

Roma, caput gusti

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Technically, they are brilliant. Extremely motivated and passionate, having spent their formative years abroad or even hailing from other countries, their curriculum vitae are worth a close examination. The gourmet scene of Rome is atypical, transversal, crossing restaurants and trattoria with a generation of chefs from Anthony Genovese to Cristina Bowerman, from Leonardo Vignali to Roy Caceres and Alba Esteve Ruiz. Their food, and its various degrees of experimentation, has finally been recognised as a legitimate part of the city's daily routine.

The internet, reality shows, MasterChef and a range of publications, not to mention the opening of the permanent food expo-market Eataly, have exposed the Roman public to the world of gourmet food. Today, even the most stubborn and obstinate defender of tradition knows that there is a vibrant food movement that is all about creativity and gastronomy. Food where every dish can be a surprise, designed to seduce the mind and the palate, made to rock the boat and shake things up. The "right cooks at the right time" are a kind of learning process that try to sweep away old habits or reinvigorate them by imbuing them with new meaning. Leonardo Vignali for example, has completely reinterpreted traditional dishes with a new intensity and cleanliness of flavour while not deviating one millimetre from the most orthodox traditions at his trattoria Da Cesare al Casaletto.

Thanks to their experiences abroad, these chefs have become a spontaneous part of international food movements, while at the same time integrating themselves into a city that has always tended towards conservatism and the cliché, 'A Roma se magna!' (In Rome, we eat a lot!), notwithstanding its extensive relationship with tourism. It's true that in Rome people eat a lot, but today they do it with more taste.

It's a capital city that has been able to detach itself from the mythological provincialism of the osteria or a gradual lowering of standards thanks to new multi-functional concept venues of hundreds of square metres, perfectly in line with the offerings of other international cities. These are concepts that carry the signature of Roberto Liorni, the architect who, starting with Gusto 15 years ago, began Rome's stylistic makeover and the renewal of Roman restaurants and night life that followed. Today there is a constant stream of multi-functional venues with long opening hours or new mini-concept venues popping up, each presenting a new idea. These are venues that are bursting with atmosphere, but where food and service are hardly ever up to the same standard (of course, it is very complicated to serve 1,000 covers a night with quality gastronomy).

That's where our new Roman chefs step in.



Roy Caceres Conquering Italianness

One evening, a famous gourmet critic, after having eaten and paid his compliments to the chef, let slip an offhand remark. “That dish,” he said, “is missing Italianness.” Roy Caceres relayed the comment to his Japanese second chef Iroshi, who has been with him for years. Iroshi started to ask himself exactly what the word ‘Italianness’ meant. He looked for it in the dictionary and bought books to try and understand. “In his vocabulary it does not actually exist. It’s a sentiment and so it’s difficult to fully translate.”

Roy is of Colombian origins and lived in Colombia until the age of 16, when he came to Italy. Italianness came to him a little at a time, thanks perhaps also to his positive approach as he grasped all the opportunities that came his way, working as a janitor in a tourism village, a dishwasher and then a cook. The restaurant he owns is in Parioli, a solid middle class suburb not far from the centre of Rome. He has found it difficult to insist upon food without roots, or perhaps it’s better expressed as food without consolidated habits. He has the reputation, completely unjustified, of being a molecular chef. “Yes, they have tried to brand my food, but here we work above all on the emotional aspect. I feel very Italian. I married a Sardinian woman, I have three children, but not having been born here I have consciously researched the bases of Italian traditions. I never miss an occasion to learn.” Roy’s Italianness is a product of his research as he is a great reader, a cultured and knowledgeable chef.

“Sometimes I wonder how many Italian chefs consciously study the gastronomic history of their own country. I like talking with people and a large part of what I know is the product of talking and reading. I am lucky to be able to see things from afar and this allows me to act freely.” In the five years he spent as chef in one of the most famous restaurants of Emilia Romagna in the 1990s, the Locanda Solarola, Roy never tired of gathering stories. These ranged from the accounts of harvesting frogs to fishing for eels and smoking them, to the ancient texts of Platina and Scappi (the Comacchio eel served on crushed spelt with carp gelato is still on the menu).

