

HEINZ BECK

The Magician of Balanced Flavors

by Lucy Gordan

Dynamic and scrupulously meticulous, Heinz Beck, a blond and wiry elf straight out of a Grimm Fairy Tale, was born in Friedrichshafen on Lake Constance in Bavaria, on November 3, 1963. He grew up and was trained as a chef in Altötting, halfway between Passau and Munich. His professional experience has always been in Michelin-starred restaurants: Commis de Cuisine at Feinkost Kaefer in Munich, 1985-86; Chef de Partie at the Colombi Hotel in Freiburg, 1986-1989; Chef de Partie at Heinz Winkler's "Tantris" in Munich, 1989-1991; Sous Chef at "Tristan" in Mallorca 1991, and Sous Chef at the Residenz Heinz Winkler in Aschau, 1991-1993. Since 1994 he has been Executive Chef at "La Pergola," the elegant roof-top restaurant of Rome's Cavalieri Hilton.

Since 1998 Beck has won three forks in the *Gambero Rosso* guide, and since 2000 two stars in the Michelin Guide to Italy.

His 2003 ratings:

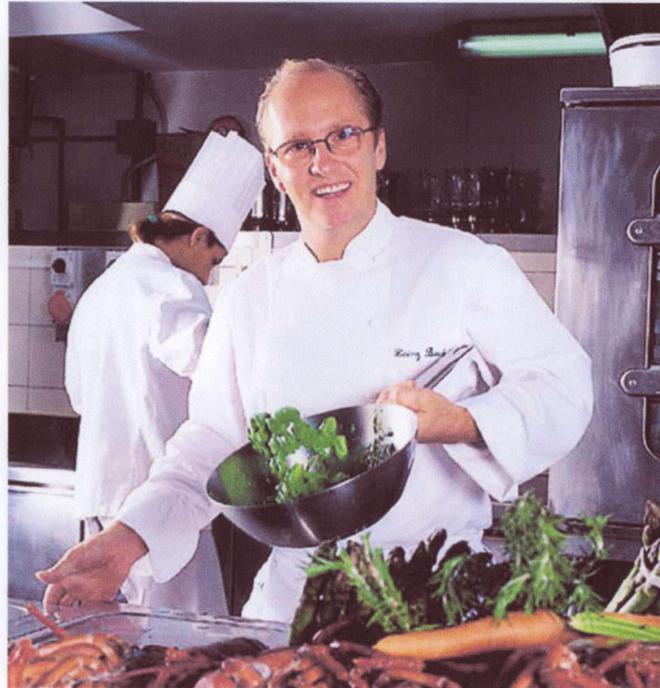
Michelin: 2 stars and five red forks, number 1 restaurant in Rome, among the 20 restaurants in Italy with 2 stars

Gambero Rosso: 93/100 and three forks, no. 1 restaurant in Rome, second-best in Italy

Espresso: 18.5/20 and four toques, no. 1 restaurant in Rome, second-best in Italy

Veronelli: three stars and no. 1 restaurant in Rome. They designate Beck as one of Italy's top five chefs.

Shortly after his first monograph, Beck Heinz, was judged the Best Chef Book in the World for 2002 at the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards (from among 3,500 competing volumes published in 56 countries in 33 languages), the world's most important prize for a cookbook, Lucy Gordan interviewed him for *Epicurean Traveler*.



LG: Our tastes in food are intimately connected to our childhood, can you describe your first memories of food?

HB: At home and at both my grandmothers', we always ate and drank very well. I had a very positive introduction to food. However, this solid foundation is not the end all and the be all. More important is how you build on it, how you develop your taste and your ability to be creative in combining certain flavors.

LG: Any specific foods?

HB: Many, but they are northern European recipes, from a style of cooking that I no longer prepare. For example, elderflower fritters are a typical

Bavarian dish. Or elderberry syrup. In my book, *Beck Heinz* there's a recipe, "mixed berries in elderflower gelatin," which I concocted from a childhood memory. But now I live in Italy. Here at "La Pergola" I can't put Nordic dishes on the menu, because we're in southern Europe with a different climate, different local ingredients and thus a different style of cooking. It's much warmer here than in Germany so our body needs less energy, hence a lighter cuisine. In northern Europe, they need to consume more calories, so the food has to be heavier.

LG: Are you homesick for any particular Bavarian dishes?

HB: Bavarian stuffed peppers, duck and goose.

LG: Your family are jewelers, so how did you come to love cooking?

HB: I didn't want to become a chef. I wanted to become an artist, a painter. My father wouldn't let me. My identical twin wanted to become a chef, so I said: "OK, I will too." My father said: "God forbid, with two chefs in the family, the dinner conversation will only be about cooking."

LG: So it's true that your father flipped a coin and that you became a chef instead of your brother?

HB: That's right. "Tails."

