

Michel Troisgros

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*Guest of honour at the Opening Ceremony of ALMA's 15th Academic Year
Parma, Auditorium Paganini, 23 October 2018*

“Thank you, I am honoured to be here today. Thank you very much for this invitation that has brought me to ALMA, here in Parma: this really impresses me and moves me. I am thinking especially of the chefs who are here this morning: it’s so nice to meet you here in this building renovated by the great Renzo Piano, an architect that represents the friendship between Italy and France, because Renzo Piano lives in Paris, and is a world-famous Italian Parisian. All of you chefs dressed in white uniform, you look fantastic! I think chefs should wear white all over the world, and not black as some do. I know the restaurant world very well because I have been following it since I was born. Ours is a family restaurant, I was raised in it and I experienced it as...a football pitch, as a theatre stage. When I was little, I thought the customers were friends of my parents who were coming to eat at our place, with the Troisgros. Four consecutive generations of chefs. It’s really intriguing: why did each generation choose this profession? I don’t know, perhaps we simply liked it. We feel a contagious joy about doing this job, about practising this art. And it is with this same joy that I would like to address three points with you:

- 1) The ‘60s, when Marchesi was in France.
- 2) Italy, the maternal side of my family.
- 3) Today’s cuisine.

Let’s start with Maestro Marchesi. A chef like many others at the beginning, though he had a particular taste for beauty, loved to eat and was a true gourmet. He followed his family’s traditions - pasta, risotto, good sauces - then day by day he started devoting himself more and more to the craft: he learned,

tasted, and experimented, while respecting traditional uses and customs. He found the cuisine of his country a bit too set in its ways, yet he adored it. It was a time in the history of cuisine when Italian people only wanted the well-known traditional dishes.

Here in France we already had a few artists, something different was being created, and this convinced Gualtiero Marchesi to see for himself how things were changing. At that time some were even saying that a group of chefs was *subverting* French cuisine: Guérard, Senderens, Vergé, Haeberlin, the creators of French Nouvelle Cuisine in the 1960s. Gualtiero Marchesi wanted to see this new cuisine, not as a customer but as a player, he wanted to participate. The letter he wrote to the Troisgros brothers explaining his motivation was captivating. The brothers were won over and replied “We agree.” For Marchesi what had been up to that moment an unexpected chance was turning into an opportunity to explore avant-garde cuisine.

Marchesi had not yet seen an organization of that kind in the kitchen: chefs working closely with the staff, free to create, customers eager for novelty, menus capable of evolving very rapidly, vegetables freshly picked and immediately cooked, and incredible respect for raw materials and their freshness. There was a dish that particularly attracted him and summarized for him the approach of the two Troisgros brothers: escalope of salmon with sorrel, made with an innovative technique which he defined as “rosé à coeur”, pink inside. He made comparisons with his own work and realized that it takes time and daring to achieve what French chefs had done, time to assimilate techniques and, in part, to forget them. He constantly wanted to learn, do research, go beyond traditional approaches and create. My father, who is now 90 years old, told me that he clearly remembers this man who stood out among the others, elegant, delicate, with the appearance of an intellectual, not an ordinary chef, a person who paid great care to all aspects of cooking, had a sensitive relationship with food and asked a thousand questions “*How do you do it, how can I improve it, where does this product come from?*”

Gualtiero Marchesi followed the example of my father, the owner of the restaurant: they commented on the pleasures of the table and exchanged stories, they went together to meet market gardeners, cattle

breeders, poultry farmers, and the fishermen at the Loire River. What mattered was the result, not the rules.

At that time refinement was a weakness, perhaps because of a lack of inspiration. All this talk about service, the cart that arrived with dishes that were either cold or lukewarm: he did not like all that. He loved light sauces that were not made in advance, and establishing a correct cadence with different dishes. He worked with Jean-Baptiste and witnessed the changes that made him a pioneer. I was 10 years old when Gualtiero Marchesi came to Roanne. I shared my bedroom with this stranger: before going to bed he would make notes and draw sketches in a notebook; in the morning I would go to school and he would start working in the kitchen. So one month, three, then seven months went by... and at the end he went back to Milan, enriched by the time he had spent with us.

