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## LÉA LINSTER:

### THE ONLY WOMAN WINNER OF THE "BOCUSE D'OR"

Interview ©2009 by Lucy Gordan



Léa Linster  
photo by Marc Theis

*A born gourmet, buoyant Léa Linster ([www.lealinster.lu](http://www.lealinster.lu)) put Luxembourgian cuisine on the world map when in 1989 she became the first female prizewinner of the Bocuse d'Or, the highest distinction in the world of cuisine. In 1982, after the death of her father, also a cook from whom she inherited her talent, she took over his place in the kitchen of their family inn in Frisange, ten kilometers outside Luxembourg City, and opened there her first gourmet restaurant, "Léa Linster."*

*In 1987 the Michelin Guide awarded her a star. In 1991 Linster opened a second restaurant, "Lëtzebuurger Kaschthaus" serving Luxembourg specialties, only three kilometers away in Hellange. In 1996 she bought a vineyard in Remich on the Luxembourgian Moselle river and started producing her own wine, Elbling. Since 2001 Linster has written several cookbooks in collaboration with Random*

*House-Germany and the German magazine, Brigitte, where she writes a gastronomical column.*

*During her recent customized press trip to Luxembourg, courtesy of the National Tourist Board, Linster invited our Rome Bureau Chief Lucy Gordan to dinner at elegant "Léa Linster," where this interview took place.*

#### **Our tastes in food are closely connected to our childhood — your first memories of food?**

**LL:** Good food has always been the most important aspect of my life. Through taste and smell I discovered the world perhaps even when I was still in my mother's womb.

I've always had a very well developed sense of taste. Even as a toddler my father loved to make me taste all kinds of food. He waited to see my reaction, not only whether I'd liked or not what he'd cooked, but also whether it had been well-prepared. I recognized first-rate cuisine very young; I've always been a gourmet.

#### **Your mother was a pastry chef and your father a cook?**

**LL:** That's not exactly right. I'm 54 years-old. When I was a child, people did a bit of everything. Where we are now was a café, restaurant, gas station, bowling alley, liquor and tobacco shop, and money exchange. Because we had a gas station we had all kinds of currency. We are so close to the French border that, before the euro, when people wanted to go to France, they bought their French francs here. They didn't have to go to the bank. We also rented rooms to tourists. My friends tease me that I'm a top chef of a drugstore, an old-fashioned general store, not a deluxe restaurant.

From a very young age I could distinguish between Luxembourgian and French cuisine. That's because, when we wanted a French baguette, all we needed to do was to cross the border. For example, camembert is always better in France than here.

Crucial for me was that Luxembourgers love to travel. We love to go by car, of course, to Alsace and to Brittany because of the food there. So when Luxembourgers come back home, their first stop was and still is always here, because we're only 800 meters from the French border. In the past they'd stock up on local beer and cheap gas, and they've always been eager to tell us what they'd eaten on vacation. That's how I learned how important food is for people. When people eat well, they are happy.



Interior of Léa Linster Cuisinière  
photo by Lucy Gordan

#### Who was your mentor?

**LL:** Good food was the most important thing in this house. Always! My father had been a pastry chef as a young man. After the Second World War, he was hired by American army officers to bake and cook for them. He loved that job and he transmitted to us his love for America. All I know about cooking I learned from him. He was absolutely my mentor. Without my father I never would have even thought of becoming a chef. My father was an artist of life, not just of cooking. He loved life and taught us the importance

of living well. I inherited my talent from my father and my tenacity from my mother. She was the realistic side; he was the magical side. Cooking is magic.

**Then it could be said that you were born in the kitchen, that cooking is in your genes. So am I right that it was not a cerebral decision to become a chef; it was following your heart?**

**LL:** Yes, and my palate. I wanted to make sure I would never run out of good food. So I thought to myself, if that's your goal, you'd better learn how to make good food yourself.

The other aspect is that the easiest way to seduce people is to offer them good food. If you cook well for people, they usually like you. If you want to spoil someone, the easiest way to do so is through food.

