

**YEAH, I'M SAMMY HAGAR,  
AND I LEARNED HOW TO**

**COOK**

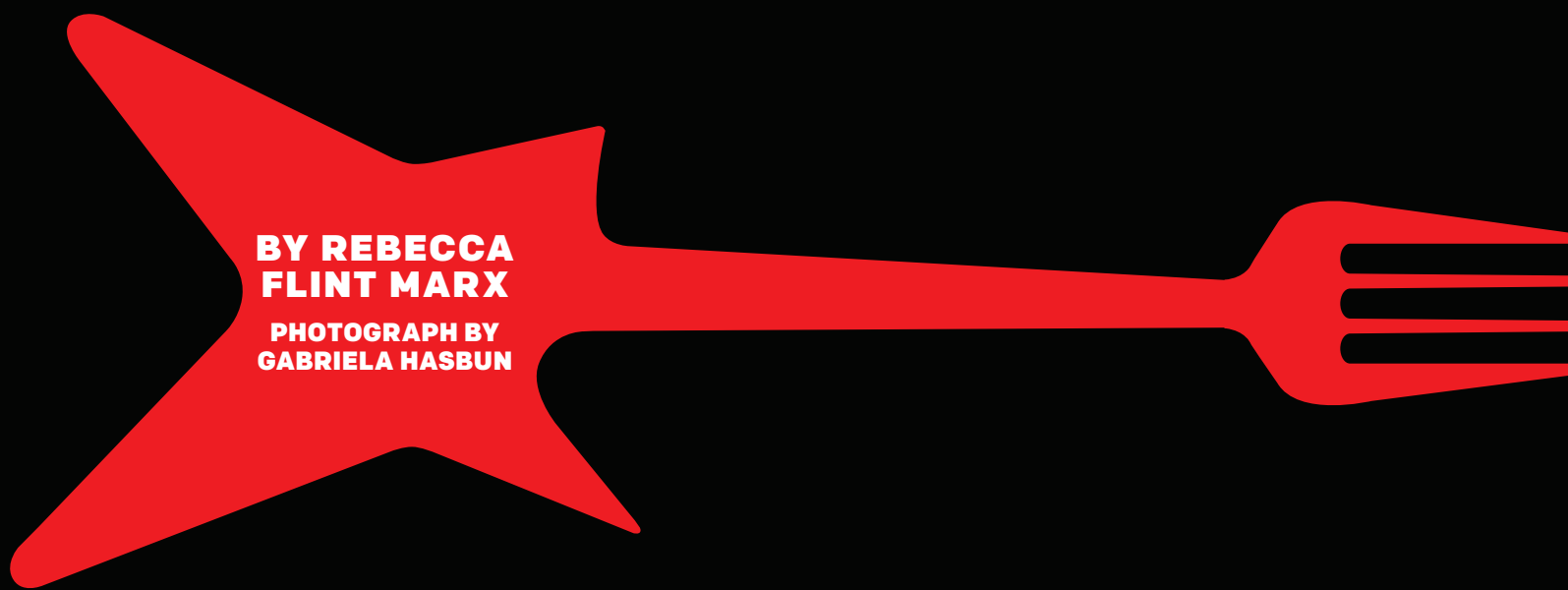
**BEFORE I LEARNED HOW TO**

**ROCK**

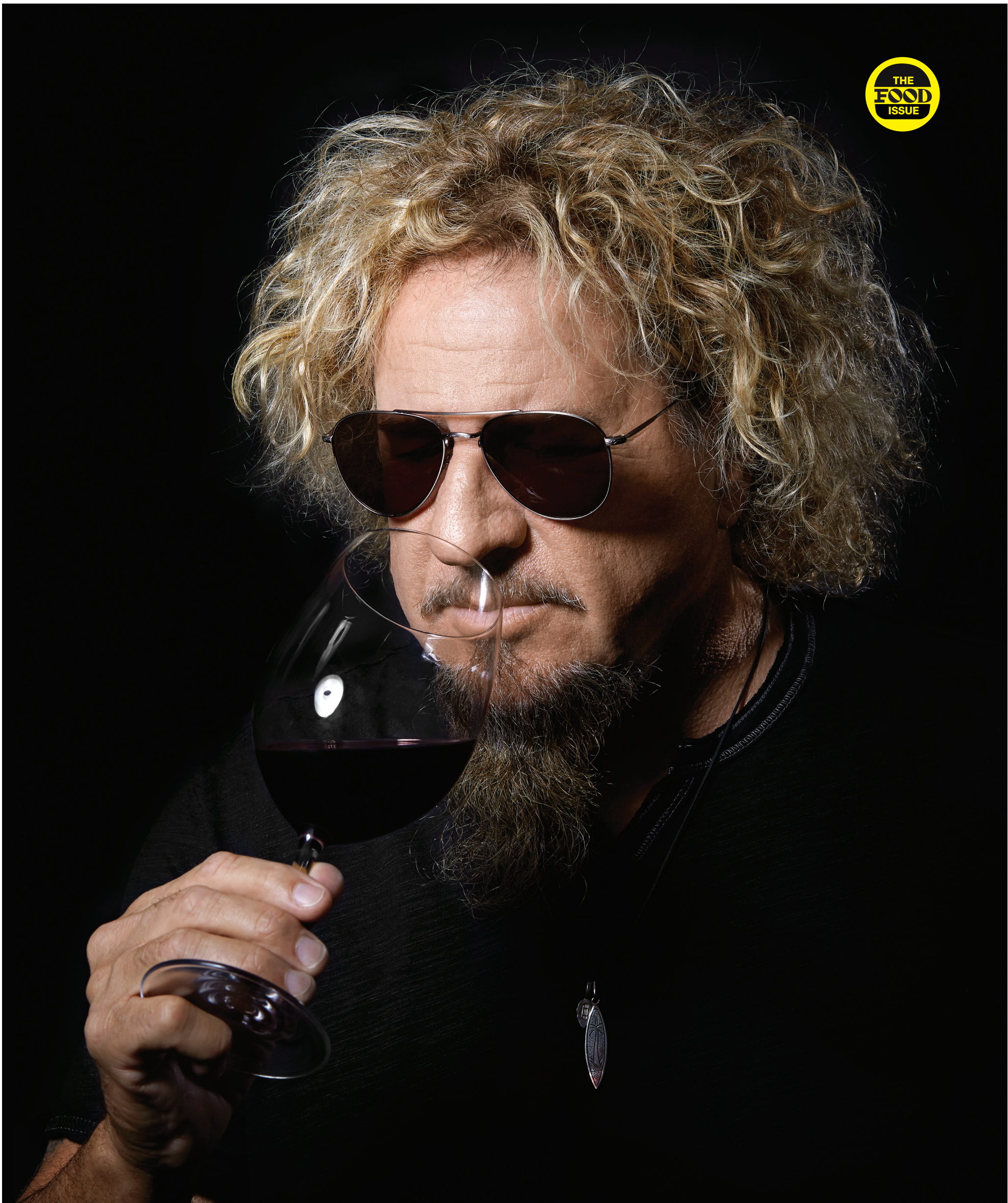
**THE MAKING OF A HAIR-METAL GOURMAND**

**BY REBECCA  
FLINT MARX**

**PHOTOGRAPH BY  
GABRIELA HASBUN**



THE  
**FOOD**  
ISSUE



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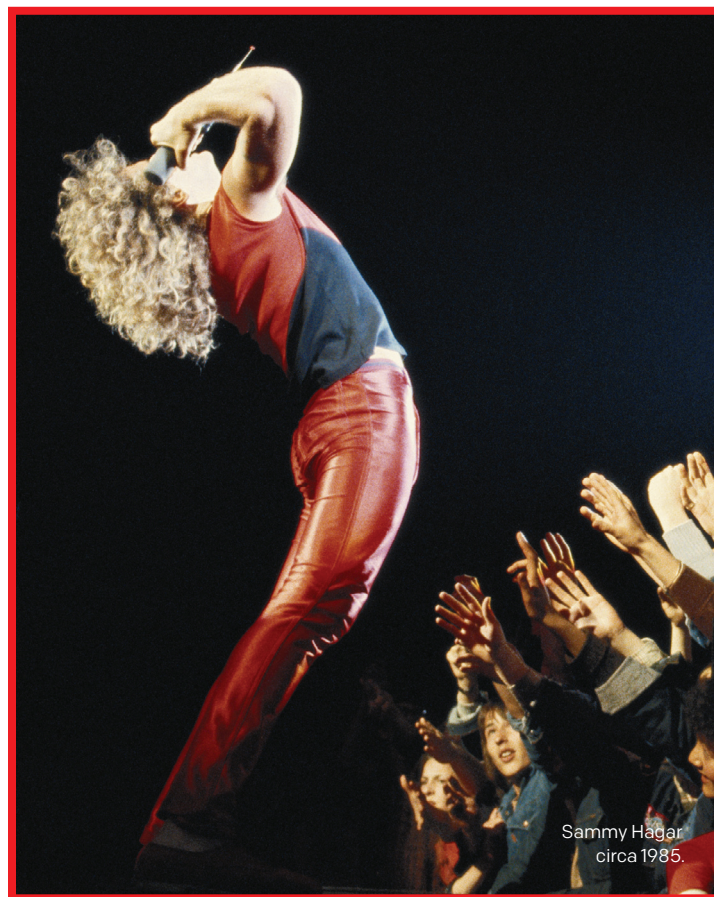
GOT TWO OF THESE: my birth year,” Sammy Hagar says, holding up a dusty bottle of 1947 Château Cheval Blanc for my inspection. We’re standing in the cool air of his wine cellar, the one he carved out of the side of Mount Tamalpais to hold his collection, which has grown to encompass upwards of 10,000 bottles. “Last I looked, it was \$85,000,” he says, slowly turning the Cheval Blanc over in his hands. “This has not moved from my cellar since 1978, maybe, and I bet you I paid—I have my notes; I don’t bet anything—I paid \$200 for it.” He returns the bottle to its terra-cotta-lined cubbyhole, then selects another. “This is a ’29 Latour, which is probably a \$15,000 bottle of wine, and this hasn’t even moved—I shouldn’t have even done that,” he says, quickly replacing it. He turns to consider a couple of wooden