



2011 James Beard Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award Recipient **Kevin Zraly**

The Lifetime Achievement Award is given to an individual whose lifetime body of work has had a positive and long-lasting impact on the way we eat, cook, and/or think about food in America.

By **Jamie Feldmar**

TO HEAR THE COUNTRY'S FOREMOST AUTHORITY on wine, Kevin Zraly, tell it, he would never have gotten into the business if not for a certain music festival in upstate New York. "I went to Woodstock in 1969, and, like any 18-year-old, I was rebellious and idealistic. So, naturally, I enrolled in the college closest to the fest," laughs Zraly. And so it happened that, while attending classes at SUNY New Paltz, Zraly started working at the Dupuy Canal House—and the foundation for his life's work was set.

Zraly was waiting tables at the Canal House in 1970 when the food luminaries Craig Claiborne, Pierre Franey, and Jacques Pépin walked in. Claiborne, then the restaurant critic at the *New York Times*, ended up gracing the Canal

to run their wine program, so she took me to meet Joe, and that was it," says Zraly. "I said to Joe, 'What kind of wine list do you want?' He replied, 'I want you to create the biggest and the best wine list that New York has ever seen. And don't worry about the cost.'"

During his tenure at Windows on the World, Zraly wrote *Windows on the World Complete Wine Course*, one of America's top-selling wine books, and founded the Windows on the World Wine School, which has seen more than 20,000 graduates. Zraly still teaches the course today, though the school was forced to relocate after the attacks of September 11, 2001. "That tragedy stays with you," says Zraly. "That day is embedded forever in my heart, soul, and

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House with a rare four-star review. Zraly was promoted to manager. "I had to learn about liquor, beer, and wine—fast," he recalls. "It was the most fascinating period of my life. Wine became an obsession—I wanted to learn everything there was to know about the subject."

Over the next four years, Zraly hitchhiked to vineyards in California and hopped trains between châteaux in Europe, meeting winemakers and absorbing an encyclopedia's of information. "The only challenge left was New York City," he recalls. "It's the wine capital of the world. You can get any wine you want here, from anywhere in the world. The old saying is true: if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere."

Zraly was working for a wine distributor when he found himself at the World Trade Center meeting with Barbara Kafka, who, in addition to working as James Beard's editor, had been hired by restaurateur Joe Baum as the head buyer for his new restaurant, Windows on the World.

"They just happened to be looking for a young American

spirit. We lost 72 people in the restaurant. I am accepting this award for them."

Zraly also credits many others whom he's worked with over the years. "Anyone who is chosen for this award didn't do it alone," he says, adding, "If I hadn't met Barbara Kafka, I'd be just another wine salesman. That's why it's always important to recognize how you got to where you are."

Although much has changed in the wine world since Zraly was a long-haired hippie, he shows no signs of slowing down. After September 11, the Windows on the World Wine School relocated to Times Square. In 2007 he teamed up with Robert Parker to create the Parker/Zraly Wine Certification Program, and he is currently working on both an updated edition of the *Windows on the World Complete Wine Course* book and a memoir. "Just because this is a lifetime achievement award doesn't mean I'm done working," he laughs.

Jamie Feldmar is a Brooklyn-based freelance food writer.