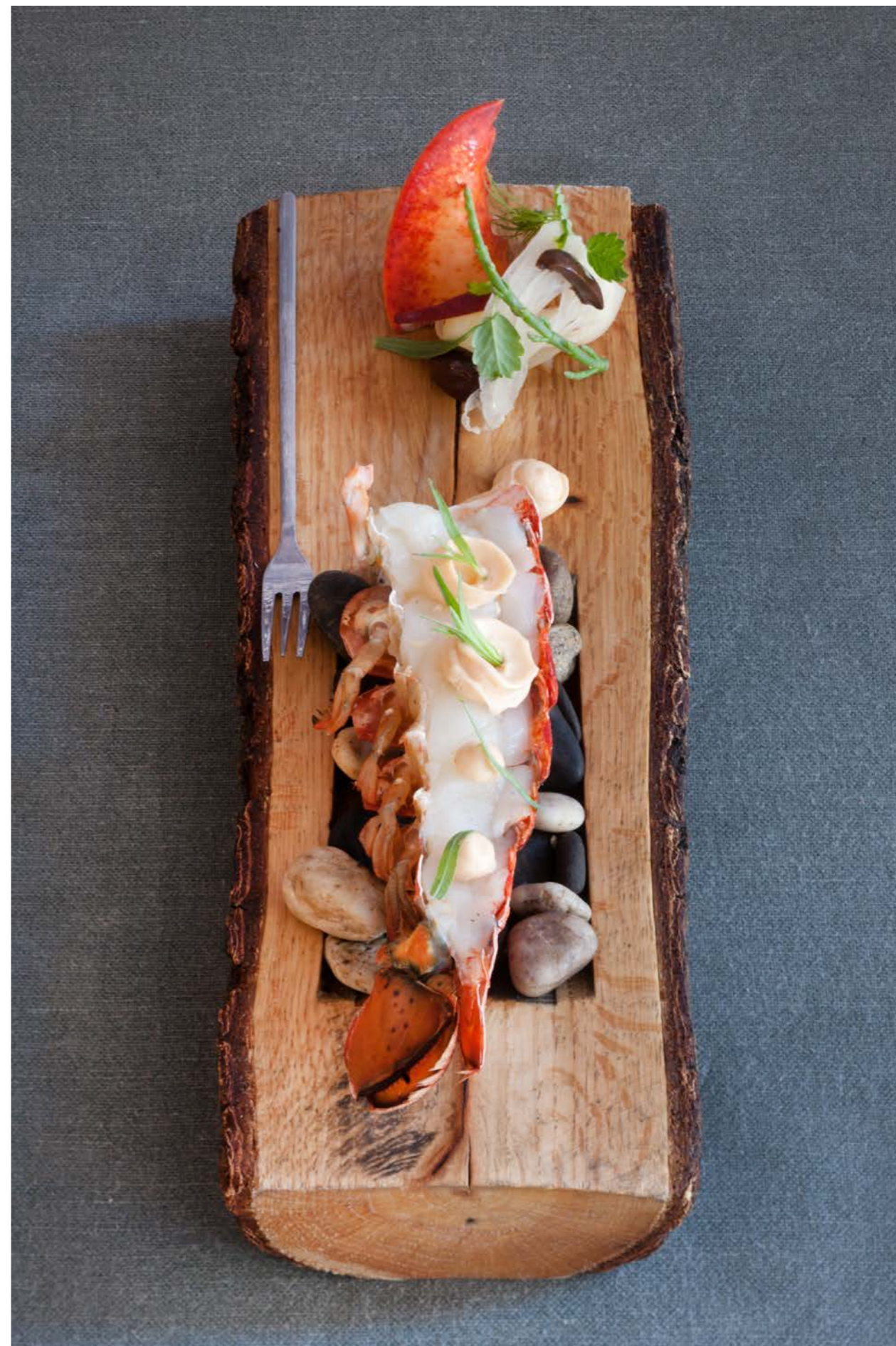
“Food is about innovation, but if you don’t know what has come before you, how can you dedicate yourself to innovation?” Take for example the carbonara: “The Roman client knows how to recognise a perfect carbonara, but I wanted to create something different to the traditional version. I have seen many interpretations, but it was always pasta. If you touch a traditional dish, either you know how to go beyond it or it’s better to leave it alone. When a carbonara is done well, it has an incomparable creaminess, and I focussed on this creaminess.” The Uovo 65° carbonara dish comprises an egg cooked at low temperature for 40 minutes (with white and yolk of the same creamy consistency) laid over crunchy pork cheek and covered with a warm milk foam, parmesan, pecorino cheese and whites made into a wafer. On top there are pasta ‘chips’ (mezze maniche pasta cooked for 50

minutes then dehydrated and dried for a day and a half, then fried at 190°C) and blown pork rind. It’s the taste of carbonara with diverse textures.

“During the long period I spent at Il Pellicano in Porto Ercole, I remember they gave us a kind of handbook with all the rules we were supposed to follow. I was particularly struck by a short story in this dossier that was supposed to serve as both warning and motivation. Two workers were sculpting two rocks into bricks and a passerby asked them about their work. The first replied: ‘I am fighting to transform this rock into a cube,’ while the other worker, inspired by his work, said: ‘I am preparing this rock that will serve in the building of a cathedral’. Your motivation is what makes the difference for what you want to build and where you want to go. At our place, the most boring job is the preparation of the herbs. We use hundreds. Every morning they need to be cleaned and if you are fast and motivated you can do it in an hour, otherwise it’s just a mountain of herbs and an unbearable task.”

Speaking of herbs, these play a large part in Roy’s food, the source of a thousand nuances. His great art is all about choosing and using the right amount of the right leaves.

From the amazing flavour palette of Koppert Cress, Roy chooses the *kikuna* leaves (“they remind me of *pomorosa*, a Colombian fruit”), that together with other shamrocks make his taco dish a masterpiece; a flavour miniature that





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is truly moving, the proof of food built on details. It's worth reflecting on. The idea is that of a taco; a classic of Southern American street food. But instead of being drawn from the stuffed corn puff, his taco is made with a Swiss chard leaf. One side is brushed with a mixture of water and flour, which is sealed by frying briefly in a pan. The leaf is crunchy, but flexible, and placed on a filling of tuna belly seasoned with lemon zest. It's not just any lemon, but a concentrate of lemon essence. The bitter peel is then soaked by osmosis in lemon juice to offset its bitterness. Apart from the zest, the tuna is seasoned with a few drops of soy sauce, pepper, salt, fresh coriander and the green part of a spring onion. This is laid on a bed of chickpeas and covered with the taco leaf. Next to it there are lime seeds obtained by passing the flesh of the fruit in liquid nitrogen. It's eaten like a taco, gathering up the filling with your hands. The whole dish is presented on a wooden platter. In the mouth it's an explosion of freshness, velvety taste, crunchiness – a sublime street food.

It's a mission fully accomplished: keeping the diner on their toes with dishes full of movement that never tire the mouth. Details are studied and calibrated to this idea. "In a long menu, dishes don't have to be monotonous. Italian food is extremely tasty, with full and round flavours, but they are part of a mono taste. A degustation menu made up of traditional dishes can be tiring, whereas if you present dishes full of contrast you can make the degustation experience last longer. If you want to move people at the table you have to avoid being boring."

The grilled lobster is a return to Sardinian tradition, studied in depth thanks to the Sardinian origins of his wife. Roy puts rocks in a hollowed-out log and places incandescent embers on top of them. The lobster shell is placed to sizzle on them. The aroma of the smoke recalls the many Sardinian traditions of cooking over embers, but above all preserves the fragrance of the lobster flesh that has been vacuum cooked in a solution of salt, sugar and fennel seeds. The Taggiasche olives, the lobster mayonnaise and a mix of herbs complete the vast array of sensations.

A concentration of Italianness is also in the dish of mozzarella, bread, tomato and oil. Diverse layers of wafers alternate the Mediterranean flavours. Roy jokes: "It's made by a Moldovan, a Colombian and a Swede". The Taggiasche olives are dried and blended with extra virgin olive oil. A wafer of spelt bread is dipped into the liquid olives and this is alternated with a mozzarella wafer and a concassè of peeled Piccadilly cherry tomatoes seasoned with salt, oil, sugar and a disk of mozzarella whey. To complete the elegant chromatic circle, frozen spinach powder (the basil necessary to cover the dish with greenery would make it unbalanced and so blanched spinach seasoned with oil and passed through the Pacojet was chosen) and a few drops of oil. A white wine from the Mount Etna vineyard of Fassina (100% Catarratto grapes), with its great mineral qualities and freshness, seals in the Mediterranean qualities of the dish.

