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PIETRO LEEMANN: Italy's Only Vegetarian Chef Starred in Michelin

interview by Lucy Gordan



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Pietro Leemann was born in Lucerne, Switzerland, during the summer of 1961. At the beginning of the 1980s, at the height of the nouvelle cuisine rage, he began his career as a chef studying with Angelo Conti Rossini, Fredy Giradet, and Gualtiero Marchesi. Then he spent two years in the Orient: one in Shanghai and the other in Osaka where he taught at the prestigious Tsuiji Cooking School. In 1989 he opened his own restaurant "Joia" in Milan--the first vegetarian restaurant in Europe to receive a Michelin star in 1996--thereby creating a new style of "natural cuisine."

After a very brief meeting in February at Rimini at MIA (Mostra alimentare italiana/Fair of Italian Food Products) during the 7th Festival della cucina italiana: pomodoro rosso (the 7th Festival of Italian Cuisine which this year featured the red tomato), where Leemann presented his dish, "Alternative Gazpacho," Lucy Gordan (www.lucygordan.com) went to Milan, to "Joia" (Via Panfilo Castaldi 18, tel. 011-39-02-2049244, closed Saturday and Sunday lunchtime) for *Epicurean Traveler*.

LG: Our tastes in food are closely connected to our childhood; your first memories of food?
PL: Eating freshly-picked vegetables, especially tomatoes and carrots, from our garden.

LG: How did you come to love cooking?

PL: When I was about 15 years old, a close friend of my parents, Angelo Conti Rossini, came to dinner. He was the most famous chef in the Ticino, the Italian Canton of Switzerland. As a gift he brought a vanilla bavarese — a charlotte royale. It was so sublime that I was electrified, as if struck by lightning. At that very moment I decided to become a chef. I still propose this dessert on "Joia"'s menu. It's an important icon for me.

LG: Other chefs in your family?

PL: My maternal grandmother "Nonna Ermina" had been a professional cook, but she never owned her own restaurant. In my mother's family several relatives worked in the food sector.

LG: Who was your mentor and what did you learn from him?

PL: First Angelo Conti Rossini and later Fredy Giradet and Gualtiero Marchesi. From Angelo Conti Rossini I learned that you have to rise through the ranks and first learn with humility how to wash pots and scrub the kitchen floor before moving to the stove. He owned a restaurant called "Il Giardino" a Brissago on Lago Maggiore. I worked with him there, but more importantly he was the person who opened doors for me by sending me to work in several extremely prestigious, multi-

starred restaurants. For chefs, training in top restaurants is vital. If you are not introduced, it's very difficult to get that initial break. Thanks to Conti Rossini I joined Fredy Giradet's team at "Crissier," in Switzerland. In those days Giradet with Bocuse was the mastermind of nouvelle cuisine. Even if Giradet followed his instinct, he drilled into me the strict self-discipline necessary to becoming a top chef and taught me never to compromise about the quality of my ingredients.



Leemann being interviewed by Bruno Gambacorta, the producer of RAI 2's program: "Eat Parade" photo by Lucy Gordan

LG: What did you learn from Gualtiero Marchesi? How would you describe him?

PL: When I came to Italy to work with Gualtiero Marchesi, I already knew how to cook, but I didn't know how to "invent" a dish or how to present it. Marchesi taught me how to create a dish from scratch: not just how to cook it, but what ingredients to use, how to combine them, the taste, and the layout of my dish on the plate. Marchesi is The Intellectual of the highest quality cuisine. Still today he takes a traditional Italian dish, reinterprets it, modernizes it, and makes it his.

LG: Why did you go to the Orient?

PL: From 1976 to 1988, the year before I opened "Joa," I dedicated all my time to learning. I worked all over Europe in restaurants which served the highest quality of traditional Italian and French cuisine as well as nouvelle cuisine — the rage at the time. After a few years, however, I realized that the European culinary world was limiting. The only way I could learn more was by exploring another completely different reality, way of life, so I decided to leave for the Far East.

LG: How did this experience influence your cuisine?

PL: When people say that the Far East is another world, they're telling the truth. The Orientals' relationship to food is completely different from ours in the West. For example, for both the Chinese and the Japanese the consistency of food is more important than its taste. For them tastes are similar and blend together. Instead a meal is a tongue-twister; this sequence of different consistencies in the mouth exalts them.