LG: What did your brother do instead?

HB: Hotel Management School and then the Holiday Inn Management Program. He became Manager of a Holiday Inn and eventually the Holiday Inn Food and Beverage Development Manager for Asia, Africa, and Europe. Then he left the hotel business, moved to Dublin, and became the Development Manager for United Distilleries. However, he missed the personal contact he'd had with his "guests," so in 2000 he bought the Holiday Inn Royal Victoria in Sheffield, England.

LG: Getting back to you, do you still like to draw?

HB: No, it was a passing phase, wishful thinking! From the moment I started working I wouldn't have had time anyway. In Germany I always worked six days a week. Ten years ago a six-day work week was normal, but if you work six days in a row, you need to rest the seventh day.

LG: All your training and, before coming to Rome, almost your entire career had been in Germany, and yet as Giacomo Dente says in the introduction of Beck Heinz, Germany..."does not figure in the collective imagination as geographically predestined for gourmandise..." Is that an unfair cliché? Does it annoy you?

HB: No, why should it? It's a waste of time to get angry about narrow-mindedness. As I said before, because of their different climates, northern Europeans have different dietary needs from southern Europeans. If a southern European on vacation in northern Europe complains about the "heavy" food, likewise a northern European on vacation in Italy could complain that the food is too oily. It's a question of tradition, not necessarily quality. It's narrow-minded to say you don't eat well abroad; you eat differently. Differently doesn't mean badly.

LG: What did you learn from your mentor Heinz Winkler?

HB: First and foremost, the business side of running a restaurant. To be a successful restaurateur you have to know how to manage money, not just your kitchen. Winkler taught me how to make a profit. Secondly, he taught me self-discipline and efficiency. Your staff doesn't need to love you; it should respect you. Thirdly: Winkler taught me how to balance flavors.

LG: Other chefs you admire?

HB: I don't have time to eat out. To get a feel for the style and skill of a colleague, to judge, I'd have to go to his or her restaurant at least twice, three or four times in a short span of time. The last time I went to a three-star restaurant, the Enoteca Pinchiorri in Florence, was in December of 2001. Even if Pinchiorri is one of the top five, if not of top three restaurants in Italy, it was my first time there in the nine years I've lived in Italy. For me to be able to

truthfully say: "Oh yes, Pinchiorri is fantastic," I'd have to have closer ties.

LG: The three essential qualities to succeed as a top chef?

HB: It goes without saying that you have to be a good cook. Otherwise, what's the point of running a restaurant? So you need to be creative, but also need to be a leader and a good manager, capable of motivating your staff and managing your accounts.

LG: In 1994, when you came to Rome to open "La Pergola" as Executive Chef, was it your first trip to Italy?

HB: Yes, when I came for my interview.

LG: Had you traveled much as a child?

HB: Never.

LG: How have Italy and Rome influenced your cuisine? What remains the influence of Winkler and Germany?

HB: We inaugurated "La Pergola" on October 10, 1994. My recipes are not German, Italian, or Roman; they are Heinz Beck. You won't find the dishes on my menu anywhere else. All the recipes in my book are new, created specifically for the book. Inventiveness yes, but cooking is not only inventive-ness. Without a doubt, my recipes are northern Mediterranean. I constantly tell myself: "You have to produce for your market." My market is Italian. Seventy to eighty percent of my clients are Italian. My clients have to find their traditions in the flavors on my menu. Therefore to be successful my recipes must have Italian roots. Otherwise my clients won't come back, which is the barometer of how successful a chef you are. If my menu offered only Nordic cuisine, an Italian would come once and never again. As for my non-Italian clients, they don't come to Italy to eat sauerkraut. If I'd gone to New York instead of Rome, I'd have invented another type of menu. If a chef works in a foreign country, first he has to figure out his market. Then he can start to cook. We chefs have to satisfy our clients, not our egos.

LG: Please explain your culinary philosophy.

HB: Lightness and the correct balance between the four principal tastes: salty, sweet, sour, and bitter, in a studied counterpoint which stimulates the palate to new heights of sensation.

LG: You've been the executive chef of "La Pergola" since its inauguration; have you ever thought of opening your own restaurant?

HB: No, because the infrastructure here gives me the peace of mind I need to be creative.

LG: Many world-famous chefs like you abandon the kitchen to become consultants, open cooking schools, or appear on TV. Why haven't you?

HB: In all these years, there's never been an evening when I haven't been here. However, my daily duties permitting — and only I know how many these are — I don't refuse consultancies or TV appearances. I evaluate the offer. It's a question of the fee — but no offer can interfere with my daily duties.

LG: You are one of the few chefs who doesn't cause controversy, that everybody praises. What is the secret of your success?

HB: I can't answer that. They tell me it's my talent and my sincerity. You'll have to ask other chefs, your fellow journalists, and the general public. I don't feel superior to my colleagues, but, since for the past five years "La Pergola" has been fully booked every night, we must offer something extra special.