"One of the most reassuring things about Italian taste is saltiness, and finding a good blend that plays with this is interesting." For about a year now, as gastronomic memories resurface, Roy feels the need to return to South America, and soon he wants to go back to Colombia. "I am sure that something will come out of it, another part of my food that will be about my origins." Colombian-ness...

Alba Esteve Ruiz

An endless dawn

This is perhaps just the dawn. But soon the sun will be high in the sky. Alba Esteve Ruiz, a 23 year-old Spanish chef, has all the qualities, starting with her formidable food, to become more than just a rising star in the Roman restaurant world.

Food critics are usually reluctant to pronounce themselves so dramatically, but in her case enthusiasm crosses every line between reporting and critique. We are talking about a star who could soon find the confines of Marzapane, the gutsy and bistronomically correct venue where this Alicante chef works, a little tight. She has an iron will and unusual concentration, miraculously discovered by talent scout Mario Sansone, who became a partner in the enterprise with Angelo Parello. They are three youngsters (33, 32 and 23 years-old), not only full of enthusiasm, but also highly trained and with clear ideas developed through solid experience, notwithstanding their young ages.





Their partnership happened through a network of friendships, beginning with Mario and Angelo. Mario Sansone is Sicilian, a graduate of communications and a passionate gourmet ("I decided at university I would no longer eat rubbish"). He heard about the opening of Eataly in Rome and presented himself to Oscar Farinetti, who, obviously seeing the qualities of the boy, took him on and sent him to Turin as the purchasing manager of the organisation. The next year he went to Rome to do the same job and after a year and a half, he decided to stay.

He is flanked by a Sicilian friend, Angelo Parello, the youngest surgeon in Italy. "I asked him: 'I want to open a restaurant, do you want to be a partner?' He said, 'Yes, I trust you and I'm in, whatever the details.'" Angelo, after having followed his mentor and professor Carlo Ratto, worked in 52 countries around the world, but as of October he has been based at the Gemelli hospital in Rome. They joke, "It's the best restaurant in the world to have a heart attack!"

This was the partners' vision. There was no dawn on the horizon at this point. And then it came. After attending catering school in Valencia against

her parent's wishes (they considered it a subpar profession), Alba, 17 years-old, returned to Alicante to work for Paco Torreblanca, one of the most famous pastry chefs in the world. After two years she left, as her jealous colleagues found it hard to cope with her innate talent. She began work at El Celler de Can Roca in Girona and after just a month she was already head of the entrée section. "I was like a snake in that kitchen. If they ask you to peel five kilos of potatoes and do only that, you get bored. I tried to do it as soon as possible. They gave me a list of things to do and I tried to do them as quickly as possible so I could also do more interesting things. I wanted to learn by watching, too." From there, thanks to a friend who worked with her at El Celler called Mattia Spadone, the son of Marcello Spadone of the La Bandiera restaurant at Civitella Casanova, she spent a year with one of the most passionate families of Italian gastronomy. But Alba was thinking of Alain Ducasse's France and Michel Bras. France would have to wait, however, as this was when she stopped over in Rome and met her current companion in life and work, Michel Magoni, who is also the sommelier at Marzapane. Michel introduced her to the two partners and when they tasted her food (in a

little restaurant in Colle Oppio where perhaps they remember her still), they were dazzled.

The location was a residential area full of offices. The partners wanted to create the atmosphere of Septime, the Paris bistrot of Bertrand Grébaut that had so entranced them with an open kitchen and informal table settings. They opened their restaurant in March 2013.

During the day there is a quick lunch service with a queue outside (they say it's the best carbonara in Rome!) and at night there are two degustation menus that have become so sought after that bookings are weeks in advance (the maximum number of seats is thirty). Alba has a supply of excellent raw materials from the Consorzio La Granda meat to salamis and cheeses from Vincenzo Mancino to the pasta of the Mancini pastificio and so on. This is after all the specialty of Mario Sansone, who has conducted an exhaustive selection process. From Eataly he has collected 6,000 references. "I assure you that reading a label properly can tell you everything about a producer," he says. "It's like visiting a company without warning."

But raw materials are not enough if you don't know what to do with them. The freshness of anchovies are not enough to make a great dish of anchovies, candied capsicum, parsley cream, toasted almonds and *allioil*. Or a great meat to make La Granda boiled meatballs with cabbage and a slightly spicy BBQ sauce. Or the filling for saffron *cappelletti* with pork belly, chickpea cream and herb broth.

The natural and mature use of Spanish techniques find their home in this woman's kitchen, translating into sauces with perfect textures, without a trace of fat, without any heaviness, so much so that at the end of an eight course degustation menu you leave the table with a sense of incredible lightness. There are no exasperated plays on consistencies, no ingredient is useless, nothing is in excess, technique is completely metabolised and naturalised in a culinary melting pot that has only benefited from its Italian passage.

Alba's food brushes away many clichés of Spanish food, highlighting the practical results of innovation in terms of gels and thickening, for example, and what kind of support they offer. The effect is subtle. Without giving away

their presence, they allow the elimination of all fatty parts while still giving structure, backbone and softness, concentrating the flavour even in the most delicate gradients without complicating digestion. The use of these products is a part of Alba. She grew up with them like one grows up cooking with butter in the kitchen, and this naturalness translates into extremely clean, streamlined food, without Baroque touches, where every stroke of sauce has a full and realised meaning. Take the Cruciferous dish, where eight kinds of cruciferous vegetables are presented in indifferent stages of cooking and consistencies (cream of cabbage and mustard, purple savoy cabbage in sweet and sour, burned pickled bok choy, stuffed Roman cabbage, raw Brussels sprout petals, fried black cabbage, rocket leaves...). Or take the oyster with apple and fresh ginger cream covered with a vodka tonic granita. But it is in the suckling pig with a cream of smoked chestnuts flavoured with vanilla, 85% Pedro Himenez Emidio Idalgo dark chocolate and grape and thyme chutney, perfectly cooked, perfectly salted, and in its consistency and combination of flavours that one understands the true meaning of gourmet food. And food without limits.



