

Michel Troisgros

Executive Chef of La Maison Troisgros, Roanne (France), 3 Michelin Stars for 50 years

*Guest of ALMA's first Career Day, interviewed by Loris Gai, RAI journalist
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Loris Gai - *La Maison Troisgros: three Michelin stars since 1968; twice voted "Best restaurant in the world". How do you keep a legacy going through three generations?*

Michel Troisgros - It's very difficult to answer this question in a few moments. 50 years and three Michelin stars are a long and complex history. A lot has happened in these fifty years and frankly even before them. First of all, we have something inside us that others don't have. My grandfather planted the first small seed, which generated a small plant. Generation after generation this plant grew stronger and more lush. That small seed was of good quality, and it slowly expanded gathering nourishment from its small roots. These roots represent the knowledge that my grandfather accumulated through the years. He studied history and created his own, drawing inspiration from his family, his region, and his country. Together with the seed provided by my grandfather we needed a great deal of courage and daring, which were developed on the basis of the great tradition that he himself had generated. To all this we added our daily work. The nature of everyday life, the joy of being an active part of the community, the people that we meet every day on the street, the same with whom we were able to build up a relationship of trust.

There is a strong dynamic of reciprocity and mutual trust. It means generating value for customers day after day. Trust is the key element between us, making it possible for customers to share in the harmony that pervades our restaurant, in the sense that they can enjoy what I refer to as collective harmony. It's not something easy to achieve. My moods change from day to day, I have worries and "headaches", I

may have disagreements with my family or with suppliers. But Paolo and Giuseppe - chefs Paolo Lopriore and Giuseppe D'Errico, both with work experience at La Maison Troisgros [editor's note] -, who are here today, can both testify to the harmony that I am describing, as they have also worked at Roanne, although at very different times. There is real trust in the chef, who in this case is also the owner. I believe that this "secret" enables us to go on year after year, creating a mix of elements wanted by the customers.

The restaurant exists because there are customers, I need their support because if they did not come, I could not continue my work. It's a bit like a painter who thinks and reflects in his studio, but who obviously could not paint any portraits without people to portray. So, coming back to the question about our history, it is the result of a succession of new stimuli from the different generations. The first generation made way for the second one, which in turn encouraged the third one, and so on. Each generation stood aside at the right time, and each one learnt a lot from the previous one and handed down its knowledge to the next one. It's not the story of just one person, but of 4 generations with two children each, and of two brothers who are still working. Obviously, you need good management techniques.

LG - Achieving excellence is easier than maintaining it, but behind it there is always a great specific quality, there is something that makes people stand out from the rest: what was it that made the difference for you, in your career?

MT - What made the difference? I started my career path, my professional life aware of being the son of Pierre Troisgros, so that what I did differently was criticized because it was compared to what my father, an extraordinary man, was doing. I realized immediately that I would never be the same as my father. My mother was Italian and I think of myself as 50% Italian. Thanks to my typically French training, with chefs Roger Vergé, Haeberlin, Alain Chapel, Frédy Girardet, to my experiences in Japan,

Brazil and San Francisco, I came back to France with a different experience from that of my father, and re-entered the Troisgros story in a way that was unprecedented in our family. If I had given up on my experiences, on myself as a person, in order to carry on the history traced by my father, I would not have been myself. So I said to myself: okay, I will go back home, and continue on this journey based on my certainties but without neglecting the tradition of the restaurant! The clientele considered Troisgros an untouchable, immutable institution. To be honest I went through a difficult time, because I was not free to express myself. However, my wife Marie-Pierre has always been my bedrock, giving me certainty and strengthening my beliefs.

I lost part of the clientele, and attracted a new one. Getting the public to accept this new operating philosophy took time and a lot of patience. My wife helped me a great deal, supporting me every step of the way.

I believe that I respected tradition. My father did not do a copy and paste of my grandfather's cuisine, and it was the same for me: I followed the family tradition, while preserving my freedom.