LG: Last February world-famous French chef, Bernard Loiseau, committed suicide. They said the motive was his despair of recent criticism of his cuisine. Is it that stressful to stay top-ranked?

HB: Yes, because the long hours are grueling, because you're under constant pressure; you always have to create and produce on command, and you cannot make mistakes. If a soccer player scores twice in one game and then for the next five games doesn't score, he's still a genius.

Instead, if a chef concocts a dish unanimously judged as sublime, but the rest of his meal isn't perfect, he's done for. Nobody says: "But I ate that superb whatever." That's the crux of the matter. Everyday you are confronted. You have to be tops even if you have a fever, a headache, have fought with your wife, the management, your *maitres*, your suppliers. Nobody cares if you didn't sleep well, had a car accident. No other profession is so constantly stressful. My clients don't care if my suppliers didn't bring me any fish because of a hurricane. They don't forgive. They don't come back. We three-starred chefs are not gods, but we're not allowed to be common mortals either. The higher your rating, the higher the clients' expectations, the higher your stress.



LG: The support of your wife is crucial, right?

HB: Thanks to my wife, Teresa, I've become a bit more sensible and well-balanced.

LG: How did you meet?

HB: She worked here in the hotel.

LG: Is she a good cook? Her specialties?

HB: Of course. Pasta with sardines. Sicilian dishes. She's from Palermo.

LG: And yours?

HB: That's easy. Just read Beck Heinz. They're all there. My masterpiece is "Fried Zucchini Flowers with Crustacean and Saffron Consommé on pages 64-65. It's photographed on the dust jacket as well.

LG: All joking aside, the introduction to *Beck Heinz* says that in great part you owe your success to discipline, and to your personal selection of your team: How is your team organized?

HB: My team is 99% Italian, only the hostess is Slovak. In the kitchen we number 15.

LG: Do you find its members by word-of-mouth, the way Hans Fritz, former director of the Hilton, found you through Heinz Winkler?

HB: Sometimes. Look at the pile of unopened mail over there on the sofa.

Everyday I receive five or six job applications. I don't believe in internships unless they're paid. Unfortunately, famous chefs often abuse interns as low-cost labor instead of training them. Our future depends on the availability of well-trained professionals. Teaching interns is not only a commitment of time, but of money too. However, we owe a similar commitment to our mentors who gave us our springboards to success.

LG: Your typical day?

HB: I work five days a week, twelve hours a day. I don't have typical days. My job is very complex. It covers many roles besides cooking. Outside the

Hilton: public relations, meetings with clients, suppliers and producers, interviews with journalists...Internally: weekly meetings with the Hilton's management, the food and beverage sector, with purchasing, and with the owners in addition to weekly meetings with "La Pergola" staff to decide on the menus, new equipment, the decor, the flowers etc., and a daily meeting with my kitchen staff. At the end of each month I go over the accounts with management. "La Pergola" is a profit center. For example, my suppliers know that I send back everything that is less than perfect. That's an ultimatum that guarantees top quality. I pay on delivery and working for me is prestigious. Believe me, I'll have no problem in replacing a supplier. He'll have a problem replacing me.

LG: How do you spend your free time? Your hobbies?

HB: Sunday is for total relaxation. Even I need to rest. I like to go to museums and art exhibitions.

LG: Where do you go on vacation?

HB: To hot climates. The tropics. The Caribbean. The Maldives. Mauritius.

LG: Chefs are well-known for having collections of motorcycles, fast and fancy cars, and watches; what do you collect?

HB: Nothing. As you can see, I'm not wearing a watch, and I don't own a car.

LG: Your favorite foods?

HB: Teresa's pasta with sardines or her spaghetti all'amatriciana.

LG: Wines?

HB: Banfi's red wines are top quality. My favorite is Brunello di Montalcino, Poggio alle Mure 1997.

LG: Flowers?

HB: Red roses.

LG: Color?

HB: Green.

LG: Are you a sweet-tooth?

HB: No.

LG: In November 2002 *Beck Heinz* won "Best Design," "Best Chef Book" in Italian, "Best Cook Book in Italian of 2002" in the Gourmand Cook Book

Awards, and in February first-prize as the Best Chef Book of the World in 2002. How can an American buy it?

HB: On my website: www.heinzbeck.com. Click on publications. The Italian publisher, Bibliotheca Culinaria, is looking for an American distributor.

LG: Are you writing a second book?

HB: Yes, on pasta. Bibliotheca Culinaria will publish it in September, 2003.

LG: You write in German of course?

HB: No Italian. Then it's translated into English and German.

LG: I began by asking you about your childhood memories of food. After so many years abroad, what do you miss about Germany?

HB: Snow at Christmas.

