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What’s on the menu for celebrity chef creator and agent to the stars Shep Gordon? A special appearance at this year’s Hawai‘i Hotel & Restaurant Show, where guests are in for a super treat.

WHAT'S ON THE MENU FOR CELEBRITY CHEF CREATOR AND AGENT TO THE STARS SHEP GORDON?
A SPECIAL APPEARANCE AT THIS YEAR’S HAWAI‘I HOTEL & RESTAURANT SHOW, WHERE GUESTS ARE IN FOR A SUPER TREAT.
The man who built a career out of making other people famous and wound up becoming famous himself continues to shine brightly in a world of glittering stars.

Such is the life of the highly influential talent agent and culinary mastermind Shep Gordon, who at 74 shows no signs of burning out. In fact, he appears to have a lot left to give even in semi-retirement, starting with his appearance at April’s Hawai‘i Hotel & Restaurant Show at Hawai‘i Convention Center (see accompanying stories). There, he’ll be the featured speaker and will likely cover a range of topics — from his creation of the celebrity chef genre and decades-old connection to rock ‘n’ roll and Hollywood’s elite, to his sundry philanthropic endeavors and keen insights into living a peaceful, productive existence.

Event attendees, however, will probably want to hear more about those legendary dinners he hosts at his home on Maui, where a who’s who of celebrities often appear at the table. That’s because as part of this year’s trade show, a private dinner with Gordon will be auctioned off to a group of very lucky people.

Sharing a meal with the man fondly referred to as “Supermensch” (his life was chronicled in the Mike Myers’ 2013 documentary Supermensch: The Legend of Shep Gordon) and who’s managed the careers of a number of luminaries, including Alice Cooper, Teddy Pendergrass, Luther Vandross, Pink Floyd, Blondie, Kenny Loggins and Groucho Marx, certainly isn’t a bad way to spend an evening. But to do so in the company of some of the most notable A-listers, too?

Gordon isn’t revealing who else might be at the private dinner, but take it from someone who’s previously dined at his Wailea beachfront property: the stars almost always come out at night at Shep’s place.

“I’ve been to a few of his dinners and you never know who will show up,” says Mufi Hannemann, a longtime friend of Gordon, and the president and CEO of Hawai‘i Lodging & Tourism Association, which is co-hosting the show along with Honolulu Star-Advertiser and Hawai‘i Restaurant Association.

“The first time I went, (musician) Mick Fleetwood was there. The next time it was (former NBA coach) Don Nelson.”

According to Gordon, who happened to be hosting baseball legend Cal Ripken at his home during this interview, “Over the years, I’ve put on dinners for musicians, actors and chefs as a way of bringing friends together. I’ve also hosted dinners for charities, so there’s always lots of fun at the house and it’s a great environment to be a part of.”

Beyond the potential of rubbing elbows with the rich and famous, guests will be treated to an exquisite meal from chef and restaurateur Roy Yamaguchi. In addition, Yamaguchi will serve up the most expensive wine bottle (2015 cabernet sauvignon) ever sold, and which bears Gordon’s name.

“It’s in the Guinness World Records now after it got auctioned off at $350,000 a bottle,” says Gordon about celebrity winemaker Jesse Katz’s creation. “It’s not available anywhere in the world except in my house, but I’m going to serve that...”
as part of the dinner, and I’m going to give every couple that attends a bottle of wine to take home.

“Sure, it’s an inflated value,” he adds, “but it’s a nice perk.”

Gordon didn’t plan on becoming famous when he left New York for California as a young adult in the ’60s, but his attraction to people of power made it easy to gravitate toward the celebrity lifestyle.

“It’s probably why I have so many celebrities in my life,” says Gordon, whose first encounter with a star, Janis Joplin, resulted in a punch to the mouth after he unknowingly interrupted her having sex in public — one of the many tales he details in his autobiography They Call Me Supermensch. “In most cases, you become a celebrity because you perfected something so much better than everybody else, and that usually comes from having a really good work ethic.”