crates. “I don’t know if you know about Romanée-Conti. They’re worth, honestly, \$12,000, \$13,000 a bottle. This is, like, \$300,000 worth of wine, those boxes right there.” He grins. “I’m not bragging. I’m just giving you an example of how deep I am into it.”

To anyone with even a passing familiarity with Sammy Hagar, the idea of the former front man of Van Halen standing in a wine cellar—his own, at that—expounding on the virtues of rarefied bottles may seem incongruous. This is, after all, a man who spent the better part of the ’80s and ’90s jumping off amps and high kicking in his parachute pants, a blur of headbands, shockingly white teeth, and a trademark cascade of curly, potato chip-blond hair so distinctive that it once got its own Annie Leibovitz portrait. This is the Hagar of “I Can’t Drive 55,” perhaps the most successful song ever written about traffic court. In its video, Hagar, defiant in his yellow jumpsuit, rocks out on the judge’s bench as chaos erupts in the courtroom, then endures a 10-second stint in jail before driving off into the sunset in his black Ferrari, laughing. It’s a denouement that dovetails neatly with his current status: At the age of 67, a millionaire some 120 times over, the so-called Red Rocker is still getting away scot-free, and laughing all the way to the bank.

The one thing that Hagar’s not doing, however, is driving off into the metaphorical sunset. After all, he’s got a cookbook to sell. In September, HarperCollins will publish *Are We Having Any Fun Yet? The Cooking & Partying Handbook*. Coauthored by Josh Sens (the restaurant critic for this magazine), it is, Hagar says, his bid to be taken seriously as a food guy. “I want respect from the culinary world,” he tells me. “I want them to know I’m not just a rock star who eats hamburgers.” That’s right: He may have scaled the *Billboard* charts many times over—in Van Halen alone, he had 12 number-one hits—and socked away enough of a fortune to qualify, according to one celebrity-income website, as the 23rd-richest lead singer of all time, but Sammy Hagar really just wants the world to know that he can cook. As he writes in *Are We Having Any Fun Yet?*, “People seem surprised when I tell them just how deep I am into the culinary thing. It’s as if they’re thinking, ‘You’re Sammy Hagar. What the fuck do you know about serious food?’ My answer is, ‘Yeah, I’m Sammy Hagar, and I learned to cook before I learned to rock.’”

