

Lexus Culinary Masters Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo Go Together Like Olive Oil and Soy Sauce

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It takes Chef Jon Shook less than a second to answer the question “What do you think the other person’s favorite ingredient is?”

“Pasta,” he responds, referring to fellow chef and restaurant partner Vinny Dotolo. “I know that’s not an ingredient, but he craves it. We were in New York recently and he was having pasta withdrawals.”

Dotolo doesn’t miss a beat: “For Jon, I’d generalize a region: Asian cuisine. It fits his palate. If I really distilled it down, I’d say soy sauce.”

Dotolo pauses, then adds, “And maybe for me it’s olive oil. At Jon & Vinny’s, we’re basically drinking olive oil over here.”

It’s a lighthearted exchange but one that inspires reflection. Soy sauce and olive oil — two ingredients rarely found on the same table, yet each transformative on its own. Together, they represent something greater than their sum: a delicate balancing act of instincts, influences and flavors.

That’s Jon and Vinny in so many words. One conversation with them and it’s clear that what started as a relationship forged in the fiery crucible of Florida’s culinary scene has extended far beyond a partnership or even brotherhood. With 26 years, nearly 900 employees and a place among Lexus’ most enduring Culinary Masters, Jon and Vinny are something else.



Two Peas in a Pod

Their story began in 1999 in the culinary program at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale. Fresh out of school, the two moved to Los Angeles together and threw themselves into the grind, lugging crates for catering gigs at night and trading banter about the restaurants they might open one day.

“We really came up together,” Shook says. “Where most business relationships are one person with the money and another with the ideas, we were equals from the start.”

But growing up came with aches, if not sacrifice. While friends went home for Christmas or off to spring break, the pair stayed out in LA clocking in across kitchens. “Are you willing to give up your weekends? Your holidays?” Shook asks. “That’s what this life takes.”

Dotolo adds, “Cooking is still nuts and bolts. Like musicians in the studio or painters at the canvas, you have to give it all your time.”

Responsibility came in waves. First it was about them. Then — with the opening of their first restaurant, Animal, in 2008 — it became about a team.

“You go from living outside your parents’ home and going to school to suddenly living up to those responsibilities and establishing a business,” Dotolo recalls. “And sometimes the public’s expectations are bigger than you’re ready for. But you keep going. You keep people in mind besides yourself.”