**What are the essential qualities of being a top chef?**

**LL:** Passion, talent, and hard work.

**You are the second female chef I've interviewed. Why do you think it is so difficult for women to break into this profession and then, more difficult than breaking in, to stay in it?**

**LL:** If you want to have this "ideal" female life, with husband and children, and all the responsibilities of the wonderful institution of marriage and family, well, being a top chef should not be your choice of profession because you have to be at home. You can't have everything. If you are a chef, your guests come first. You have to be at the restaurant for them and at night. However, that's the time when families gather. As I said earlier, I was born in a restaurant so for me



photo by Marc Theis

this was never a problem. I also do not really care so much about “private life,” although I have a son who is brilliant and we love each other very much. Next year he will go to university in Lausanne to study economics and business management. This means that later, he'll be equipped to run this business if he wants, but for now I run it my way. I love to do what I do, the way I love to do it. This restaurant is my dream and I want to live my dream. He should live his dream. If it should turn out that my dream is his dream too, we'll see how we can get along. For now we don't discuss it.

**Does he like to cook too?**

**LL:** Yes, he cooks very well. By age 16 he'd already been trained to take over the business in case something bad happened to me. I'm not married, so we're just the two of us.

**What do you like best about your profession?**

**LL:** Good food and my fantastic way of living. When you are successful in a business like this, you do it with passion, love to improve, and you fulfill your life's dream; that's the best.

In the past I sometimes considered mine a stressful life with too much hard work because, like most chefs, I had to make huge financial investments which strangled me for about twenty years. During those twenty years you can pretend to yourself to be free, feel free, but you really won't be until you've paid off your investments. Now everything here belongs to me. I'm the owner. This is very important to me. This is where I've always lived, but we were four children. I'm the third. You could say I owned one wall. I had to buy the other three. I bought everything from my mother in 1985 at its market value. The only lucky aspect was that I was used to these four walls and understood their potential, that I was investing my money and my life in them. My brother is in the music industry. My older sister is the artist of the black-and-white paintings you see here. They weren't interested in this business. Neither was my younger sister.



Exterior of Léa Linster Cuisinière

photo by Lucy Gordan



Lobster Salad

photo by Lucy Gordan

**The least?**

**LL:** The accounts, and when I have to economize.

**In a nutshell, what is your culinary philosophy?**

**LL:** Quality above all else. To cook light dishes that are easy to digest. To find the best products, which come from many sources, takes a lot of work. Taste has to be clear, fresh, and fruity. When I say fruity, that includes the sauce. You have to taste the sauce's freshness. When you cook a sauce for too long, it becomes

tired. Anything overcooked doesn't give pleasure. I'm against taste enhancers. If I serve

you a lobster salad, I cook it to order. Freshness is also of the upmost importance. I only put things in the refrigerator that have to be served cold. I cook to order and then serve. I love to cook the way mothers do. They have the ingredients; they cook them; and then they eat them. I love to serve soups. On cold days, I serve a hot one; on warm days I serve a cold one. People all over the world love soups.

**Your greatest professional satisfaction?**

**LL:** Winning the Bocuse D'Or in 1989 for my saddle of lamb.

**In 1987 you won your first Michelin star; when did you get your second star?**

**LL:** Next year. I will probably stay a one-star forever because there are people in Luxembourg who do not want me to have a second star. It's a small country and there is a lot of jealousy. I made the best out of all this because, since I wasn't getting my second star and I got bored, I started to write books. I'm on German TV at least once a day, most often on the station ZDF, especially on the programs "Lanz Kocht" or "Küchenschlacht," where I moderate a cooking competition between amateur chefs. For four years I had my own show called "Léa's Kochlust"

on ZDF. At the moment I don't have my own show, but I'm frequently a guest which is good for publicity. In Luxembourg we're only 500,000 inhabitants, but by being on German TV I'm seen by 100 million people in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. If I'd been awarded a second star, I probably wouldn't have done these other fulfilling things. I also have a gastronomical column in the most popular German women's magazine, *Brigitte*.