Marzapane dolce&cucina

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La spigola al vapore

Leonardo Vignali

Amatriciana... with love



Every evening, since early last year, about thirty Americans take the famous #8 tram for about three quarters of an hour, crossing the city to reach the end of the line in an outlying suburb of Rome. They walk the short distance to reach a trattoria that prominent American expat food bloggers have decreed the best in Rome, outclassing even the lauded and well-loved Testaccio venues like Felice or da Flavio. Thirty Americans out of seventy covers is not of small consequence.

In reality, Leonardo Vignali could fill the restaurant with stars and stripes tourists, but he prefers to accept only half of the bookings. "Americans want to come out here because they hope to find what they've been promised: authentic Roman food without being ripped off. I have realised that this is their objective. I want them to take home the taste of authentic *amatriciana* or boiled meatballs (*polpette bollite*). It's just a shame I don't speak

English." It is a shame, because the other plus of this place is the loveable and relaxed host.

Vignali, in all his years abroad, only lived in Francophone countries, living for twelve years in Switzerland and France. Then he returned to Italy, met his wife and began to look for a trattoria he could run himself. "When we found this trattoria, where the neighbourhood families came to eat lunch on Sundays, Maria Pia and I looked at each other and felt this was our place. Instinctively we said to each other 'let's buy it'. It had been on the market for several years but the owner Cesare couldn't make up his mind. He met us; we liked each other, perhaps because we were respectful when we met." That was May 2009 and in just a few years the trattoria has had enormous success. "We take our work seriously, but sometimes we wonder if journalists know what they are talking about. It's a great responsibility to live up to the reputation the trattoria has

earned."

The Vignalis put all of their savings into starting up the business. "We left everything pretty much as it was, apart from a coat of paint on the walls, without too many ambitions or wanting to change things too much." The dining room, with its '70s-style aluminium windows and doors may not be the most beautiful in the world, but they fit perfectly in keeping with the low-key style of the owners. The outdoor eating area with a summer pergola is nonetheless very pleasant. Even in the kitchen they have chosen to keep with tradition and carefully choose products from the small neighbourhood shops. It's a menu without frills and rather ascetic descriptions of dishes ("like the trattoria where I used to work when I was 15") that outlines all the house specialties.

There are so many good ones, you could almost stop at the antipasti: aubergine croquette *arrabbiata* style,

fried *gnocchi* served on a cream of *cacio* cheese and pepper, balls of boiled meat with basil pesto and *suppli*. Then the homemade pasta - fettuccine, *tonnarelli*, *gnocchi* and the dry pasta: *rigatoni*, *bombolotti*, *spaghetti* ("the *mezze maniche* are from De Cecco because this is a pasta that is used daily and some of the heaviness from the 1990s and 2000s needs to be changed. Let's be realistic. I only make an exception for Mancini's spaghetti"), *all'amatriciana*, with cheese and pepper, *carbonara*, *alla gricia* (a sauce like *amatriciana* without the tomato), with Roman roll sauce, broiled bull's tail...

"There was a context here that we did not want to let go. Some of the recipes are even from the lady who used to cook here, Cesare's mother. I think in the end people are creatures of habit and they tend to always eat the same things. I see it in our clients."

The same things, but well done. At da Cesare, the homestyle cooking is supported by good technique. "Technique cannot improve the things our parents taught us. Oil that burns, tomato that shreds... these are all defects to correct. Our objective is to make gastronomy simple and intrinsic, like Roman food. Tripe for example is better the day after. But if you re-heat it in the pan, it oxidises. To avoid this, we chill it, vacuum seal it and then re-heat it in a *bain marie* at the moment of service so it retains all its aroma and fragrance."



Leonardo comes from an Abruzzese matriarchy where all the women were superb cooks. "I was brought up by grandparents and aunts in an extended family that was so big someone was always cooking." The rest came from a rich work history in the great starred restaurants of Switzerland and France. Here he was not the cook but the *maître* (and you can tell in the attention he shows every guest as he moves between the stove and the tables), also gaining his diploma as a *sommelier*.

Among his most important experiences was a period at the Beau Rivage in Geneva, one of the most luxurious hotels of Europe, where he says that all he did for two years was clean the silver. "That's where I developed my passion for hospitality. When you put clean silver on a table, you realise that even through such a simple but harmonious gesture, you can generate happiness." However, the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1991 put an end to this experience ("it seemed like the war had broken out in Switzerland, and we interns were forced to interrupt our training").

As important were his five years at the Relais & Chateaux La Petite Nice-Passédat, where he became dining room director and *sommelier*. "There I met my master of wine. Jean Pierre Mignot opened my mind. From that moment, I learnt to apply the search for balance in wine also to my dishes. And that's when I became conscious of the world of food. The chefs liked to have my opinion - they trusted me and understood that I didn't talk rubbish. If I dared to make a suggestion, it was with good reason and usually on the money. The eggplant croquette, for example, is the result of many trials until I managed to calibrate the quantity of mint. I am very particular, and I always follow through."

A memorable moment from his time at the Petite Nice is a thrice served Bouillabaisse (the restaurant, on a rocky outcrop, is right on the sea). It's



Da Cesare al Casaletto

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not on the menu now, but if you insist he will prepare it with the same maniacal approach that he used all those years ago. "I remember when the *pointu* tied up under the restaurant and ten chefs went to get the baskets of fish. Once they brought us 220 kilograms of snapper, I remember well because I had to sell the fish in the dining room and I had nine days to get rid of it. I have to go slowly with fish because Romans are still diffident about it," he says, so it's only spaghetti alla carbonara, Anzio anchovy fillets, calamari and *paranza* (fried fish combination) from the Mediterranean on the menu now, although given his great knowledge of raw ingredients and excellent suppliers, one can also risk something off menu...

He has decided to manage the kitchen alone, with the help of five guys from Bangladesh.