A compilation of recipes, anecdotes, and tips for Sammy-style living, Hagar’s book is categorized by the places he calls home: Mill Valley, Maui, and Cabo San Lucas. The latter looms large in the legend of Hagar: Way back in 1983, inspired by a *People* magazine photograph of Keith Richards and Patti Hansen’s beachside wedding, he traveled to the then-sleepy fishing village and liked it so much that in 1990 he opened the Cabo Wabo Cantina there. The restaurant-bar-nightclub spawned three more, in Las Vegas, Tahoe, and Hollywood, and paved the way for Hagar’s other pursuits in the food and beverage industry. Along with the Cabo Wabos, there are Sammy’s Beach Bar & Grill, the chain of airport and casino restaurants from which Hagar donates his personal profits to charity; El Paseo, the fine-dining steakhouse that he and Tyler Florence opened in Mill Valley in 2011; and Sammy’s Beach Bar Rum, which he launched that same year. And, of course, there’s also Cabo Wabo tequila, the brand that Hagar created for his cantina patrons down in Cabo San Lucas and eventually sold to Gruppo Campari for almost \$100 million.

During this time, of course, Hagar’s main job description was rock star. The singer and guitarist got his first big break in the mid-1970s when he was asked to join the hard-rock outfit Montrose; after splitting with them, he embarked on a successful solo career, with hit singles like “Your Love Is Driving Me Crazy” and “I Can’t Drive 55” and a platinum-selling album, 1982’s *Standing Hampton*. In 1985, Van Halen hired



Sammy Hagar  
circa 1985.

DENIS OREGAN/GETTY IMAGES

Hagar to replace David Lee Roth as its front man. Over the next 11 years—a period commonly referred to by fans and detractors alike as Van Hagar—the band churned out four multi-platinum-selling albums and a slew of chart hits, like “Right Now,” “Finish What Ya Started,” and “When It’s Love.”

For all of the commercial success, Hagar’s time with Van Halen was also characterized by conflict: In his 2011 autobiography, *Red: My Uncensored Life in Rock*, Hagar recalls his disagreements with Eddie and Alex Van Halen. “I knew they were trying to get rid of me,” Hagar writes. “Eddie was trying to make me quit. He would find something wrong with every lyric I’d write.” Hagar ultimately left Van Halen in 1996, though whether he was fired or quit is up for debate. He briefly rejoined the band in 2003 for a reunion tour that was tumultuous, Hagar writes, thanks largely to Eddie Van Halen’s continuing substance abuse problems. Though Hagar once again quit the band in 2005 (he has since formed a number of others, including Chickenfoot and the Circle), he and Eddie Van Halen continue to publicly gripe about one another: After Van Halen bashed the talents of former bassist Michael Anthony in a *Billboard* interview this June, Hagar posted a video to Facebook saying, “Fuck you, Eddie Van Halen...you’re a liar.”

The food world, by comparison, has been something of a joyride for Hagar. It’s true that the original Cabo Wabo had a rocky first year that allegedly included drug-addicted employees stealing money, shakedowns by Federales, a loss of \$40,000, and the defection of the Van Halen brothers as investors. Ultimately, though, both management and business improved, and Hagar emerged triumphant. In *Are We Having Any Fun Yet?*, he claims that he never spent a cent advertising or marketing his tequila, instead fueling interest by drinking it onstage during shows. Although he acknowledges that rum has been a tougher business than tequila—“Everyone goes out and says, ‘I want a rum and coke,’” he laments. “No one says, ‘I want a Sammy’s Beach Bar Rum and coke’”—Hagar is given to rapturous asides about infusing his rum with ingredients like macadamia nuts and pineapple. All told, he’s made more money from food and booze than from music, something that continues to surprise him. He always dreamed of being a rock star; the titles “restaurateur” and “tequila impresario,” he says, were “the two dreams I never had.”