**Your signature dish and other specialties?**

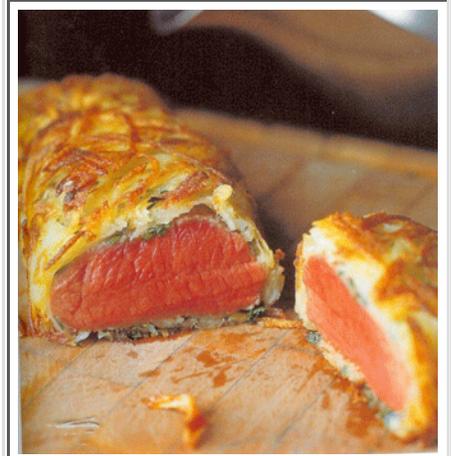
**LL:** "Saddle of *Lamb Bocuse D'Or*" is my signature dish. I love to say: "First I made my lamb and then my lamb made me." Another specialty is my "French-style Boiled Beef."

**How would you describe typical Luxembourg cuisine?**

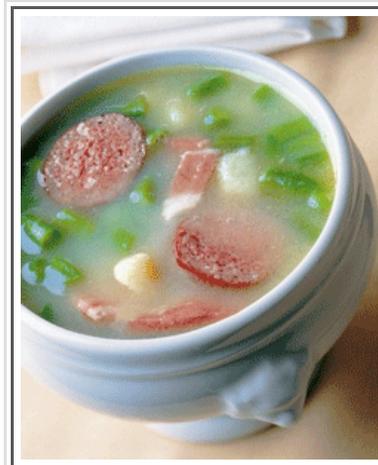
**LL:** It's a harvest, farm food. Local ingredients. What we raise and grow in Luxembourg. What our soil and climate gives us. Seasonal. For example, now it's the beginning of the season for our famous green-bean soup: *bouneschlupp*. I love it. I put sausage in it. If I show you a picture, you will get hungry and want to taste it. I also love cabbage and carrots. I'm a very potato person.

**In a nutshell, how would you define your cuisine?**

**LL:** Cooking with love.



Saddle of Lamb  
photo from *Best of Léa Linster Cuisinière*



Bouneschlupp (green bean soup)  
photo from *Best of Léa Linster Cuisinière*

**What do you believe is the reason for your success?**

**LL:** My love of cooking. I cook with joy. I don't consider cooking work. It's my passion.

I told you before that I did not care so much for private life; that's because I grew up in a café and do not know what private life is, so I don't miss it. I prefer being here talking with you to being at home watching TV with a family. This is the life I've always known. As a child our café was always open, always an open-house. We never took vacations. If we closed for a day, I thought it was the end of the world.

As I told you, I took over the family business in 1982. First I closed the gas station, then the bowling alley, and then the café. I don't miss the café because now my restaurant has become my open-house. The only difference is that now people make reservations; at the café they just showed up.

**Up to now you have told me about Léa Linster the chef, but my readers and I would like to know more about you. For example, what is your favorite food?**

**LL:** My saddle of lamb because it made me famous. I also love dumplings and green-bean soup. Local foods. You will not find anything on my menu or in my book, *Best of Léa Linster Cuisinière* that I do not love. Why not? The answer is simple. I do not cook what I do not love. Here at my restaurant people eat my favorite foods.

Bread is another favorite of mine. I have been working on a recipe for weeks to get it just the way I want it. My grandfather was a baker who made some pastries besides and my father was a pastry chef who made bread besides. Bread is in my genes. In most restaurants they serve you eight different kinds of bread, so how do you know which one is the best? I don't give you any choice. I just give you the best.

Another of my favorite foods is butter. In Luxembourg we have the best butter in the world. Here I really care about butter. We open a new package of 500 grams [about 1 pound] for every table when the guests arrive, because butter absorbs the taste of everything else. If I open the butter and leave it out for half-an-hour, it will have already lost its absolute freshness and ideal temperature.