A Partnership Meant to Be

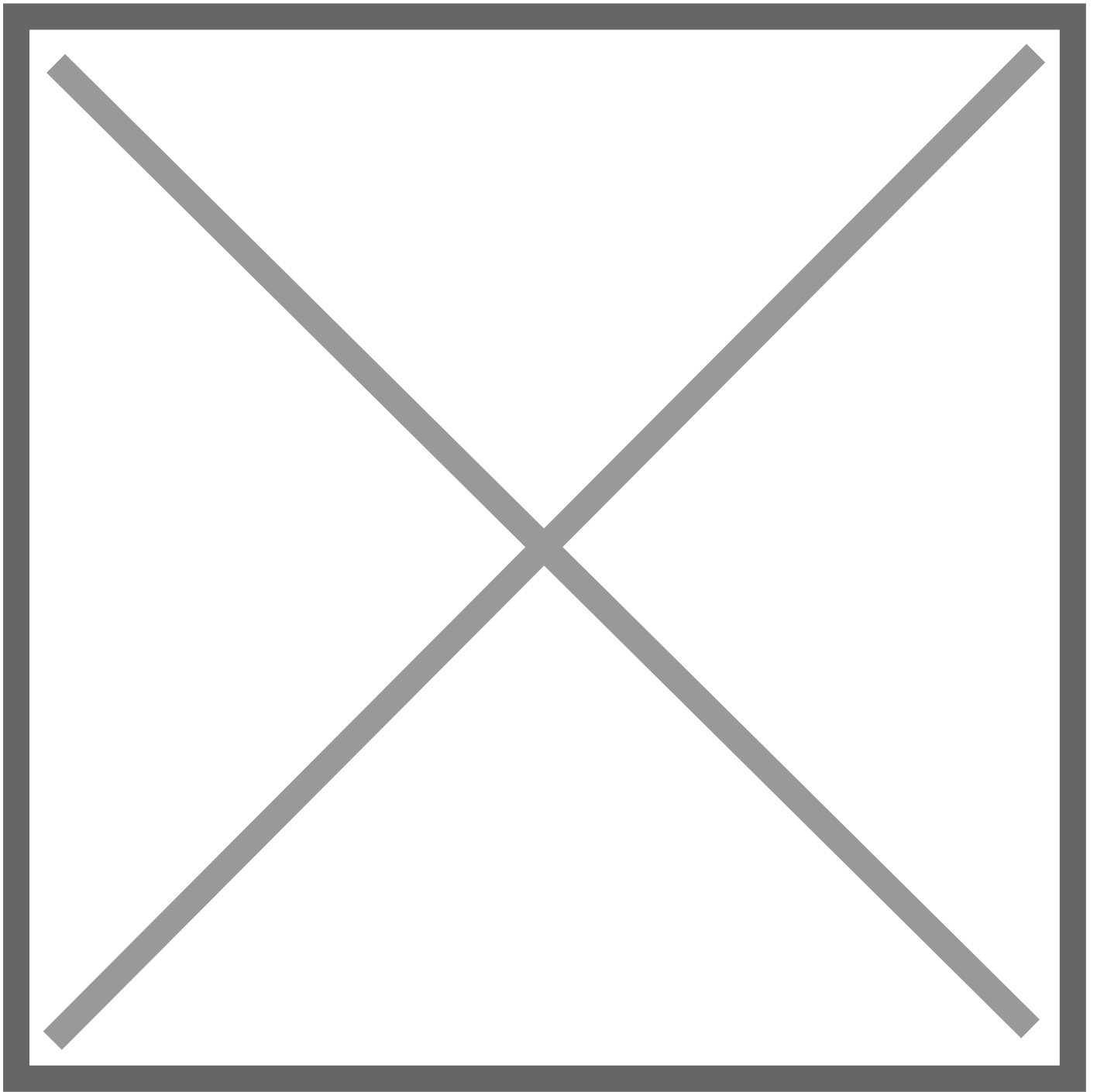
Animal was a hit, and with its success came recognition far beyond Los Angeles. Critics praised its unapologetic nose-to-tail menu. Suddenly, the duo was more than two cooks from Fort Lauderdale; they were voices in a national conversation about food. That momentum gave them the confidence to expand, though in ways they might not have expected.

In 2013, another opportunity came knocking. A fellow chef introduced them to the Lexus Culinary Masters program. It was a leap outside the kitchen, but the philosophy felt familiar.

Shook recalls the first conversations: “The tagline “The Pursuit of Excellence” — it felt like us. And we liked the vehicles, too. That was the icing on the cake.”

As they developed what many would consider their magnum opus, Jon and Vinny also stepped onto the national stage with Lexus. That meant traveling for events, cooking for engineers and even starring in commercials.

“We still looked at ourselves as cooks, so to be on a national commercial? That’s not something many people get to do in their life,” says Shook. “Suddenly, it was mushroom foraging, smoke machines, a stunt driver whipping us through Malibu. It was surreal.”

