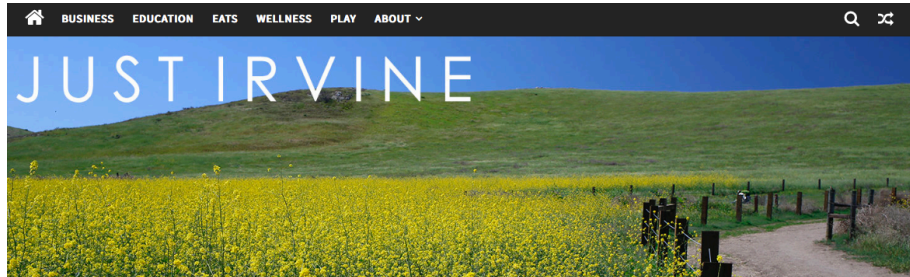




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Eats

Bistango: A Restaurant That Grew Alongside Irvine

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You could say he's something of an original. And so is his restaurant: [Bistango](#) in Irvine. John Ghoukassian is the owner of Bistango Restaurant which will celebrate its 30 year anniversary next year. This is quite a feat considering Irvine itself was only formally incorporated 45 years ago.¹⁾ Here is the behind the scenes story of a restaurant that truly grew alongside the [City of Irvine](#) and its owner, whose story will take you half way around the world and then back to Irvine.



PHOTO: Bistango owner John Ghoukassian

John's First Restaurant Venture and his Narrow Escape from Tehran

Born and raised in Tehran, Iran, John dropped out of college to work for his father who was a restaurateur. Then, as a young man in his late 20s, John opened his own restaurant also in Tehran. He named it the Chattanooga!²⁾ What an impression such a name must have made on the customers in Tehran in the 1960s.



I believe in setting the trends rather than following the trend. Being a very patient person, it has paid off to persevere throughout all these years. – Owner, John Ghoukassian

Even at a young age, John was not one to follow the crowd and his restaurant was one of just a few Western-style restaurants in Tehran at that time. It became a success, seating almost 300 people. But as the Islamic Revolution began intensifying, running a Western-style restaurant in Tehran became extremely risky. When he couldn't ensure that all the female patrons in the restaurant were covering their faces, he received threats for failing to enforcing Islamic law.³⁾

The American name of his restaurant may have been some foreshadowing as he would eventually find his way to the United States. When it became too dangerous to stay in Tehran, he narrowly escaped to France where he was granted a visa and reunited with his family. Almost a year later in 1983, he received a visa for the United States.⁴⁾



The last three decades have been comprised of many "colorful" years, turning points, ups and downs, hardships and successes. – John Ghoukassian

Soon after his arrival to the United States, he and two business partners took a bold move and opened a restaurant called Bistango in Beverly Hills' famed Restaurant Row. The restaurant became a success almost immediately and although the partnership dissolved, John opened a second Bistango location, this time a bit south of LA in a young new city named: *Irvine*.⁵⁾

Bistango Finds its Home in Irvine

It was 1987 and Irvine was nothing like the bustling city that it is today. John leased restaurant space in the business district near John Wayne Airport, where Bistango still remains today. No one thought his restaurant would succeed in the business district.

Well, surely there are more farfetched stories, like a successful restaurant in Tehran named the Chattanooga. So despite the naysayers, John kept a quiet confidence about his restaurant.



PHOTO: Rack of lamb and scallops dishes (Photo courtesy of Bistango Restaurant)

From the start, he made Bistango unique. Bistango offered live music, artwork on the walls and of course, great food. He admits the early years were tough but as Irvine grew, so did his business.

Many people did not think Bistango would be a success when this restaurant first opened in Irvine. But you proved those people wrong and Bistango has experienced much success. To what do you attribute yours and Bistango's success?

John: During the last three decades, there were many occasions I could have easily given up when the road got bumpy, but instead of giving up, I adjusted and adapted. You always need to constantly re-evaluate your business and be able to evolve in order to stay ahead. This requires creativity, self-assurance and a vision of where you want the business to go so you don't become outdated.

I believe in setting the trends rather than following the trend. Being a very patient person, it has paid off to persevere throughout all these years. With the help of a great team to execute my vision and direction, we have been able to beat the odds.

Speaking of having a great team, Timothy Doolittle, who has spent the last nine years worked alongside the likes of Wolfgang Puck and Emeril Lagasse is Bistango's Executive Chef. ⁶⁾

Bistango is known for "New American" cuisine, what types of cuisine do you draw inspiration from to create a dining experience unique to Bistango?

Timothy: Bistango has a long history that offers me a leg up on creating dishes that our guests will embrace. I am lucky enough to have the input of our longtime General Manager, Ray Saniian and owner John Ghoukassian to help me navigate our menu progression. While I draw my inspiration from many global regions including Europe and Asia, our dishes always have a California touch.



PHOTO: Bistango Executive Chef Timothy Doolittle (Photo courtesy of Bistango Restaurant)

Finding success in a competitive field, Timothy had this advice for anyone wanting to become a chef.

Timothy: Be realistic about your expectations. The hours are demanding. Holidays are not what they used to be. Failure is far more likely than success. But it can be totally rewarding and worth the tremendous sacrifice. Anything worthwhile is not easy.

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While most anyone can grill a filet mignon, it requires far more skill to prepare a cassoulet or short ribs and they are far more satisfying for me, whether I am cooking or eating. Anything worthwhile is not easy. – Executive Chef Timothy Doolittle

What are your signature dishes or favorite ingredients to cook with?

Timothy: Typically I get the most enjoyment from preparing things that take a lot of time like veal stock, sauces, confit, BBQ, roasted or braised meats. I gain great satisfaction from taking something humble and making it great. Interestingly, what were once considered peasant foods oftentimes demand special attention, base knowledge and experience to get right. While most anyone can grill a filet mignon, it requires far more skill to prepare a cassoulet or short ribs and they are far more satisfying for me, whether I am cooking or eating.



PHOTO: Chef Doolittle prepares Roasted Ruby Beets salad (Photo courtesy of Bistango Restaurant)

Bistango has called Irvine its home for almost 30 years. How has it been, watching the restaurant grow as Irvine has grown?

John: The last three decades have been comprised of many "colorful" years, turning points, ups and downs, hardships and successes. As Irvine has grown, we have learned to adjust, adapt and listen to our customers' needs and the rest becomes second nature.

When asked what he enjoys, John answers with a smile, "Good food, good music and good art!" Visit Bistango to experience its New American cuisine, live music and art. We hope you enjoy dining there especially after getting to know owner John Ghoukassian and Executive Chef Timothy Doolittle a little better.

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