**Your favorite wine?**

**LL:** My own Riesling called "Elbling" and "Riesling Alice Hartmann."

**Flower?**

**LL:** Chives when they are in flower, and white roses.

**Color?**

**LL:** Apron white and blue.

**A dish you don't like?**

**LL:** All foods when they are of bad quality. I love all foods that are good. I hate everything false. For example, I love butter and I hate margarine.



French-Style Boiled Beef  
photo from *Best of Léa Linster Cuisinière*

**Chefs are well-known for having collections, often of motorcycles, fast cars, or watches; what about you?**

**LL:** Special happy moments. I savor them.

**Have you written a cookbook?**

**LL:** Yes, four. I wrote them in German. Their titles are: *Einfach und genial: Die Rezepte der Spitzenköchin Léa Linster* (2002); *Rundum genial* (2005); *Kochen mit Liebe* (2007), published by the bi-monthly magazine *Brigitte* and Random House-Germany; and the one I gave you, *Best of Léa Linster Cuisinière*(2003) which was also published in French and English and which I co-authored with top-chef Simone Van de Voort. It won the “Best Woman Chef Cookbook in the World” at the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards in 2004 in Barcelona.



Filet of Sole  
stuffed with noodles and crayfish  
photo from *Best of Léa Linster Cuisinière*

**Are you writing one now?**

**LL:** Yes, as I do every year now because I have this cooking column in *Brigitte*, but the new book doesn't have a title yet. I will write it in German. It will be published by Random House-Germany for the German market and will include 20 to 30 new recipes of mine.

**What are your feelings about food critics and restaurant guides? Have they been a help to your career or have they added unnecessary stress?**

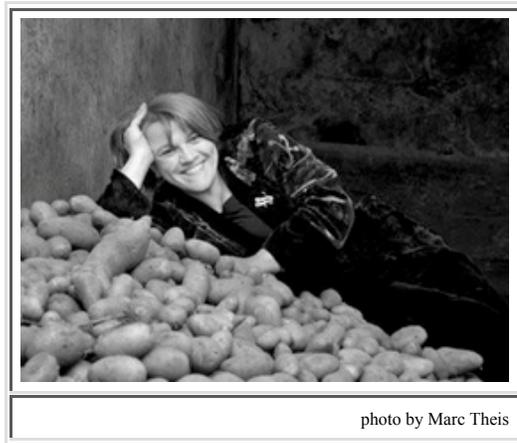
**LL:** I believe in the saying: “If life gives you lemons, make a lemon meringue pie.” When they didn't give me a second Michelin star, I became a philosopher. I opened up other doors and it meant my career as a chef had less stress in the kitchen. If they should take away my one star, they'd have to demote many other chefs too. In the past if a chef went on TV, the guide books became jealous and lowered his or her rating. This happened to a lot of chefs in Germany. The guides justified themselves by saying that if a chef was on TV, he or she was not in the kitchen. This was not true in my case because most of the time I'm right here. Being on TV was excellent publicity for me, just as good as a star. When people who have seen me on TV come here, they want to see me here so that's where I have to be. That can be a stress, but it's worth it because “Léa Linster” is always full. To counter the stress of always having to be here, we close for lunch during the week.

**Besides Bocuse and Giradet, what other chefs do you admire?**

**LL:** Pierre Troisgros and Joël Robouchon. I worked with Robouchon.

**If they hadn't become chefs, Heinz Beck wanted to be a painter; Gualtiero Marchesi a pianist; Thomas Keller the shortstop for the New York Yankees; Vitor Sobral a judge; what about you?**

**LL:** A movie actress. They get more exposure and earn more money.



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Lucy Gordan is an award-winning travel writer and cultural journalist living in Rome, where she is Epicurean-Traveler.com's Bureau Chief. She can be reached at [gordan@attglobal.net](mailto:gordan@attglobal.net). Her website is [www.lucygordan.com](http://www.lucygordan.com). Links to other recent articles by Lucy Gordan:

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