"It's too risky putting all your faith in just one chef. You are hostage to them and under constant threat. Mine was a choice for autonomy, driven by a great love of my work." He also veers toward the dining room. "In France, it was in the hands of professionals. A suit, tie, straight back and off you went. But you lost the naturalness, the serenity and joy of the food. Too formal. In Rome, we have the other opposite. Sometimes they serve you at the bar without looking you in the eye, has that ever happened to you? If I can't have a direct relationship with my clients and I don't see what they eat and what they drink, I don't like it. I don't feel calm, I feel as if I haven't got the equation right. With wine it's the same, I don't like exaggerated pomposity, even though I buy high-quality wines." He has a fan in Jonathan Nossiter, the director of *Mondovino*, who is a regular at the restaurant. "We are here to let people enjoy themselves and not to educate or teach them. Naturally I also buy products that the greater public likes. A client pointed out to me a while ago that there was not one wine from Lazio on the list. I changed that. If you eat a dish of *coratella* (offal of small animals), a Bellone (native to Lazio) is a great accompaniment. But a Vitovska from Zidarich is even better."

Anthony Genovese

When a dish is a hunt for flavours



Before he reached his current and surprising culinary maturity, Anthony Genovese says he was a 'spice gigolo'.

This 40 year-old chef, with two Michelin stars on his lapel, who only knew how to hit, provoke and even ignore the client, has changed. He has put his performance anxiety to one side and designs complicated dishes that are evermore original and authentically his, with a sense of complete tranquillity.

"To be the same every day is a secret weapon. I have really learned to ignore critics. And, artistically speaking, to have fun. It's not that I have eliminated spices (that would never happen – my kids and friends are always bringing them back from trips for me), but I use them today sparingly."

He is searching for a certain Italian taste right now, like the Roman touch of green tortelli with butter and anchovies with the brilliant green of wa-

tercross and the explosion of whipped butter that envelops the mouth.

He lived in France until he was 21 years-old and went to catering school in Nice. While it was his classical training on the other side of the Alps that formed him, he yearned for more contact with his Italian roots.

He decided to leave France for Florence, and was torn between the Enoteca Pinchiorri or the school of the great Marchesi. When it came to making a decision, his then-chef asked scornfully: "What are you going to do, learn how to make spaghetti?"

"There has always been an enormous conflict inside me: I am the child of immigrants (his parents are from Calabria), and I have never felt French, but I grew up in that culture."

He decided all the same for Pinchiorri, and spent four years with the family, one of which was in Tokyo open-

ing their first restaurant. "They were great pioneers," he says. Then he went to Malaysia and Thailand and then to Ravello for nearly five years as the chef at Rossellinis. Here he not only earned the two stars, but also a work companion in Marion Lichtle, the pastry chef who is always at his side. Finally it was a move to the capital, with their own venue, Il Pagliaccio.

Marion is from Alsace, and has a different way of looking at spices. She uses fresh herbs and infusions, the legacy of a childhood spent between vines and barrels and tasting wine. Her parents own the Lichtle vineyard that celebrated the tenth anniversary of Il Pagliaccio this year with a special label. But before Ravello and then Rome, Marion spent two and a half years in prestigious London restaurants. An immense passion for work unites the two. "But passion is putting it lightly," says Marion. "In reality it's a way of conceiving life that revolves around this thing."

"At the beginning, I had a lot of difficulty thinking that the place was mine, but if you want to grow it has to become yours," says Anthony.

Together they put together a tightly knit team, starting with sous-chef Francesco di Lorenzo, who has been at Il Pagliaccio for years. "Yes, it's a good moment, and we want to create; to do." The dishes are fun, like the figs and prosciutto, pork tail with its own broth, gnocchi and pea watercress. The fresh fig is cut thinly and flavoured with the pork tail and prosciutto broth. The gnocchi are made with vacuum-cooked potatoes, passed in a pork broth as if they were little stones in clay. The smoked provola purée gives a touch of cheese and to finish, a cream of 'nduja (spicy pork sausage).

What is the origin of such a risky dish? They laugh: "We started with prosciutto and figs. We were in a beauty spa with clay masks on our faces," says Francesco ironically. "To tell the truth, not everyone can tell if it's prosciutto and fig or a *gnocco*. In the delirium of creation, something escapes our intentions at times."

In this forge of ideas, everything is an experiment. "You see this? Francesco just got back from Malaysia with fried fish and we made grissini using them with the *taralli* dough. This is the magic moment in which the whole brigade participates. Whoever said that a dish only had to have three ingredients? The important thing is that the client recognises the principal ingredient." After that, the rest is up to them. They disorient the senses with small and mysterious sauces where everything is self-contained and impossible to decipher. First the caress of comprehension, then the punch of wonder.

The almost raw Sicilian prawn is emblematic. Its dorsal vein is filled with a peanut mousse (peanut paste melted in tamarind syrup with garlic, ginger, five spices and then passed through the Pacojet). Next to it, there is a sauce prepared with a very floral infusion of *yunnan yin zhen* with a bitter aftertaste that contrasts well with the sweetness of the prawn. The infusion of tea is made in milk, flavoured with smoked pepper and the whole fixture is thickened with linseeds that are puffed at 70°C then blended.

In the same plate there is also a candied marshmallow. An infusion of basil and lemon zest is placed in a syrup of water and sugar. Lemon juice and gelatine are added, and the whole liquid is left to coagulate before being whipped in the planetary blender. Toasted and salted peanut powder, cinnamon and cumin are then added. This infinity of flavours, concentrated on the end of a fork (apart from the prawn) is a dive into a mysterious combination that always finds the right balance on the palate.

A dish that enters perfectly into Anthony's philosophy is the smoked beef, with hints of saltiness, tuna cream and miso with razor clams. "This is 100% Genovese. It's food that I love to do, cooked and raw, meat and fish, the play of texture and contrasts. The first thing that struck me when I arrived in Asia was the sweet and sour of their food and I wanted to preserve this in mine too."

The point of the fillet (*cazzamali*) is smoked, marinated on order with Worcestershire sauce, smoked paprika, Xérès vinegar, oil and granulated mustard. The razor clam is opened on the grill. Next to it is the



pickled tuna cream and miso, almost suggesting veal with tuna cream, with the addition of a quenelle of green capsicum, a julienne of capsicum and green capsicum oil.

