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Emanuele Scarello:

President of Italy's "Jeunes Restaurateurs d'Europe"

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Emanuele and Michela Scarello

Born in Udine on the 11th of July 1970, Emanuele Scarello is the chef/owner of "Agli Amici" in Godia, a charming rustic town, famous for its potatoes, five miles from Udine. "Agli Amici" has had a Michelin star since 2000 and with a rating of 16.5/20 the guide L'Espresso classifies it the best restaurant in Friuli/Venezia Giulia. During a recent press trip to Friuli and the Veneto, organized by Buon Italia for Italy's Ministry of Agriculture, Lucy Gordan, our Rome Bureau Chief, interviewed Scarello, Italy's President of "Jeunes Restaurateurs d'Europe".

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

ES: Rather than to specific events, my first memories of food are connected to this geographic area where I grew up and where I still live. I'll explain more clearly what I mean: I could never write a menu for "Agli Amici" without gnocchi because Godia, this "suburb" of Udine, is a potato town. Here we host a huge Potato, hence Gnocchi, Festival in September. This Potato with a capital P has a flavor that's part of my DNA. It's also the smell of a boiled potato that's just been mashed. That short moment is when you can smell if the potato is of high quality. If we experts even touch a just-boiled potato, we can tell immediately if it has enough starch to make a good *gnocco*. These are the sensations I grew up with and which my mother has passed on to me.

How can you know whether a just-boiled potato is good or not?

ES: OK, when a potato is harvested at the end of August or the beginning of September, the farmer has to leave it outside in the open air for a while so that it loses some of its water content. A just-

harvested potato contains lots and lots of water, so it's not sticky to the touch. If you were to boil this same potato during the month of January, after storing it for several months in a dark place, when you go to touch it after boiling and mashing it, your fingers will stick together. That's because during storage time it will have lost much of its water content and so will have a much higher concentration of starch. Therefore to make gnocchi in the winter you need to add very little flour, only a sprinkle. We plant "Kennebuk" potatoes. No time of year is better than another for making potato gnocchi because the potato is a living vegetable. In August we make gnocchi one way; in January in another.

In the past, seasons had much more meaning, were much more weather-dependent. This was not a mistake. To give you a better idea of what I'm driving at, if I complained to a farmer: "Last summer was a cold summer," he'd answer me, "But of course, the moon was a month behind, we've had one less full moon, so we're a month behind when it comes to seasons." They knew what they were talking about.



Your family has been the proprietors of "Agli Amici" since 1887 or for five generations, so one could say that you "were-to-the-kitchen-born," that, like Léa Linster, the top chef from Luxembourg, becoming a chef was in your DNA, or was there another reason for choosing this profession?

ES: When we were younger, our mother and father told both Michela, who's the sommelier and in-charge of the dining room, and me to study. In fact, Michela has a university degree in modern

languages. But it came naturally to us to collaborate in the family business of so many generations. We didn't do so because our parents forced us to. On the contrary they tried to discourage us by saying: "This profession requires enormous personal sacrifice. Think hard before committing yourselves." As far as I'm concerned it's too special a profession to turn it down. I consider myself lucky, very lucky, because I love my profession. It allows me to be creative and to work with my team, all of whom are first-rate. I wouldn't change my profession, and I'm speaking from the bottom of my heart, for all the money in the world. I wouldn't stop even if I won the lottery because I'd get bored. It's true that Michela and I live our profession from a privileged position: we love our work; we have regular guests who appreciate our talents; and especially because we live here in Godia where we've always lived. What more could we ask!

But isn't it a disadvantage to own a restaurant in a small village like Godia rather than in a big city?

ES: Our location has its pros and cons. Yes, people must come here on purpose, but, since they do so, they're in the mood to appreciate our cuisine. Here the pace of life is still on a human level. In the afternoon I have time to play with my son and to chat with the farmer who sells me my potatoes. These are priceless moments. When I serve you a piece of meat, not only do I know the butcher, but I also know where the calf grew up and what it ate. This wouldn't be possible in a metropolis, where life is at high speed.

A brief history of "Agli Amici" ("At My Friends")?

