has served such a formidable wedge of big cheese—**Alain Ducasse**, **Wylie Dufresne**, **Thomas Keller**, **David Kinch**, **Gray Kunz**, **George Lang**, **Sirio Maccioni**, **Jean-Louis Palladin**, **Charlie Palmer**, **Wolfgang Puck**, **Claude Troisgros**, to name a few—it's as much because of his imagination, intelligence, and diligence as his culinary background. Working at a level of creative intensity equal to his clients', he has led the way in transforming kitchen design from mere practical necessity into an art form aimed at returning the kitchen to the center of the restaurant.

"If you crossed Frank Lloyd Wright with MacGyver and the Mad Hatter, you might begin to find someone resembling Mark," hazards **Norman Van Aken**, who unveils Stech-Novak kitchens at **Mundo** (Coral Gables, FL) and **Norman's** (Los Angeles) this year. "He's been a chef and knows the world chefs live in. He's completely wild-eyed, brilliant, and uncorrupted by such silly things as constraints, and he will bust ass to find a way to bring his vision home." —TED GACHOT