**T**O GET TO Sammy Hagar’s house, you drive through Mill Valley and then point your car skyward—up, up, up the side of Mount Tam until there you are, standing in the driveway overlooking a canyon as the sun shines and hawks swoop languidly by. Inside the house, a sprawling modernist chunk that Hagar has called home since the late ’70s, he and his wife, Kari—blond, slim, and a number of years her husband’s junior—are hanging out with their Chihuahua and Maltipoo. Sammy, stocky and barrel-chested, still has the hair, though it’s shorter than in its Leibovitz heyday, as well as a permanent vacationing-rock-star tan. He looks younger than he is, save for the gray in his goatee, and bears a not-insignificant resemblance to his friend Guy Fieri. (In *Are We Having Any Fun Yet?*, Hagar himself acknowledges that the aggressively peroxided *Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives* star looks like “my long-lost twin.”)

Seated at their big, oval glass dining table, which abuts a grand piano in the mildly cluttered living room, the Hagars talk about Sammy’s all-encompassing passion for food and cooking. As they talk, they keep motioning to the kitchen, a large but unshowy space (save for the cabinets that Sammy had custom-made by Pininfarina, the Italian car-design firm behind Ferrari). The kitchen, Kari says, is where her husband “can stop thinking about all the other stuff going on. It’s another form of creativity, and it’s his therapy.”

Whatever emotional burdens Hagar may suffer from, a lack of self-esteem is not one of them. When I ask what made him decide to do a cookbook, he alludes to the success of his previous book, *Red*, which became a number-one *New York Times* bestseller. “I’m a success junkie,” he says. “Having a brainstorm, waking up in the middle of the night and

## “I’M NOT JUST A ROCK STAR WHO EATS HAMBURGERS.”

going, ‘Wow, what if I...?’—and doing it, it’s just so awesome. Taking something out of the ether and making it materialize is magic. It’s, like, godly. You read the Bible, and this is what God did, man. It’s almost a mini-version of that.”

There’s something incredibly good-natured, even weirdly humble, about Hagar’s brand of egomania. The man may indeed compare himself to God, but he does so with a resounding lack of guile. And anyway, a certain degree of enterprising narcissism is a basic requirement for anyone with a cookbook to sell.

Arguably, no one buys a celebrity cookbook because of the recipes. If most modern cookbooks aren’t so much about food as lifestyle, then the celebrity cookbook is almost entirely lifestyle, luring fans with the promise that eating, say, Gwyneth Paltrow’s buckwheat-banana pancakes will entitle them to some crumb of her magical world of light-filled kitchens and superior skincare products. That may explain why the long and pleasingly weird history of musician cookbooks includes titles like *Liberace Cooks! Hundreds of Delicious Recipes for You from His Seven Dining Rooms*; *Smash Mouth: Recipes from the Road* (to which Hagar contributed); *Cookin’ with Coolio: 5 Star Meals at a 1 Star Price*; and *The Sinatra Celebrity Cookbook: Barbara, Frank, & Friends*. (Almost nothing, however, can explain the delightful existence of Boy George’s *Karma Cookbook*, written in 2001 with his “macrobiotic mentor,” Dragana Brown.)

*Are We Having Any Fun Yet?* has no pretensions toward healthy living or personal-brand revisionism. It’s more or less Hagar’s second memoir, with recipes thrown in, designed primarily, as Hagar writes, to share “my lifestyle with friends and fans.” Interspersed among stories on topics as varied as the gestation of Cabo Wabo (both the “big ass cantina” and the tequila), women having sex with each other onstage during a concert at the Fillmore, drinking with Kenny Chesney and Toby Keith, and the eating habits of various musicians (“Bob [Weir]’s a hard one to figure: One day, he’s vegan; the next day, he’s not”) are recipes strewn across the party food-comfort food Venn diagram: lobster burritos, green chili-cheese grits, huevos rancheros, “basic-ass tomato sauce,” a BLT.

The recipes aren’t groundbreaking, but the text surrounding them is entertaining, written in the plainspoken, affably self-absorbed voice of someone who’s perfectly comfortable extolling the virtues of both a home-cooked meal and himself. On the subject of local, seasonal food in Mexico, Hagar writes, “You want free-range chickens? You find those fuckers scurrying everywhere.” Introducing a section on tequila,



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he notes, “I like to party as much as anyone, and I’m all for getting naked when the time is right.”