ES: In the beginning it was kind of local pub or tavern. On Sundays my ancestors organized the wedding or baptismal feast of someone from Godia. Before that, at its very start, in 1887 my great-great grandparents had a kind of emporium where they sold candies. Their home is still here around the corner. On its façade is written: "Generi Coloniali Alimentari", a kind of general store. Its first owner was named Umberto. He was my father's great-grandfather. He'd been a body-guard to the King of Italy. When he retired, he took out a license for the store. Slowly but surely it became the local hangout. It had the first television of the area. Men gathered here to watch Primo Carnera's boxing matches. He was from Friuli. Then from catering weddings, little

by little, “Agli Amici” started serving food until Mamma and Papà made it what it is today. Mamma began traveling around and working in the kitchens of important restaurants all over Italy and in France. Papà started giving courses for sommeliers. Then I did and so did Michela. “Agli Amici”’s success wasn’t sudden, a surprise, “Bang”; definitely not. It started slowly; we grew one step at a time. In the beginning Mamma and Papà organized wedding banquets on Saturdays and Sundays for 500 people at a time. Then they asked themselves: “What satisfaction do we get from providing this time of cuisine?” The only answer: “Money, yes, but joy and creativity, no.” So they decided to change directions and Mamma began her travels. Her most prestigious experience was at “Le Notre” in Paris. Their new start was arduous. We lost a lot of local clients who still wanted the cuisine they were used to, but Mamma and Papà struggled on. Sometimes they had only one or two guests; sometimes nobody came. This was the price they had to pay to become the pioneers of top cuisine in this region of Italy.

How did it get its name?

ES: The answer’s obvious. It was the local hangout. It’s only been officially named “Agli Amici” since 1962. Before that it didn’t have a sign. It was known as “Paluzzan”, my grandfather’s nickname.

A brief summary of your career so far? Have you always worked here or did you do internships in other restaurants like your mother?

ES: After I graduated from the hotel management school in Arta Terme, a town in the province of Udine, I worked here in the dining room and then a year at the restaurant “Boschetti” in Tricesimo when it had two Michelin stars. I also completed the three-year course for sommeliers here in Udine. Then I went first to Vienna briefly to learn their bourgeois cuisine, next to Paris, and lastly to various restaurants around Spain.

I think it’s necessary, fundamental to have a 360° background in restaurant management. It’s like having a degree in general medicine and then a specialization. I can’t create a new dish for my guests unless I know their aspirations. That’s why I first worked in the dining room, and then became a sommelier, before moving into the kitchen. The kitchen and the dining room have to work on the same wave-length. They must be in symbiosis. They have to work together to create the right meal for each guest.



Where did you work in Vienna, Paris and Spain?

ES: I could grind out a list of all their names, but I don’t like to talk about myself. It’s as if I had to promote and be proud of my cuisine only because of where I’ve worked in the past. That’s ridiculous. My cuisine shows my and only my and my team’s creativity. My imagination has to be free and cannot be conditioned by the past. Perhaps that makes me atypical. But workplaces have walls, which don’t speak, which don’t have a heart or

feelings, and don’t have imagination or brains. It’s the people who helped me to grow professionally who matter. One of these special people was Giorgio Trentin, who sadly is no longer alive. He was the owner of “Boschetti”. Giorgio had a strong sense of hospitality. He had enormous class. He knew how to make his guests feel welcome and at home, a talent that is vital in our restaurateur world. Making people feel welcome and relaxed is more important than being able to cook a good dish.

Your mother Yvonne is also your mentor; what did you learn from her?

ES: My mother comes from Dolegna, a little town nearby. Her surname is Bodigoi; Bodigoi is a *bijou* cru from the Collio region of Friuli so it was inevitable that she’d go into this line of work. I learned to cook and to love cooking from her.

How has “Agli Amici” changed since you took over the kitchen from your mother? Was it difficult for your mother to let go?

ES: No, certainly not. She’s still very much involved. I ask her advice all the time. She works here in the kitchen every day. We started out three in the kitchen: my mother, me, and a young helper; now we’re eight including my mother, plus four in the dining room, a business administrator or accountant, and a PR or press agent.



What are the essential qualities for being a top chef?

ES: I’m not a top chef because I don’t feel like a top chef. I feel like a passionate chef. I’m passionate about my profession. I have a strong will and desire, enormous energy, and a superb team. Most important is respect for all: for the freshest and best available products, for co-workers, for the workplace, and its surroundings. As I said before, I cannot not include a potato dish on my menu. It would be disrespectful of my surroundings. I have to show respect for everyone who has made it possible for me to

have a restaurant of such high quality. Unfortunately, respect is a sentiment that’s getting rarer and rarer.

Therefore the most important quality for being a top chef is respect. Second a top chef must be modest and not pompous. Thirdly, if he is the owner as well, it means welcoming guests and making sure they eat an exceptionally delicious meal in a warm, hospitable atmosphere with no stress.

So what more do you need to accomplish to become a top chef?

ES: Nothing really because it’s the results, not chatter and hot air, that count.



What does it mean to be Italy’s President of “Jeunes Restaurateurs d’Europe”?

