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*December 7, 1986*

## After giving many meals, she will receive

*Sister Sam has fed the needy for decades with her St. Vincent Meals on Wheels program. Now some of L.A.'s top chefs are hosting her 75th birthday party.*

**June 12, 2010** | By Kate Linthicum, Los Angeles Times

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As the director of St. Vincent Meals on Wheels, Sister Alice Marie Quinn has spent the last three decades serving food to the people who need it most. Each day she rises before dawn for an hour of prayer before overseeing the preparation and delivery of nearly 5,000 meals to the city's homeless, homebound, disabled and terminally ill.

But at her 75th birthday party on Sunday, Sister Sam, as she is known by friends, will be on the receiving end. At a ballroom fundraiser at downtown's Vibiana, some of the city's top chefs will be feeding her.

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The dinner menu is heavenly: spicy tuna tartare in a sesame miso cone, roasted wild salmon with truffle smashed potatoes, ginger creme brulee ... the list goes on. The menu's architect, chef Wolfgang Puck, says no one deserves it more.

"Sister Sam, she's like a saint," he said last week at Spago, his Beverly Hills restaurant. "If anybody should go to heaven, it should be her. She should sit in the first row up there. Or at the best table."

Los Angeles is home to the very rich and the very poor. Sister Sam knows how to navigate both worlds. To raise money, she lunches with wealthy donors. She also personally writes birthday cards to those who eat her meals.

She and Puck have an unusual friendship, one that dates to the early 1980s, when he asked her whether St. Vincent could benefit from some of the proceeds from his annual American Wine and Food Festival. He has been a major fundraiser for the program ever since.

Once he told her in his choppy Austrian accent: "If you weren't a nun, I'd have married you."

Her response: "I'm glad I'm a nun."

On the surface, they have little in common. Puck is a tanned, jet-setting restaurateur whose flamboyant public persona helped define the phrase "celebrity chef."

Sister Sam is a heavysset nun. When she took her vows 55 years ago, she pledged to lead a life of poverty, chastity, obedience and service to the poor.

But both have a wry sense of humor and strong hands with dexterous chef's fingers. And both know the joy of feeding others.

Sister Sam started small, with a single pot of stew, in 1977. She served dozens of seniors at Precious Blood Catholic Church near MacArthur Park, a humble operation that eventually grew into St. Vincent Meals on Wheels.

Now the nonprofit group is headquartered in an industrial-sized kitchen in the same neighborhood. There, Sister Sam oversees a staff of 98 and several hundred volunteers.

One morning last week, she wound her way slowly around the kitchen, nodding hellos to the dishwashers and the women spooning rice and vegetables into lunch trays. She stopped to talk to a young man chopping celery who had tattooed script circling his neck and well-gelled black hair. She patted the spikes on his head and declared, "It's really hard!"

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As a forklift beeped loudly from the loading dock, Sister Sam heaved open the freezer door to reveal a stockpile of frozen meat, wrapped in plastic. "We could probably park six cars in there," she said.

Sister Sam is a practical woman — she once scotched a colleague's plan to send coasters to donors as "frivolous" — and she has conceived of many cost-saving tricks. She has learned, for example, that it's cheaper to scoop cream cheese from huge vats instead of buying individual packets. And she knows she can save half a cent a meal by buying cardboard meal trays with fewer food compartments.

Across town, in Beverly Hills, Puck is not known for austerity. "She delivers essentials," he said. "We deliver affordable luxury."

Strolling from table to table on Spago's sun-dappled patio, he greeted lunchtime customers with warm handshakes and flashes of his bleach-white smile. (Later, while he sat with a glass of ice-cold Evian, he was interrupted by a blond in a baby doll dress who scolded him for skipping her.)

Puck's kitchen produces a tenth of what Sister Sam's does each day, but it was no less bustling. Dishes clattered and line cooks bumped into one another. On one stove, cherries cooked into compote. On a nearby rack, glistening ducks hung from wires.

Walking by the appetizer prep bar, Puck popped a porcini mushroom into his mouth.

If Sister Sam had been there, she might have slapped his hand. Once, on a visit to her kitchen, he dipped a finger into the potato salad for a taste. "I almost had a heart attack," she said. "That's against the board of health."