



Wolfgang Puck, Chef Food for Life

Lesson Introduction

Interview Log: Interviewed on August 28, 2023 by David Bender

- ▣ Access **The Thread** episode of Wolfgang Puck on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- ▣ Access his long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#)

Learning Objectives

***Note:** This episode mentions mature content such as suicide ideation and abusive parents.

Social Studies Focus

- ▣ Identify economic challenges faced by immigrants to the United States
- ▣ Explore definitions of family, including chosen family
- ▣ Examine the idea of the “American Dream” and how it is interpreted and experienced differently
- ▣ Discuss personal responsibility and community involvement in creating a better society

English Language Arts Focus

- ▣ Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one chef
- ▣ Analyze the structure and purpose of a narrative, identify key themes in this episode, and synthesize information from a spoken text
- ▣ Analyze, reflect on, and discuss the title of the episode “Food For Life”
- ▣ Explore the idea of purposeful work and a meaningful life
- ▣ Use Wolfgang Puck’s episode as evidence to write a rhetorical argument, commentary, or synthesis essay

Episode Overview

Described as “the first and perhaps the only chef that you and your grandma know by name,” Wolfgang Puck is the epitome of the American dream. An émigré from Austria in 1973, Mr. Puck displayed brilliance as a chef that was immediately evident, earning him a reputation that has only grown stronger over the next five decades. His unrivaled status as one of America’s premier epicureans led him to create two of the most storied restaurants in the nation: Ma Maison and Spago. Mr. Puck has also used his stature to build a foundation that has contributed millions of dollars to vital food programs like Meals on Wheels. Yet, for all his fame, Wolfgang Puck retains a gracious humility and a disarming sense of humor. This episode of **The Thread** will whet your appetite to learn more about this extraordinary man.



Biography

Wolfgang Puck is a world-renowned chef, restaurateur, and philanthropist. Born in Austria, Puck was inspired by his chef mother to begin cooking as a child. He started formal training at 14 in some of France’s top restaurants. At 24, he moved to the U.S., working first at La Tour in Indianapolis before making waves with Hollywood’s elite at Ma Maison in L.A. in 1975. A best-selling author, Puck released his first cookbook, *Modern French Cuisine for the American Kitchen*, in 1981. The following year, he opened Spago, his first flagship restaurant, where his innovative California cuisine earned him James Beard Awards for Outstanding Chef and Restaurant of the Year. Puck went on to open critically acclaimed restaurants worldwide, expanding into catering and products under Wolfgang Puck Fine Dining Group, Catering, and Worldwide, Inc. An Emmy-winning TV personality, he was honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2017. Through the Puck-Lazaroff Charitable Foundation, he’s raised millions for cancer research and Meals on Wheels. In 2012, he received the James Beard Foundation’s Lifetime Achievement Award.



Teaching Tip: First Take

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode’s opening.

Suggested Steps

▣ **Watch and then read aloud** the opening of Wolfgang Puck’s episode with students:

“My mother was also a chef, so I used to help her out sometimes in the summer when I was not in school. So for me, being in the kitchen with the pastry chef, tasting all the sweets was a lot of fun. And so my mom found me this job as an apprentice, and my mother told me when I was leaving, she said, ‘I know you. I know you just have to make more money than you spend. Then you will be okay.’ We got paid very little. So when I started my business, I looked at the calculator and said, ‘I have to make more than I spend.’”



▣ **Ask and Discuss:** What do you learn about Wolfgang Puck’s upbringing from these opening sentences? What insights can you infer?

▣ **Next,** as a class, discuss the role of “the opening” in any form of storytelling – an interview, film, play, or song. What is their point of view on why the filmmakers chose this as the opening for the episode? What ideas, topics, or themes may the filmmakers be foreshadowing?

▣ **Last,** have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on how the opening connects with the episode’s title “Food for Life.” Have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.