Throughout the cookbook’s pages, Hagar dispenses wisdom on subjects including the downside of celebrity—“I don’t like the feeling that I’m being watched. It gets me thinking, Shit, what if I need to pick my nose or scratch my balls?”—the various uses of aloe vera (“works great as a sexual lubricant for women”), and the perks of having a private jet. He even makes time to memorialize his deceased pet parrot, a creature that “wasn’t the most beautiful parrot in the world, but...was the chilliest bird you’d ever want to meet.” And his is most likely the only cookbook to date to include sidebars on bud butter and Mexican Viagra, of which Hagar writes, “I ate dinner, went to bed, but woke up in the middle of the night with a porn star hard-on.”

Hagar’s all-encompassing enthusiasm for food somehow transcends all of the talk about dead parrots and Mexican Viagra. As celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse, his friend for over 25 years, tells me, Hagar is “on a serious food trip, always chasing restaurants or ingredients or reading about a dish. He plans his tours and his life around food. Like, he’ll call me and go, ‘Hey, Em, I went and harvested a bunch of sea urchins out of the ocean. What should I do with them?’” Joe Satriani, the virtuoso guitarist who plays alongside Hagar in Chickenfoot, has been with Hagar when he’s chasing restaurants. “He seeks out the craziest stuff wherever we are,” Satriani says. “Like, in Corpus Christi, if he hears about deep-fried pigs’ tails being served out of a truck on the other side of town, then that’s where we’re going.” When Hagar goes out to eat, says chef Michael Mina, who has also known him for years, “he dissects everything, whether it’s wine or food. He’s always asking a lot of questions and really wants to understand it. He’s totally into it.” And everywhere Hagar goes, he brings that inescapable rock-star charisma. “He doesn’t just walk into a restaurant,” Satriani says. “He explodes into a restaurant.”

**H**AGAR TRACES his love of food to his maternal grandfather, Sam, a “crazy old Italian,” he writes in *Are We Having Any Fun Yet?*, whose “favorite hobbies were hunting, fishing, lying, and stealing.” His grandfather was also a self-taught chef who made his own sausages, salami, preserves, olive oil, and fresh mozzarella, albeit often from stolen ingredients. He taught his grandson to make something out of nothing, a useful skill for a kid who grew up “dirt poor” in Fontana with a father whom Hagar describes in his book as “an angry, stumbling drunk” and a mother who worked full-time and “stretched herself thin trying to keep us all fed.” Like his grandfather, Hagar’s mother knew how to live off the land—Hagar calls her approach “yard to trailer”—and made “simple but delicious” meals, “the sort of humble things you eat when you’re ass-out broke.”

Hagar’s madeleine moment came in 1975 while he was in London, touring to support his first solo album. There, the husband of a family friend treated him to a meal that paired Château d’Yquem with peaches and prosciutto, a ’61 Latour with rack of lamb, and a ’27 Martinez port with blue cheese. “It just changed my life,” he recalls. Prior to that night, he hadn’t been a drinker, having only “tasted wine that my dad left in a bottle laying in the garbage can when I was a kid.” But he quickly became a self-professed “total wine nut” and began collecting, buying bottles with whatever spare cash he had on hand.

In 2009, Hagar decided to get into the fine-dining game with El Paseo. He bought the Mill Valley institution, which first opened in 1947, for the same reason he does anything these days—because he’s rich and he wanted to. Still, he wasn’t prepared for the headaches that delayed the restaurant’s reopening by two years, much less the fallout from his business partnership with Tyler Florence, the Food Network chef and owner of San Francisco’s Wayfare Tavern.