"The client today wants to understand what they are eating. You let them understand by making the centre of the dish easily recognisable, the heart of the plate must be easy to decipher. You need to know that you are eating a prawn or a fillet, but then we can have fun by mixing up everything around it and you can create a thousand different puzzles and games. People want to be a bit surprised, but you always have to give them the impression that they have perfectly understood the dish. When a dish is about the search to identify flavours, you know you have won! Never cover the principal ingredient, just help it a bit," Marion smiles slyly. Right. Help it, but how? Her food is increasingly made up of details, and the devil hides in details. There's no need to justify these, for it's the chef who is the final winner, in this no man's land where complexity in food can be given the form of normality.

Doing away with French reduction, Anthony only uses water-based sauces and broths and syrups to seal in the essences of flavour. Take for example his sequence of flavours in the pineapple emulsion, seaweed, spinach and turbot pil pil. The spinach is sautéed with the cooking juices of the turbot and dressed with sherry. The kombu seaweed is cooked in *dashi* ("note that there is seaweed and then there is seaweed; quality varies a lot"), left to marinate and cut very finely. There are also pineapple chips with fresh pineapple purée and cubes of fresh pineapple marinated with *macis* lime and smoked pepper, cooked at 65°C for 12 minutes, cooled, grilled and passed in almond oil with cedar grass. Or the fish of the day, a splen-

did snapper with vegetables cooked with inverted osmosis in a syrup of water, sugar and mint and served with a grapefruit sauce.

Marion is preparing a dessert of figs in a reduction of port with *babà* rum and melissa granita. On the menu there are five desserts, all accompanied by fruit. Marion doesn't like to be called a pastry chef, but rather a chef who also makes desserts, in keeping with the restaurant's style. "I have acquired an English mentality that obliges the pastry section to also know about other cooking. On the other hand, there is an increasing amount of sugar used in the wider kitchen while in the pastry section we use an increasing amount of salt. Even Anthony uses a lot of caramelised fruit, cane sugar, molasses and fruity tones that have taken the place of spices. Sometimes we have to be careful to not put the same combinations on the menu, because after many years working together we risk doubling up. One of the drawbacks of the job."



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Cristina Bowerman

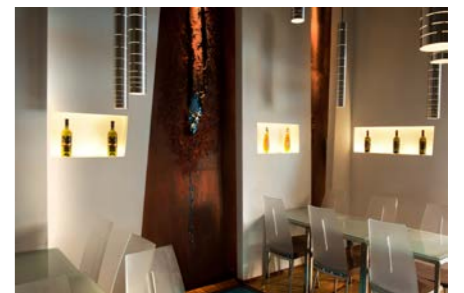
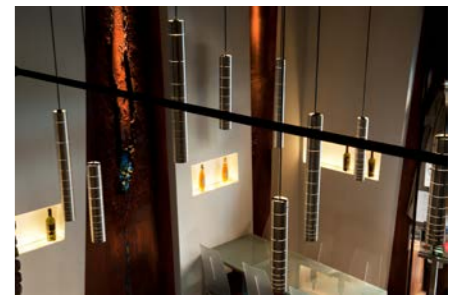
I experiment, therefore I am



A vaguely punk haircut, two sparkling black eyes in an intense and petite face, Cristina Bowerman is one of those women whose mind never rests. Her mouth is constantly trying to keep up with her thoughts which are rapidly translated into both English and Italian, thanks to the many years she lived abroad in California and Texas.

Her restaurant, Glass Hostaria, faces a piazza in Trastevere that is marred by signs of degradation. A homeless woman is an almost fixed feature outside the front door. "Yes, I know her well. When I look at homeless people I always wonder about the moment in which certain things happen, when things take a different direction." For her things took a different turn when, at the age of 25 with backpack in tow, she graduated from law school and left Cerignola for the United States, where she remained for sixteen years. When she appeared on the Trastevere scene in 2004, Bowerman seemed part of another world. Given her mentality, forward thinking, vivacity and interests, it is natural to ask what on earth she has in common with Rome and its carbonara and amatriciana or with the approximation of those many here-today-gone-tomorrow venues that are scattered around the city. "Like cabbage at morning tea time," she admits. More like fermented cabbage perhaps, given that she dedicated months to the study of fermentation processes (starting with Korean kimchi). It could almost be a symbol of her vast scientific interests, her intellectual curiosity, but above all her iron discipline.

Not a day goes by without a couple of hours study for her, from the chemistry of yeast to the process of fermentation, or recently of cheese, aromatic compounds and their combinations. "I base myself on a concept of my father's: the important thing is to give the best of what you have. The rest is



relative." Nothing in the Glass Hostaria is casual or left to the whims of the moment. Every ingredient is associated with a voyage, a suggestion, a book or research. "I am proud to be the first to have used the heart of fresh palm. I don't believe in an apprenticeship. I believe rather in study and research. I am damned to be an eternal student, or I get really bored. Every one of us has the choice of energising themselves through work or letting it become simply a routine. But if you choose routine, your standards are inevitably lowered."

Her curiosity and energy seem to never rest. She has two degrees, one in law from Italy and the other in gastronomic sciences from Austin, Texas, a city where she intends to return before too long with her husband and son ("My whole extended family is there and I still have a house there"). In the Texan city she wants to open a venue along the lines of Romeo, the concept restaurant she launched with the Roscioli brothers, an inverted osmosis that distils the experience she has matured in Italy.