Photos: View of Austrian-American chef Wolfgang Puck in the kitchen of the Ma Maison Restaurant, LA. 1978. (Ellen Graham) top; Sidney Poitier, Gella Assefa, and Wolfgang Puck during Wolfgang Puck Cut Steakhouse Opening at Regent Beverly Wilshire in Beverly Hills, California, United States. (J. Vespa/WireImage for BWR Public Relations) lower left; Wolfgang Puck during his early days at Ma Maison, Los Angeles. (Personal photograph of Wolfgang Puck) lower right



Teaching Tip:

The Thread Up Close

Step One: Watch Wolfgang Puck’s episode “Food for Life” here.

Next, have students discuss and debrief the episode using these suggested questions:

- ▣ How did Wolfgang Puck’s challenging childhood shape his work ethic and drive to succeed?
- ▣ What skills, qualities, and talents make Wolfgang Puck a successful chef?
- ▣ How did his experience as a young chef in France contribute to his culinary philosophy?
- ▣ How does Wolfgang Puck’s story demonstrate the importance of social responsibility?
- ▣ Do you think Puck’s professional success is emblematic of the American dream?
- ▣ What lessons can be learned from Wolfgang Puck’s journey?

Step Two: After discussing the questions in Step One, have students return to *The Thread* episode and engage in a close read and analysis of his interview using the transcript and video as a reference. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning *The Thread* with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of a *Thread* lesson connection: What is luck? Wolfgang Puck has a particular experience and point of view about luck. His story is an engaging way for students to analyze the idea and experience of luck. Introduce this theme using this quote:

“So for me, giving back was such an important part of my life because I think I got lucky. I worked hard, but I got lucky to be successful. So many people out there don’t have that luck, and they might be talented in different things, but they end up with not much.”

Connections: *The Thread Up Close*

- ▣ What is luck? Have you ever felt lucky? What can you attribute to your luck?
- ▣ What would you point to as the reasons for his success?
- ▣ What motivates you to succeed?
- ▣ What does the title “Food for Life” mean to you?
- ▣ What new insight did you learn about (yourself, your community, your world) from his stories?



Activity: Food for Life

So many cultures and religions celebrate rites of passage, commemorate life cycle events, and carry on the continuity of their ancestry through food. In this activity, students will choose an important food of their heritage and one that they love to eat and learn more about the history and symbolism of the dish. Depending on the age of your students and the resources available, you may also organize a “Food for Life” day at school where your class shares these significant dishes and traditions as a community- building exercise, but more importantly, as a way to connect and create a sense of family in the spirit of Wolfgang Puck’s episode.

Here are sample guidelines for students to reference:

- ❑ Choose a food or dish that celebrates an important aspect of your heritage. For example, it could express a religious story, be a dish passed down through your family, or be served only at special celebratory occasions.
- ❑ Ask your family members to tell you stories about this food or dish. Google will not give you the experience of hearing stories!
- ❑ Shop for the ingredients and cook the dish. Have fun with this activity, and consider making it for your class and sharing.

Extended Learning: Write a synthesis essay using historical source material and personal narratives on your chosen dish.



Additional Resources

- ❑ Explore the [Wolfgang Puck](#) - official website
- ❑ Watch the documentary on his life, [Wolfgang](#)
- ❑ Be creative and cook with Wolfgang Puck’s [cookbooks](#)
- ❑ Learn more about his charitable work through the [Puck-Lazarus Foundation](#) and [The Heart Foundation](#)



Photos: Wolfgang Puck purchasing fish. (Personal photograph of Wolfgang Puck) *lower left*; Celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck and actor Michael Keaton attend The Weinstein Company, Brian Grazer and Casamigos Tequilas celebration for Michael Keaton at Wolfgang Puck’s CUT Lounge on January 4, 2017 in Beverly Hills, California. (Joe Scarnici/Getty Images for CASAMIGOS Tequila) *lower right*