LG – *What is the point of balance between tradition and change?*

MT - There isn't a real point of balance, it's like a fabric that is slowly formed, that is knitted like a sweater, stitch by stitch. On the one hand we have the tradition that remains and is presented again. Following the tradition of our kitchen makes me happy: for example, escalope of salmon with sorrel is a key dish. At the same time, though, tradition must have limits, because if we always served the same traditional dishes this would become a sort of ritual, and we wouldn't be offering our customers anything new. Cuisine would turn into a custom, which can turn the recipe into an easily-achievable routine, boring both for those preparing it and for those tasting it. The moment this traditional escalope of salmon turns from something ordinary into something extraordinary and rare, that's when it becomes modern, because the fact of not offering it to customers every single day makes it desirable. I

understood this because in my father's time this escalope was prepared every day and they would always say "Michel Troisgros is referring to the great tradition here", and so that dish became traditional. I myself never forgot that dish, but I also started making other things. I was young and a bit clumsy. I would change the menu from season to season, and after a few years I started making the escalope of salmon again, just for a few customers. This way I reintroduced the recipe, making it desired and desirable again, just like a cooking professor. You young people have probably heard about this escalope. "It's a typical Troisgros brothers recipe, a symbol of the 1960s", or as others say "the escalope of salmon with sorrel was revolutionary, but it's no longer served as often as it used to be." When we brought the recipe back we put the spotlight back on something that had faded a bit, making it once more desired and requested by the public.

LG - *What does a customer expect when he comes to La Maison?*

MT - I think that the customer is looking for something different. Some of them will come only once, or visit a great 3-star restaurant only once in their lives, deciding to spend quite a sum for the occasion. Others go to great restaurants in the same way they go to the gym; some come expressly from Japan, or from the village nearby; some drive up in Rolls Royces or Ferraris, others in a small economy car. There is a huge diversity of customers, each with their own expectations. For example, even people who are not professionals can become specialists, by comparing different Maisons. These are difficult customers to satisfy because you must not only serve them excellent food, but also provide them with a more intimate, personal experience. Our Maison has a soul, a soul that is also modern, and it's a place well suited to a tasting journey; in addition to this you need to be kind when welcoming customers. Avoid chewing gum, for example. I say this ironically, but at times it does happen that I go to a restaurant and the person who greets me is chewing gum. What do I do then? I turn around and I leave.

Unfortunately this also happens in hotels. In a restaurant such as ours we must show the greatest courtesy and kindness, qualities that are somewhat innate. It's better to smile for the pleasure of smiling, for the pleasure and passion in your job, rather than force a smile. It may seem trivial, but when one does a job like this all day, every day, with a lot of energy and strength, with different customers from morning to night, it's not easy. There may be customers who come to us just once, so we must welcome them with the utmost kindness and courtesy to give them the very best experience. As for cooking, it must be based on a simplicity whose very naturalness can amaze, a cuisine that stands out from the rest. In short, the result of many things, with what we could define as a typical Gualtiero Marchesi style: a deeply honest cuisine that does not insist on following trends, but is something that evolves and is underpinned by ties to the local area and respect for nature and raw materials. This is my idea of a great restaurant!

LG- On television there is a deluge of cooking shows. Is this overdose of TV cooking positive or does it risk trivializing the subject?

MT - Television shows us cooking as if it was a game, a show, and in my opinion that is a lie. The programmes are fun, it's true, but they don't tell the whole truth. Also, they tend to talk exclusively about the competitive and technical side, never about the origin of cuisine, its history and beauty. Cooking is also fun, why not, and media exposure can encourage viewers to embrace this profession. But I am not in favour of this kind of show, I don't like it at all. For me cooking is a pleasure, but it must be treated with respect, according to the most important issues and not as we see it on television, where everything is focused on provocations and situations fabricated to attract an audience.

LG - Where is haute cuisine going? What direction will it take and what place will it have in our society?

MT - I think that cuisine must deal first of all with a fundamental issue, namely good nutrition. As representatives of haute cuisine, we also must be committed to this goal.

Tradition is at the heart of cuisine, and we must be able to transmit it, and to do that we must take the time to share it. We need to pay attention to what we eat, keeping your phone off the table, respecting food and those who produce it, and dedicating the necessary time to cooking. I think that cooking depends essentially on the ability of men and women to transmit these habits, these shared rituals: only this way will we be able to keep tradition alive.

LG - *A golden rule for anyone wanting to be a chef, or undertake this type of profession.*

MT - Travel!