One of those influential people he found so alluring was Roger Vergé, the famous French chef and father of nouvelle cuisine. As he recalls about their first meeting, “I was in this restaurant in the south of France, in a room full of people who were sort of like me, which was way too successful, way too much of everything, way too much drugs, and not enough smiles — and into the room walked this guy. He was beautiful — white outfit, white hair. The restaurant got quiet, and the people who were the power people — Anthony Quinn, James Coburn, Kirk Douglas — they all got up to go and wait in line to say hello to him.

“He obviously was a power guy, but he was also so peaceful and calm, and I decided I wanted to get to know him and see where all this calmness came from because none of us had it,” continues Gordon.

That meeting led to a lifetime of friendship with Vergé, and inspired Gordon to create the first talent agency for chefs around the world. As a result, Gordon went on to birth the entire celebrity chef genre, and represent notable chefs such as Emeril Lagasse, Dean Fearing and Nobu Matsuhisa.

Locally, he encouraged Yamaguchi, Sam Choy and other chefs to unite under one banner head, which led to the formation of Hawai’i Regional Cuisine.

Little wonder why chefs (and entertainers, in general) love Gordon so much.

“I think one thing that is attractive to these artists and chefs is they see that I really care,” he says. “I don’t ever make decisions based on self-interest, but what’s good for everybody.”

Among the advice Vergé gave Gordon before his passing in 2015 was “how to interact with life in a way that would make you happy.”

That lesson crystalized for Gordon while sharing a meal with Vergé at a restaurant.

“He ate everything — I only ate a little bit,” Gordon recalls. “I thought the food was overcooked and too salted, so he took my plate and finished it for me.

“When we went out the door, I said, ‘Did you really like that, Mr. Vergé?’ and he said, ‘No, it was horrible.’ So I asked him why he ate it, and he said something to me I’ll never forget. He said, ‘Shep, I didn’t wake up this morning to ruin the chef’s life. He knew I was there, and if he saw the plate come back with the food on it, he would be depressed all night. So I can eat a bit of bad food … I’ll be OK.’”

That moment of clarity led Gordon to reconsider his own interactions and “the effect I have on others,” and set him on a course he continues to follow to this day.

“What an absolute beautiful way to go through life,” says Gordon, who also learned to never let an opportunity pass to tell others thank you. “I’ve been trying to live that way ever since.”

A SERVING OF SHEP

American talent manager and culinary genius Shep Gordon will discuss his fascinating life and more at the second annual Hawai’i Hotel & Restaurant Show.

The 45-minute talk and Q&A session, which will be moderated by Hawai’i Lodging & Tourism Association president and CEO Mufi Hannemann, begins at 5:30 p.m. April 15 inside Lili‘u Theater at Hawai’i Convention Center.

“One of the show’s unique features is the seminars on a variety of topics, and this year we’ll be featuring Shep Gordon, who’s had an enormous influence on the growth and prominence of the culinary arts across the Islands and mainland, if not the world,” says Hannemann. “He and renowned chef Roy Yamaguchi will participate in an informative and engaging discussion, and they’ll also host a private dinner as an auction item.”

Tickets are $75, which include admittance to Gordon’s talk and participation in the event’s pau hana festivities from 5 to 7 p.m. Proceeds from the auction will benefit scholarship programs for Hawai’i Lodging & Tourism Association and Hawai’i Restaurant Association.

Inset: Whether it’s hanging out on the golf course with Nickelback’s Mike Kroeger, Aerosmith’s Steven Tyler and Fleetwood Mac’s Mick Fleetwood, or (above) enjoying an evening at his Wailea, Maui, home with former NBA star and TV sportscaster Bill Walton, chef and actor Wolfgang Puck, rock ’n’ roll star Steven Tyler, and Parliament-Funkadelic bandleader and music producer George Clinton, the man known as “Supermensch” always finds himself in A-list social circles.