In the early 1980s we visited him in Milan. He was already making a name for himself in Italy, and in France as well. I remember that lunch as something really magnificent, artistic, so terribly Italian, but with a sophisticated sobriety - I had never seen anything like it before! On every table flower had been replaced with artworks by the visual artist Man Ray. His taste for creativity could be seen everywhere, in the furniture, in the graphics... his unforgettable logo was made of a few strokes of colour. His approach was based on his knowledge of the arts, his passion for great music. Nothing stopped him, not even this incredible sober refinement of his. In 1984 he wrote: "I adore music and painting, and I owe the explanation of my personal choices to a painter". He cited these words by Toulouse Lautrec: In every art - and this is true of cooking as well - great refinement lies both in synthesis and simplicity. The quotation continues: Obviously it is always necessary to refer to tradition although at times it must be forgotten, but without betraying it out of ignorance and negligence. It's in this way that we become cooks free of prejudices, "anarchists" who in the preparation of a dish recognize only the law of balance imposed by nature.

I suggest that you approach cooking with this frame of mind. In the 1970s it took courage to do so, because few Italian customers were ready to accept the English slogan "less is more." Through the

years, many chefs have worked alongside Gualtiero Marchesi and they have all expressed great gratitude and their fascination with him. I would like to share this thought with you, this time spent at his side, these chefs who thought of themselves as his children: Paolo Lopriore, Carlo Cracco, Enrico Crippa, Davide Oldani, Andrea Berton, Pietro Leeman, and many others, who have shared his choices, so that today his legacy is still very much alive. Gualtiero Marchesi worked very hard to transmit his ideas and teachings to young people, at ALMA and elsewhere during his incessant travels, announcing - just as a prophet does - a message, “the word”, as it were, the best word.”

I am going to try and tell you about me and Italy and of how, for me, Italy was born in Roanne.

Few people know that thanks to my mother I am 50% Italian, and I believe that this has played a fundamental role in my approach to cooking - not just in the composition of my dishes, but in my taste and in the techniques I use. The origin of this story can be traced back to my grandmother. Her last name was Forte, and she came from Buja, a small town near Udine; she had worked there first and then moved to Roanne because her daughter was going out with my father, Pierre Troisgros. I spent most of my youth with her and when I was old enough to ride my bike from her house to school, I went to live with her; this way I was escaping the ties to the restaurant, and she used to spoil me because she was a great cook. Spending time with her, Italian culture gradually entered my veins and I realized one thing: the influence that her taste had obviously had on mine.

Every time I could I would lend her a hand in her small kitchen, rolling the dough to make pasta, shaping gnocchi, preparing apple cake, stirring polenta, or chopping basil. It was hard to find Parmigiano Reggiano in Roanne, and we often replaced it with Gruyere cheese: my grandmother always found a solution and so the flavours were close to the authentic ones. Sunday was gnocchi day and all the relatives would gather around the large table. She started cooking at dawn, boiling the potatoes which she chose all of the same size. She mashed them while still very hot and then kneaded in the egg yolks and flour; she didn't weigh the ingredients, all she needed was her hands to feel and understand how much flour was required. She then rolled out the mixture into a thin long cylinder

which we would cut and shape. My grandmother would roll the gnocchi over the back of a fork, for her it was child's play, while I was in charge of lining them up one by one on the kitchen table with floury hands. There were dozens of them on the table! Then there was the preparation of tomato sauce, an excellent sauce, with no onions, a bit of garlic, thyme, bay leaf, a bit of celery, a knob of butter and a few drops of lemon: I can still remember the deep red of that sauce! Then she would finally carry a beautiful serving dish full of steaming gnocchi to the table, a profoundly religious moment. My grandmother was so proud of her job that she would start singing Ave Maria. At the end, the meal was rounded off with a limoncello.