Cristina has demonstrated that she

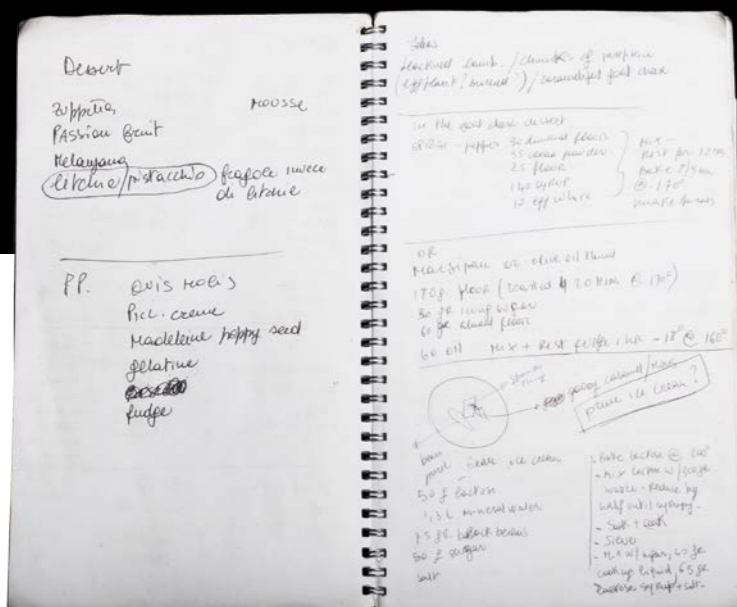
knows how to renew herself and change skins more than once, with an eclecticism that is not only linguistic, but professional. She spent ten years as a graphic designer for a large catering company in the States, "But I didn't think I would find myself on the other side of the fence." Her thirst for learning leads her to read the biographies of her colleagues and investigate their styles. "Every chef has their own. An-doni Luis Aduriz for example uses a lot of lactose. Exposure to ingredients and techniques that are not ours is essential. I try to meet people who have a specific experience with a product or a technique. Now, for example, I want to ask a cook from my town if I can spend some time with her to learn how to make olives in lime. It's an ancient conservation technique, and before we lose the knowledge of it I want to understand all the phases and gradients of the process."

This is also one of the reasons why Bowerman's kitchen is filled with international staff. "It's important to keep your interest alive. If you don't travel and you don't move, it's hard to get ideas. I don't believe that things from abroad are necessarily better.

But moving out of your comfort zone pushes you to resolve new and unpredictable situations and this stimulates capacities that would otherwise stay dormant."

Cristina allows herself two gastronomic events every year and one trip around the world. She returned from MAD in Copenhagen with the idea, for example, of using an open ember grill in the kitchen. "I had been tossing it over for a while, then I saw the chef in Christian Puglisi's kitchen grilling onions like that in the Green Egg and I immediately ordered one over the internet. I'm the prophecy of Celestine in person; I open my mouth and receive gratefully."

The city and the neighbourhood meanwhile have welcomed her. From the Trastevere piazza a great door of iron and glass engraved with the name of the restaurant discretely marks out a space. The interior is a series of surprising angles, alcoves, display cases, differing levels and spotlights, exactly like her uninhibited kitchen where nothing and everything is linear. In a city so anchored to its history (and gastronomy), the success



of cooking that takes traditions and explodes them, shakes them up, expels them, pulverises and reintegrates them was far from certain. Take dishes like the San Massimo reserve *risotto carnaroli* with lettuce, raspberries and *stracciatella* cheese, or the *bottoncini* with dark beer, cocoa, aged Roman pecorino and a pepper medley (liquid buttons of Guinness beer and bitter chocolate with cheese and pepper). The scallops, yellow potatoes, *tobiko* and ham broth, or the codfish cooked in milk with spicy coconut, edamame, shiitake mushrooms and peanuts with sea urchin or the percebes and mignonette pork cheek with *Franciacorta* offer no points of reference for those who seek an anchor in tradition or even a foothold in the echo of some ingredients and their description.

It's a mix of flavours, explains Cristina, that doesn't want to be what one of her critics described as *famolo strano* (let's be weird). "It's also a question of mental cleansing. I find it fascinating to decontextualise the product. The other side of the coin is that in the rush of experimentation sometimes dishes are placed on the menu prematurely and they are not totally balanced, so we perfect it on the job. But there is always a reason behind what I do, research and reason. In my notebooks I have written a long list of techniques and ingredients that I still want to try."

And if someone dares to ask what has driven her to add the eggs of a flying fish to the amuse bouche of beef fillet tartar with orange, capers, *tobiko*, wasabi sauce and micro vegetables (as the tartar is already so good on its own), her thunderous glare sends a message all of its own.



Glass Hostaria

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Cristina Bowerman calls them 'lessons in schizophrenia'. Or how to be present in two places, in this case the Glass Hostaria in Trastevere and Romeo in Prati.

But what have the Roscioli brothers (a Roman cult as far as tradition goes and her partners in the operation) got to do with one of the least conventional and most experimental chefs in Italy? "Professional respect, each at the top of their own game. If your attitude in business is professional quality, in the end you understand each other." Ipse dixit Cristina.



At the base of the project there is in fact an understanding that is played out also in the name. Romeo comprises both chef and baker, and combines their two spirits. Each contributes the best of what they know how to do. Alessandro and Pierluigi Roscioli are master bakers - with respect to bread and bakery products, they have few rivals in Rome. They are formidable selectors of produce, from cheese to cured meats to preserves and wine, with a vast experience nationally and internationally. Their experience derives primarily from the family ovens. The famous Roscioli of via dei Chiavari, that includes a delicatessen and restaurant in the adjoining via dei Giubbonari, boasts one of the best carbonaras in Rome. Cristina pays homage to it with her own version: *lo Spaghettono Cavalieri alla Carbonara*. "Our work together is very stimulating and it gives me access to a selection of products that I would otherwise have difficulty accessing. Now, it's enough to look in the fridge for continual inspiration." The Rosciolis on the other hand have the possibility of promoting their products thanks to a chef whose ideas go well beyond the confines of Rome. In short, it's a joining of forces.

The concept is multi-functional. Raw ingredients and products are available in the delicatessen, beyond which there is a restaurant designed by the architect Lorenzo Lupacchini (who also designed the Glass Hostaria). An unusual and surprising ceiling of interlacing white tubes hangs above it all like periscopes observing the large room, with a huge glass wall overlooking a courtyard. Fabio Spada, Cristina's partner in life and business, as well as the very creative partner in both Glass Hostaria and Romeo, manages it all. Romeo is a place to do the shopping, or have breakfast or an aperitif, or a snack of pizza bianca and amazing cured meats, or even to have dinner.

There are five *antipasti* on the menu, five pasta dishes, five main courses and many dishes based on street food such as sandwiches



(with beef pastrami, raclette and antique mustard; salmon carpaccio and creme fraîche; liver, potato chips, mango ketchup and sweet wine mayonnaise) that are dishes in their own right, inside bread. American traditions have left their mark on the chef and are a source of inspiration. The Hamburger Giuletta, salad and fries, and above all the BBQ chicken wings and coleslaw (delicious!) are a small homage in this direction.