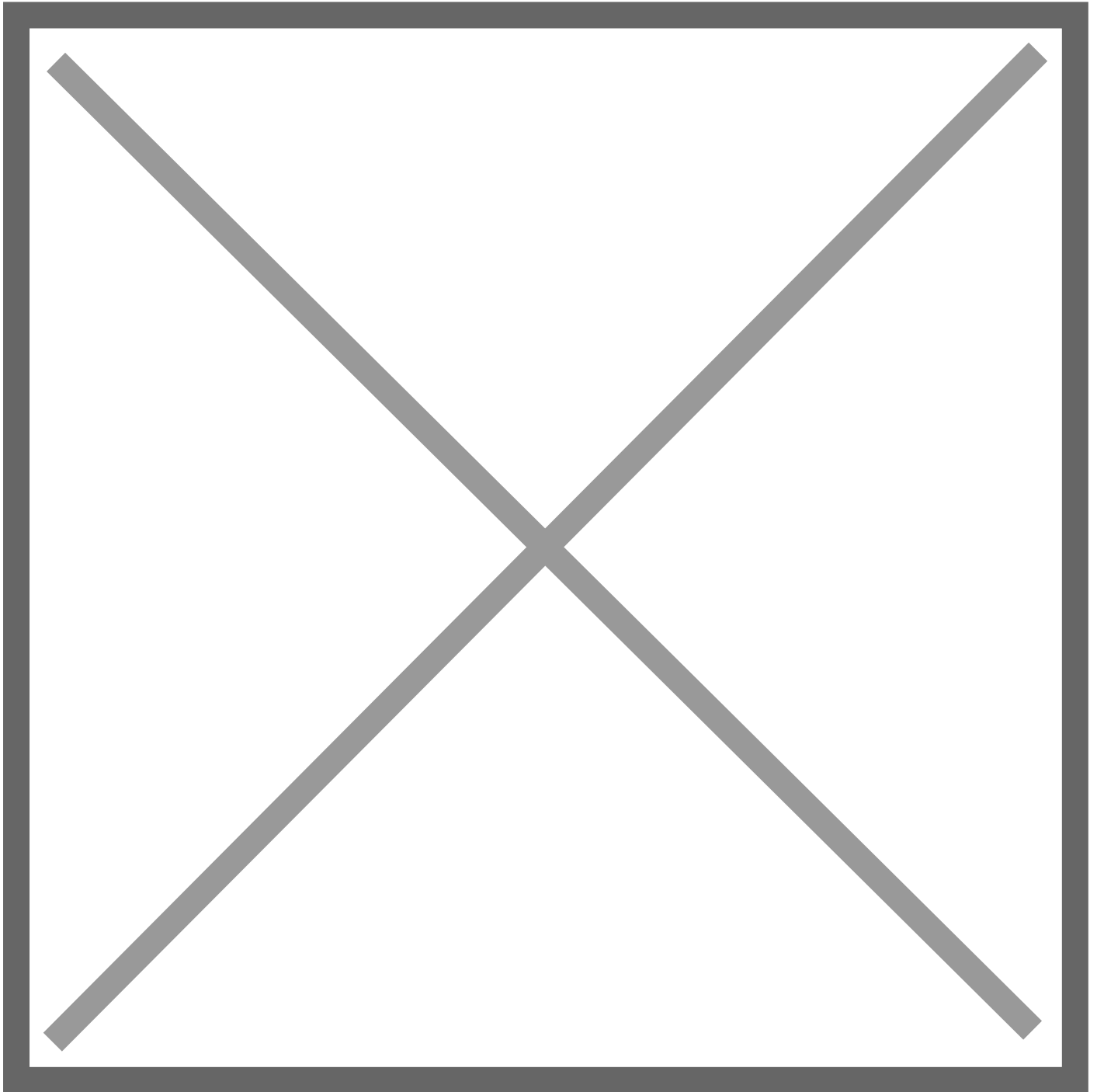


The debut of Jon & Vinny's in 2015 was a turning point in their culinary journey. It was both a namesake and a home base: a place where Italian American comfort food met California produce and where fluffy pancakes cozied up to savory pies.

"We always wanted to contribute to the greater food scene," Dotolo says. "It's fun, exciting, challenging. But the goal has always been to get better."

Recognition quickly followed: James Beard acclaim, national press and lines out the door. Meanwhile, Lexus became more than a sponsor. During the COVID pandemic, Jon and Vinny worked with Lexus to create the [first-ever Lexus Culinary Cinema](#), ensuring some chefs could keep cooking for people even in isolation.

“They didn’t run from the crisis. They went right at it,” Shook says of the brand. “That part was touching. It makes you want to represent them even more.”



An Enduring Brotherhood

These days, the story of Jon and Vinny includes their families as much as their food. Their kids have grown up in the restaurants ordering pancakes, salads and avocado toast. The pizzas? Not so much.

“They sounded great at the time,” Dotolo laughs, “but none of them like the pizzas we gave their names to.” It’s a reminder that even at the center of their success, life at the table stays humble.

It’s also a refreshingly human moment, one that brings you back to their quips about olive oil and soy sauce. Obscure at first, until you realize the two have always gone together. They meet in dressings draped over raw fish, in bright pasta sauces with ginger and citrus, in marinades that soften and sharpen at the same time. Different, yes, but when blended, they create something balanced and enduring.

And after more than two decades together, Jon and Vinny understand that concept more than most. “Twenty-six years,” Dotolo says, shaking his head. “More than half of my life working with Jon.”

Shook doesn’t hesitate to put it in perspective. “I have a closer relationship with him than I do with my entire family. Not that I don’t love my family, but when you spend that much time with someone — when you come from having nothing to building what we’ve built — it’s an amazing ride. If it ended tomorrow, we’d both look back and feel proud.”

- *Vehicle shown is a special project prototype vehicle, modified with parts and/or accessories not available from Toyota. Such modifications may void the vehicle’s warranty, may negatively impact vehicle performance and safety, and may not be street legal.*