My Italian side also comes from my holidays, as almost every summer we would visit our cousins in the Friuli region. The roads were different then and it took us a few days to cross Italy from west to east, stopping at Turin, Milan, Verona, Venice... so many exciting cities, so many restaurants! All those friendly chefs and the simple pasta and rice dishes, the pizzas: it was all familiar to me. On the third day, when we finally arrived at Buja, as soon as we walked into the house we could smell the polenta cooking in the pot over the fire; its delicate fragrance filled all the rooms.

I remember that it was the women of the house who prepared it, never the men; sometimes my grandmother and sometimes her sisters, while the men were busy with other things. It's true that in Italy at that time, perhaps more than in France, few men ruled in the kitchen, today it's less so. Kitchens were peopled by women, and they ran some of the most famous restaurants. Almost everywhere the prevailing model was that of mum's or grandma's cuisine and so they were the ones who carried out tasks such as making pasta.

This portrait of our family is an example of life in the kitchen, if not a road to follow. My father was attracted by the spontaneity of my grandmother's cuisine and from the start he applied its principles, as in the escalope of salmon with sorrel or in the veal piccata created by my grandmother from whose delicacy my father drew inspiration.

The memories of the time spent with my grandmother have come back to me: picturing her making ravioli led me to create the potato and artichoke half-moons. In my mind's eye she was near me.

My wife, Marie-Pierre, has her own way of cooking and what she prepares is always good, whether it be a soup, a first course made with leftovers, good dressings, a mixed salad, or a fruit flan; sometimes she's short on time but I'm always impressed with the result. Cooking is like riding a bicycle, the more you do it, the better you get. But it is also poetry, common sense and a lot of love.

Perhaps the last aspect of my Italian side are the significant encounters that I was able to have, especially in Northern Italy, the long time spent with Nadia and Antonio Santini, Massimo Bottura, Enrico Crippa, Massimo Spigaroli, Davide Oldani and many others: all of them shared with me their love for their region, country and tradition, and they all made it possible for me to love even more what I had received as a legacy. It's thanks to all this that I was born half Italian.

In conclusion I want to send this message to male and female chefs, pastry cooks, bakers, to everyone, a message about cooking. Thanks to my career and my origins, I can explain to you how I see today's chef. I share my beliefs with my wife, Marie-Pierre, my children, their partners and the chefs: keeping the promise made to our customers every day of giving them an unprecedented experience made of simplicity and kindness.

Two years ago we moved from our historic residence in the station square to the countryside, just 10 km away, quite a bold step because we had been in the same location for 86 years. The creation of this new 17-hectare estate gave us a great deal of energy, many ideas, joy, a lot of work, success, an intimate relationship with nature, lots of light, and land to cultivate; it has transformed us into young people with a skip in our step! Through the generations our family has always been committed to working closely with the best local producers and we have collaborated with them for a long time with the objective of producing healthy food of excellent quality, because we wish for these producers to also benefit financially from their hard daily work.

A journalist asked me what gastronomy meant to me: my answer is, everything that is precious to eat, to the extent that resources are precious and people use them carefully. Potatoes as well as truffles, sardines as well as turbot. 10 years ago, I probably would have given a different answer; but the world has changed so much that, today more than ever, chefs must be concerned about resources and therefore about the environment. The protagonists of the haute cuisine world play a key role in this evolution, which combines preservation of food diversity, healthy nutrition and solidarity towards small producers. Many of them have acted as trailblazers, discovering new flavours, reducing waste to a minimum, and where possible working with every part of the product. Just as Paolo Lopriore showed us yesterday in his restaurant, with cauliflower. Vegetable parts, meat bases, stems, offal, potato peels, bones: this is the no-waste and recycling age and we need to set an example for our chefs in order to usher in a new way, with a really strong focus in Italian and French society on homemade food and attention to the origin of products and their quality.

You have an important role to play in the future in addition to, naturally, experimenting with cuisines and flavours. May you fulfil your dreams and be successful in whatever you undertake. Thank you.