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AW14

ALLA CARTA

Dissertations Around a Table



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10 – 12 April, 2015



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Conversation with
Ruggiero Colonna Romano
Photography
Matteo Pastorio



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**Lamb Lombetto
With Vegetables**

I won't call it a
Carpaccio because
it bears no resemblance
to a sixth century
painter. It plays on the
typical sensations of
the Roman suckling
lamb. Thin slices of
seared lamb with
juniper and served with
vegetables seasoned
like puntarelle, which
are a Roman classic.

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It has the same shape as a Roman gnocco but that is made of semolina. These are potato gnocchi prepared so as to maintain the flavours of the main ingredient: the potato. They are then cooked in small parcels so as to preserve their characteristics and it makes quite a large gnocco which is served with rabbit that has been cooked in a bain-marie and then shredded. Hidden among them is one that has been made with onion ash.



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**Potato Gnocchi
With Shredded Rabbit**



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I like to define my cooking as cuisine for the blind: if you eat a dish like this it brings to mind the typical flavours of porchetta but is the result of a very different preparation. The 36 hours of cooking at a low temperature make the meat extremely soft and the bacon rind is then tossed on a red-hot grill to get that crunchy exterior. It is accompanied by seasonal vegetables.



Crunchy Piglet

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**The Chocolate
Diplomat With Cream
and Salted
Caramel**

Years ago I had an Indo-Roman phase; it was a very confusing and senseless time. It was 1997 and that year I had the opportunity to open a restaurant in Istanbul. I experimented extensively with the use of spices, long macerations with a kind of cinnamon and then my diplomat gradually took form. It is a revisitation of the famous Italian dessert, the typical dessert that you take to your grandparents for Sunday lunch. It consists of chocolate pastry, layers of pastry cream and chocolate mousse and one of the four sides of the cube is covered in dense caramel with salt that shakes up your taste buds so much I haven't removed it from the menu for 15 years.

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An anarchist in the kitchen, a son who took advantage of a short trip with his father at the wheel of his intrepid Fiat 128, along with the silent complicity of his mother, to revolutionise their century-old family trattoria and transform it into a place where Roman cuisine was opened up for debate and saw new life. Young and reckless perhaps, but time has proved him right, as shown by the first Michelin star awarded to his restaurant Antonello Colonna and the second surprise star awarded just six months after the launch of his new venture: a resort/temple to design immersed in the green of Labico, just outside Rome and only a few kilometres from that old traditional osteria that had to close its doors in the face of modernity. Antonello Colonna is explosive, he speaks directly and avoids that evocative rhetoric that (all too) often reigns in the spectacular Olympus of contemporary gastronomy. He outspokenly moves from discussing design to football to the role of conviviality, and after joking about the entirely casual coincidence of our names, we begin to have an interesting chat.

R O R
How did your relationship with the kitchen begin? What was the first dish you fell in love with?

A
I don't actually have a reply to that question because I have never fallen in love with a dish. However, I often think of those dishes that defined story, a revolution connected to tradition. The first is unquestionably a cabbage stew, which comes from a recipe my parents used to make in the winter. I kept its main characteristics: the flavours, the oil, the chili, the white wine. The recipe starts with stewed cabbage; I used that to create a quenelle which I covered with thin layers of guanciale and grated Roman caciotta. This was one of the dishes that marked the beginning of my journey and defined my modern Roman cuisine. Nowadays though, my creativity in the kitchen is the result of an almost jazz-like improvisation, meaning my guests are guinea-pigs. Today for example, I made my guest boiled tail, which I wanted to dedicate to Juventus, but in the end it was them who boiled us (this interview took place just after Juventus beat Rome, Ed.), so at this point I have to dedicate it to the referee. Once the tail is 'boiled', it is served in a bowl with broth, boiled chestnuts and parmesan. The 'negative of carbonara' was another important dish for me. I used to make stuffing that summed up Roman cuisine, but stuffed into a tortello. My carbonara contains the same ingredients as the classic version but stuffed into a tortellino, tossed in a sour cream with pecorino and served with bits of guanciale. The egg inside is whipped like a zabaione with vegetable broth. It is a very popular dish that fully reflects my agro-farmer roots, you know, I'm a child of innkeepers and the osteria.