According to Hagar, the restaurant, which is billed as a Marin-style chop-house, was his vision, paid for with his own money. It was up to Florence, whom Hagar had first met while shopping at Mill Valley Market, to run the restaurant, but, says Hagar, “he was never here to do it, so he was always hiring people to do it.” When Florence would return, Hagar continues, “he’d walk in there and crucify the chef, and then the chef would quit and the manager

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would quit.” The restaurant’s quality and consistency suffered, he says. Finally, he and Florence stopped speaking; they haven’t spoken for almost two years, though Florence remains a partner in the restaurant. (Florence disputed Hagar’s account via email, saying, “I poured my heart into developing” the restaurant.)

Julian Serrano, a former Masa chef and current Las Vegas restaurateur who has known Hagar for more than 25 years, theorizes that running El Paseo has been something of a reality check for his friend: “I think he looks at everything a bit different, because before it was fun, but now it’s money, too.” Owning a restaurant is basically the equivalent of fronting a band where everyone keeps quitting, amps keep exploding, and groupies keep filing paternity suits. That’s why, as Serrano says, “for people who have to [own a restaurant], they do it, but for people who don’t have to, it’s too hard.” Still, he adds, “I know celebrities who open restaurants, but none who are hands-on like Sammy. I think he wanted to do something good; he knows what a good restaurant is, and he knows food and wine.”

Hagar maintains that he’s happy with the restaurant’s current state and “wouldn’t close it for any reason.” Although the *Chronicle*’s Michael Bauer gave El Paseo a solid two-and-a-half-star review when it opened, Josh Sens, writing in this magazine, called it a “middling chophouse” in a one-and-a-half-star appraisal. Online, feedback has been mixed: For every Trip Advisor testimonial touting the “outstanding” atmosphere or “soooo good” smashed potatoes, there’s a Yelp review complaining of “tough” steak frites or a hostess who “radiated negativity.” Although Hagar can afford some bad reviews, it’s clear he takes them personally. This is, after all, a guy who waxes rhapsodic about his extensive fruit and vegetable gardens, presses his own olive oil from the trees growing on his property, harvests salt from the Sea of Cortez, and has been known to cook and eat the unfortunate birds that fly headlong into his sliding glass doors. As Satriani says, “He’s still curious—where most people get stuck in their ways, Sam’s just a young kid who’s still excited.”

“I want people to get the joy of it,” Hagar says when I ask him what he wants readers to take away from his cookbook. “And how simple it is to have a garden. It’s joyful to plant a frigging tomato plant.” And what does he want out of it? “I want a James Beard Award. I’m addicted. See?” he says, motioning to the trophies clumped around his living room. “My Grammys and my Hall of Fame and my American Music Awards and my MTV awards, all these things. I love them.”

Ego aside, it doesn’t matter whether the James Beard Foundation recognizes the merits of a book whose recipe for aloe juice contains a warning to “stick around the house for about an hour, within easy striking distance of the bathroom” after drinking it. Hagar has plenty to eat on his metaphorical plate. There are the shows that he plays with his various bands; at this point he chooses to perform about three a month. There’s the possible expansion of Sammy’s Beach Bar & Grill. There’s the Acqua Hotel, an apparently lucrative Mill Valley inn (a “little mini-oil well,” he calls it) that he co-owns. There’s *Rock and Roll Road Trip with Sammy Hagar*, the show he hosts on AXS TV, where he interviews pals like Alice Cooper and Heart’s Nancy Wilson in their hometowns. He and Kari are also pitching a family show to the networks. Tentatively called *Hanging with the Hagars*, it’s about “how we live and about our gardens and my businesses,” Hagar says. The sizzle reel has his two teenage daughters in Maui, learning to cut sugarcane.

Preparing to walk me to my car, Hagar projects a surpassing contentment as he talks about his future plans. It’s true that surpassing contentment tends to come more readily to those possessed of obscene wealth. But listening to Hagar, I realize that the reason it’s relatively easy to root for him, raging ego and all, is that there’s a simple generosity in his desire to spread the good life.

“I dig all this shit,” he says of his myriad pursuits. “Most guys, they want to play golf every day. I don’t. I’m going to cook every day and open restaurants and play music and drive my cars and go to wonderful countries.” I ask him where he wants to go next. “Iceland. If we like it, we’ll stay a few days. And if not, we’ll get back in the plane and go down to Croatia. Have you been?” I tell him I have not. “It sounds nice,” he says. “And the food is really good too.” ■