A combination of dishes with extremely pleasing freshness and soft contrasts dominate Cristina's food pairing. The beef fillet tartar with Taggiasche olives, fried bread, chicory and orange zest for example, or the prawn tartar with chickpea hummus, turmeric, coriander and seasoned tomato. Pasta dishes rich with creative details like the ravioli with ricotta, parmesan, pepper, lemon and fish roe, or the black tagliolini with tarragon pesto and prawn bisque appear on the menu together with super classics like the tagliatelle with Bolognese ragout and the carbonara. Together they are tasty, pleasing, well-made dishes that are clearly from a kitchen of the highest level.

Romeo

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The chef has a surprise in store however: "I have always wanted to try direct cooking and I am thinking of doing roast chicken on demand." Waiting time: 35 minutes. They are small chickens marinated in oil and salt, an all-American tradition that renders the meat very tender. "I'll make you wait for it, but isn't it worth it for a roast chicken just out of the oven?" Ah... America!

The architect of big numbers: Roberto Liorni lands in Miami

His style has been imitated in scores of copycat venues, even in Tokyo. Now he is ready to launch in Miami with a very Roman concept based on La Moderna, the pizza restaurant recently launched next to the new Testaccio market in the heart of Rome. Architect Roberto Liorni imposed his taste revolution on the Roman restaurant world with Gusto in the 1990s, the mother of all future locales in the Italian capital's nightlife: 800 square metres of space articulated to serve various functions. For the first time an architect did not limit himself to decorative interventions but visualised and designed a space to cater for all its possible manifestations.

Liorni has designed around ten very diverse projects all with large surface areas, big numbers and, one imagines, a very happy and satisfied client base. So what's the secret?

I try to imagine what I would like to find inside a venue. I put myself automatically in the place of the client right through to the kind of place setting. Today, to build a space with hundreds of square metres (Porto Fluviale has 1,000) you need to look at every detail, right through to the choice of the uniform and the logo, because every detail is a form of communication.

And what do clients want?

People don't want to be constrained; they want to feel free and free to be themselves. Spontaneous movement is generated in every one of my venues. In Porto Fluviale for example, I observe patrons that, while they are at dinner with friends, go to the bar to get themselves a Martini. They might have a look around, then they go back to the table and no-one thinks this kind of movement is unusual any more. You go to a restaurant like you go to a club. This is the approach, at least in venues with big numbers, that is popular with a younger clientele. The floor service is unfortunately not yet up to the flexibility required, as opposed to the kitchen that has been able to adapt. Not even the cleverest entrepreneurs are able to close this gap.





Porto Fluviale



Porto Fluviale



Splendor



Splendor

The reason?

There is no time to train staff. The uncertainty over opening venues, that are often held hostage to hundreds of bureaucratic procedures, means that business owners will almost never take on staff two or three months before opening. We are talking about businesses with dozens and dozens

of wait staff. The consequence is that staff are numerous but of low quality. This is the limit of all large venues. The large chains do not have this kind of problem because they use their large internal nursery during training periods. The 'independents' are on the other hand forced to blunder on in the dark as there is often not time to undergo a careful selection pro-

cess. This happens even where there is a highly professional management. Venues open with people who come along at the very last minute and this places sophisticated operations at risk from many points of view.

But how? Didn't Gusto bring in the era, as was already the case in other European capitals, of young students as waiters?

Yes, but even here we have seen a change. I often participate in recruitment where usually it's the unemployed or students who apply; almost never qualified staff. Today young people who apply for waiting jobs to pay for their studies are all without experience, but they don't live the experience as a formative stage, a fun, transitory moment that should be approached with energy and enthusiasm. If anything it's the opposite. There is only the anger and the frustrating sensation that this job could become permanent. Before students had a positive attitude, now they feel as if they are being exploited from the beginning. That's without considering that in the world of recruitment there are rackets and small mafias. To find a good barista you have to ask someone who knows everybody...

Will you bring the spirit of liberation that you speak of also to the States?

The Moderna Miami Testaccio will be a bar restaurant pizzeria with the atmosphere of Italy in the 1950s and 1960s. It's not Italy as the Americans are used to seeing it, but that hard working and industrial country of the economic boom, of Olivetti in 1982, of design, when the legend of our country was born. It's the Italy of the Lambretta rather than a vista of Posillipo, the idyllic Naples coastline. It's an attempt to render the enthusiasm and creative energy of those years with all the relative references attached to it, as if the spirit of an old Milanese workshop could be transformed into a restaurant.

You have built some of the most elegant establishments in Italy from Gusto to the Osteria della Frezza to the Pastificio, the temple of radical chic, to the popular Rosti in the Pigneto quarter, the most English and the most trendy...

Rosti was a fun experiment in that it had a large outdoor space, a car park in front of a mechanical workshop that allowed us to bring a northern European spirit to a neighbourhood

garden. Pigneto is one of the most multi-ethnic zones of Rome and this garden became popular not only with the venue's patrons. But Rosti was a different kind of bet: 100 seats divided among five communal tables. Romans usually only like shared tables when they go abroad. But it worked.

Even the Pastificio was an operation against the grain, a radical chic venue in the popular neighbourhood of San Lorenzo. It was like in Amsterdam, with elegant structures dropped into outlying suburbs, or outside the circle of the historic centre.

Have you ever asked yourself why none of your clients are gastronomic restaurants?

Good question! I have never had a commission like that.

In high level cuisine everything tends to concentrate on the performance of the chef. It's as if the clients don't want a venue that is too individualistic or distracting; they prefer to focus on minimal architecture.

We all say we've had enough of the high mass rituals of top end restaurants, but the fact is that even gastro-

nomical restaurants are all a bit boring conceptually, undifferentiated boxes with that fake elegance that was typical of restaurants in the seventies and eighties. If they must be elegant, then there must be an intrinsic coherence between the design of interiors and the food on offer, a coherence that also regards the table, the settings and the decorative elements that encircle it. North Europa docet.

With a few exceptions, you have the impression in gastronomic restaurants that it's only about the food and not the context that brings it to life and places it in a relationship with the diner. Food has thrown off many shackles, and has jumped out of the box, while the restaurant concept does not embrace this spirit of liberation. In France, for example, many have reinterpreted the bistrot. Ours unfortunately are copies that have not known how to emulate this right to the end.