

interest

by Michael Allen

Spago Controversy

Going to Spago in Beverly Hills every Saturday night might sound like the glamorous life of a jetsetter, but for a handful of women it's not a night on the town, but rather a dedication to a passionate cause. Since November 2004, animal activist Valerie Belt and her fellow protesters have been holding signs and banners outside the popular Canon Drive eatery.

What brings them to Wolfgang Puck's flagship is also what draws the customers, the menu. In question are two specific items: Veal and Foie Gras. Most people are familiar with the controversy surrounding veal; calves are reportedly kept in small confined areas in order that their muscles atrophy and thus produce more tender meat.

Perhaps not as well known is the controversy regarding Foie Gras. "They force feed the duck," says Valerie. "What happens is the duck's liver literally becomes diseased and swells to about ten times its normal size. Foie Gras is actually translated in French as 'fatty liver'."

Her crusade against Foie Gras began with a picket of Whole Foods in Santa Monica. "I started leaf-letting with friends outside. VIVA (an animal rights organization) finally got through to the CEO and Whole Foods stopped carrying Foie Gras. They won't sell crated veal. They really, really turned around."

In September of last year, Governor Schwarzenegger signed a bill banning Foie Gras, but it doesn't take effect until 2012, presumably to give businesses time to switch menus and adapt. While Valerie and her fellow activists are pleased that the Governor signed the legislation, they feel restaurants should stop selling Foie Gras now.

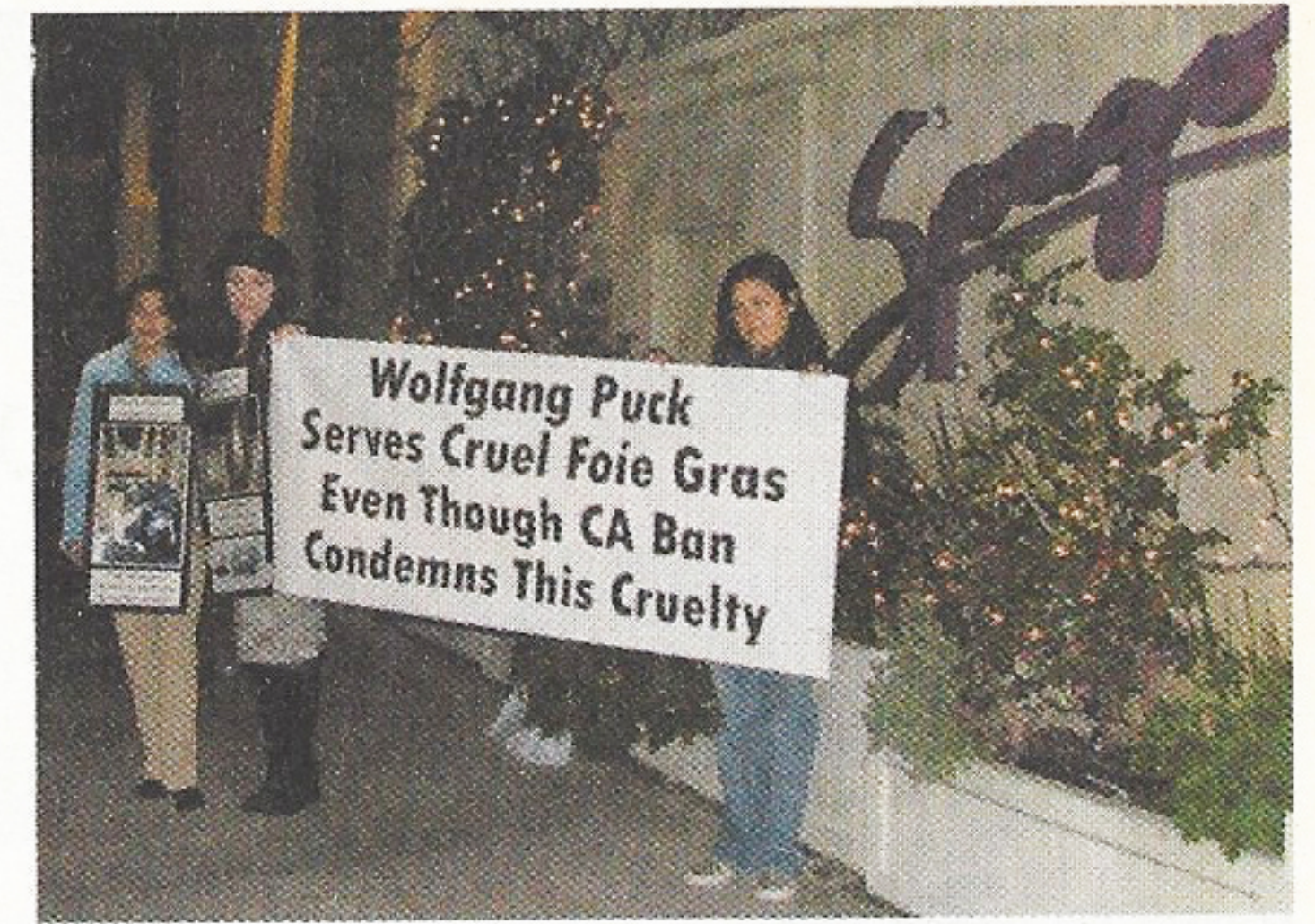
It could be argued that businesses are not under any obligation to

change their practices regarding Foie Gras, and that Wolfgang Puck and others are completely within their rights to sell the dish until the law goes into effect. Clearly Puck is being singled out because of his notoriety, a fact Valerie concedes. "Wolfgang Puck is a big name. He's well known. If you can get a big name to stop selling Foie Gras then others will follow."

And that is why Valerie and her friends have come to Beverly Hills to stand outside Spago and plead their case. "Our goal is to educate the customers who come in, and take abuse from a few." Valerie says there has been no response from Wolfgang Puck regarding the protests.

When contacted by Westside Today, a Spago rep simply stated "no comment." Calls to Wolfgang Puck's office were not returned.

On this particular night outside Spago, the wind whips down Canon Drive as the small band of protesters hold their signs and politely ask



customers to "oppose animal cruelty." The demonstration goes without incident, but protester Christine Montgomery says it's not always that way. "Some nights it's brutal, and then are other nights when people are really nice. And that's what makes it worthwhile for us, because we know there are people out there that support us. I think more people support us than not."

Montgomery seems to have no personal animosity towards Wolfgang Puck as she recalls how he recovered from his recent heart surgery. "He looks good. He's lost a lot of weight. But you need to change your menu, Wolfgang!" she smiles.