ES: To have a mission, to act as a guide, wise counsel for the group’s annual activities. My mission is promoting cuisine as a branch of culture and to encourage young people to become chefs. This year Italy’s “Jeunes Restaurateurs d’Europe” financed a kind of scholarship for a young Italian chef: the opportunity to work in the kitchens of several members for a year and we are all paying his salary and his expenses.

What do you like best about your profession?

ES: The teamwork. That I work with a wonderful team and that we prepare unique dishes, that reflect our talent. The results are what counts, not hearsay.

The least?

ES: I enjoy every aspect.

Is your team at “Agli Amici” 100% Italian?

ES: No. Two Japanese have worked with us, with me, for many years now. One, whose name is Tatsuya, is our pastry chef. In 2009 the *L’Espresso* guide voted him “The Best Pastry Chef in Italy”.

In a nutshell, what is your culinary philosophy? Is it still “Cook for others as you would like others to cook for you”?

ES: Yes. That’s my basic work ethic. I cook for my guests the same way that I cook for my son. Today it’s important to decrease the number of ingredients in a dish, not to add them. I never put more than three ingredients in my dishes. With these three ingredients we have to know how to

transmit emotion, pleasure to our guests.

How would you define your cuisine?

ES: Essential, contemporary, tasty, and well-balanced.

What are your signature dishes?

ES: Soup of soft-shelled crabs with grilled gnocchi and blanched beet greens.

What do you believe is the reason for your success?

ES: Teamwork and my collaboration with all the people who have helped me to achieve this level of satisfaction —my family, my wonderful team, and my regular guests. If my team and I propose an excellent dish, our guests eat well and come back regularly.

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

ES: Professionally-speaking, the dish I'll invent tomorrow. This allows me to dream, to fantasize. It confirms to me that top-quality cuisine is alive and always in motion. What I like best about this state-of-mind is that to invent tomorrow's dish I have to call to mind all the dishes my grandmother cooked for my grandfather. That's my daily takeoff point for arriving at tomorrow.

The dish that I most enjoy eating is duck braised on a "Spolert" or old-fashioned Friulian wood-burning stove very very slowly in a stone pot and put on a bed of polenta which has been cooked in a cast iron pot. I love polenta because it's a traditional farmer's dish. In spring I love local asparagus and the wild herbs from around here. These are the flavors in my DNA. In winter they're barley and warm fagioli with a thread of olive oil and pan-browned pork innards.

Your favorite wine?

ES: Wines from Friuli. The Zamò brothers are marvelous people and so are their wines: "Le Vigne di Zamò" from Rosazzo. I also like Ornella Venica's and Felluga's wines. Livio Felluga and his wines are like my mother's and my cuisine: ahead of their times, avant-garde.



Flower?

ES: The flowers my mother, wife and sister plant in my garden: roses, tulips, all bulb flowers really, narcissus, crocus, and lilies.

Color?

ES: Red because it's the color of passion; white because it's all colors combined, and blue because it's open like the sky.

A dish you don't like?

ES: Land snails. I'd never put them on my menu.

Chefs are well-known for having collections, often of motorcycles, fast cars,

or watches; what about you?

ES: Watches.

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



ES: Guides are extremely helpful. I believe in the professionalism of who researches and collates them. When you decide to become a chef, you have already decided to submit yourself to the judgments of food critics. Of course, at the start of my career, I suffered from “guide stress”. I was anxious and stressed-out just before the guides’ annual publication dates. That’s no longer true. We’ve had a Michelin star for ten consecutive years and we’re considered the best restaurant in Friuli and have been for a long time. So our feeling about guides has changed. I have to cook to the best of my ability not for the guides and their food critics, but for my guests. OK? I don’t need guides, my guests do. We chefs shouldn’t think; “I have to open a restaurant to get toques, forks, or stars”. Certainly not. It’s who sits at my table who permits me to reach those heights, not vice versa.

Other chefs you admire?

ES: Without a doubt Marchesi because he changed how Italian cuisine was perceived. I’m thinking about his “ravioli aperto” (open ravioli) rather than his saffron rice. He led the way, put Italian cuisine on the world map and I mean top Italian cuisine. Don Alfonso Iaccarino was also ahead of the times, avant-garde. He was the first to produce his own products, the ones he also used in his kitchen:



his own tomatoes, herbs, peaches etc., not to mention his hospitality too. I also admire Aimo Moroni, Massimo Bottura, and Thomas Keller for his rationality and organization, Ferran Adria for his imagination and uniqueness, and René Redzepi, the owner/chef of “Noma” in Copenhagen for his attachment to Denmark and its local produce.

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; Vítor Sobral a judge; and Léa Linster an actress; what about you?

ES: The Center Forward of leading soccer team in the top-league (*serie A*).

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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. Her website is www.lucygordan.com. Links to other recent articles by Lucy Gordan:

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