R O R
Tell me about your banquets.

A
I come from a tradition of feasts, with dishes like Goccia d'Oro turkey, duck à l'orange, chicken galantine, vitel tonn , lobster in jelly, bass in jelly. That lavish approach, with sumptuously decked tables and chefs who were real sculptors has disappeared now. It has become very difficult to reproduce that sort of cuisine. I managed to do so only after a long hunt for people who have long disappeared from the cooking world, anyone with that kind of skill is over eighty now, you have to search for the survivors in the kitchens of cruise ships.

I once prepared a banquet in honour of Queen Elizabeth II and I insisted that suckling *abbacchio* was on the menu. It is a shoulder of goat stuffed with pecorino and mint, an extraordinary dish that was surprisingly successful, surprising because one of the main ingredients is a part of goat that is usually given to the dogs. But instead of being given to the dogs it became a great dish that was served to the Queen, bursting with genuine flavours. Nowadays my buffets are legendary and the result of fundamental agro-industrial research. I like to ironically define them merendoni (large snacks) and they were devised to recall those lavishly set tables in the countryside laden with kilos of beans and pecorino, stewed meat, chicory, salad and wild roots.

R O R
I remember the first time I saw your resort in a design magazine, I was amazed when I found out where it was. It is something that I struggle to associate with Italy, let alone Lazio.

A
Lazio is irrelevant inside here. I travel the world to decide what I don't like. In life I am passionate about various trends, from Occitan furnishings to rationalism. I lived inside a contemporary art museum for seven years, where I still have a restaurant. This gives me the opportunity to experience the museum differently. And that was how the Vallefredda project came about, during a design exhibition when I saw a shelf attached to the wall. The shelf was by Donald Judd and the design for my resort all started from that shelf, like the Eames house. I entrusted it to an architect who designed shoes before designing reinforced concrete monoliths and the result was Vallefredda.

R O R
You come from a family of innkeepers and you think of yourself as one as well. Is the new Vallefredda resort perhaps a contemporary revisitation of the osteria?

A
An innkeeper is a generous, friendly and educated person. Always happy, playful and at the disposition of their clients, they are tough. But there is an additional aspect to it now, a return to an even more distant past. Here the innkeeper is also a farmer, entrepreneur and chef. No, not a chef, a cook. I cannot stand the use of French language for culinary terms. They were the first to set down culinary terminology, all technical language is French,

just like English is spoken in IT. Julienne, ratatouille, concass , quenelle, all cooking utensils, foie gras. And then they just can't resist putting an accent on the last vowel of pizza. They do it with the word Opera... so pizza didn't stand a chance. I have to say that I'm not overly fond of the word resort either.

R O R
wThe common perception is that traditional cuisine is a world apart from refined cuisine. But in your kitchen, these two concepts are blended so closely that they overlap completely.

A
The Master's Degree course I organise has just begun here at Vallefredda and this means I am more often in contact with a lot of young people. Just this morning we were talking about the fact that issues such as these are mainly linked to language. Words are so used, manipulated and contaminated that they have lost their meaning. I defined the word 'tradition' as an ingredient 30 years ago. The same process has happened within the restaurant world. For example, there used to only be trattoria and osteria in Italy, restaurants were in hotels. In France however, restaurants as we know them today were born immediately after the French Revolution, just think of the film *Babette's Feast* (*Babettes g stebud*). That is why I would define my cooking as Roman Twist if asked, as it is simply an interpretation of traditional Roman cuisine with a contemporary twist, just as French Twist is now well known in the world's big cities and has revitalised French tradition. My menu is aimed to provoke with its minimalism. The main courses are simple: suckling lamb, beef, guinea-fowl, baccal  and pigeon. Don't get me started on the word 'genuine', it's completely lost any meaning...

R O R
I also struggle with the use of the term 'organic'.

A
We don't have to agree with anybody because we are aristocratic anarchists and like all aristocratic anarchists we don't care about anybody else and our purchasing power is giving them all the finger. Words have lost their meaning because we are looking at an all-round revolution, we should rewrite the Constitution, starting with article 1: "I am who I am, and you are nothing" (from *The Marquess Del Grillo*, Ed.). We need to make fun of ourselves to be able to make fun of other people.

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