Another very important aspect of my two years in the Far East was learning to cook ingredients and dishes I'd never been exposed to before and learning about oriental religions and ways of thinking. I discovered that meat was no longer a part of my world, that I not only did not want to eat it, but not even cook it. So when I came back to Europe, I invented a cuisine without meat.

LG: Do you prefer Japanese cuisine to Chinese cuisine like Marchesi?

PL: They are very different — one from the other. Japanese cuisine is basic and straightforward. Instead, Chinese cuisine is very elaborate, more complex. Chinese cuisine can be extraordinarily refined. In all fairness, I must say, however, that when I lived in the Orient, the level of cuisine in Japan was much higher than in China because China was still governed by the Communist regime, so its cuisine was still under-developed. Instead, now it's undergoing an extraordinary boom; there are restaurants in Shanghai to-die-for. The Chinese have reached the same high quality as the Japanese in their top restaurants.



LG: Why the vegetarian route?

PL: Meat no longer fits into my way of life. When I cook, it's my intent to prepare food that respects nature. This translates into not killing animals. The act of killing upsets me. I'm not being judgmental because I admit that others can kill animals. However, as far as I'm concerned, if someone eats meat, he or she has to admit responsibility for the death of the animal he or she is eating. He or she is a hypocrite, if not. Since I don't feel like taking on that responsibility, it's only fair that I don't eat or cook meat.

LG: So why do you cook fish?

PL: There are various levels of vegetarianism. There are vegetarians who continue to eat fish, but then stop and eat only vegetables, eggs and milk-products. Then some stop eating eggs and milk-products and eat only vegetables and cereals. To keep open a dialog with a larger public and not be too rigid, I cook fish. I'm not here to preach, but to cook, to give others pleasure. Cooking obviously gives me pleasure too, but, above all, my cooking has to give pleasure to my guests. I don't want to obligate my guests to eat only vegetarian, so I give them an alternative choice — fish. Fish keeps open my dialog with my clients.



JOIA dining room

photo by Lucy Gordan

LG: In 1996 you were the first vegetarian chef in Europe to be awarded a Michelin star, which you've maintained ever since. Are there other vegetarian restaurants on a par with you in Italy or abroad?

PL: No, Alain Passard, a restaurateur in Paris with three Michelin stars, stopped cooking meat as an experiment for around two years, between 2004 and 2006. You have to admit that there is a general and growing tendency to eat less meat.

LG: So vegetarian cuisine is not a passing fashion, rage? Is it getting popular because it's healthy?

PL: No, its increasing popularity is neither a passing fashion, nor a question of healthiness. Our bodies simply don't need to absorb as much meat as in the past. Because of our sedentary lifestyle we don't have to, or we shouldn't, eat such a rich diet. That explains why many of my colleagues are adding

vegetarian dishes to their menus. Certainly there's a general move towards "healthy," if you want to call it that, but it really only reflects our dietary needs. People today certainly take better physical and mental care of themselves than their ancestors did.

LG: Where do you shop?

PL: I have various suppliers because I use only biological products [i.e. organic - editor]. For example, my mushrooms come from Liguria, my cheese from Piemonte, my vegetables from Emilia-Romagna. The markets in Milan offer very few biological products, so I don't buy much here. Anyway I like to develop personal relationships, not only with my guests, but also with the farmers who produce what I cook.

LG: Why did you name this restaurant "Joia"?

PL: "Joia" is a made-up word. It's a compromise between joy in English and gioia in Italian. Eating has to be a joy wherever you find yourself.

LG: What are the essential qualities of a top chef?

PL: To be uncompromising about the quality of your ingredients and strict about how you transform them. Those are two fundamental and inter-connected aspects. You must buy the best ingredients and always transform them in the same perfect manner.

As a third essential quality I'd add that your cuisine must mirror you. Thus when I eat a dish prepared by a great chef, I must be able to realize immediately that he or she prepared it. The dish must have the chef's name on it — like an artist's signature. It's fundamental. There must be a symbiosis between a top chef and his creations, works-of-art. Through the chef's creativity the food must clearly reflect the chef's character so that his creation can only be his or hers and no one else's.

Often we eat dishes that are good, but they don't reflect the chef. They could have been cooked in China, or France, or Spain. Instead it's special when the cuisine is personal, unique.

A fourth essential quality is that a top chef's cuisine must fit into the present cultural and historical context. For example, at this moment in time there's a magical exchange between different gastronomical cultures. Therefore my menu at "Joia" offers a summary of my research on where the ingredients of Mediterranean cuisine meet and combine with other gastronomical cultures.



Pietro Leeman and Lucy Gordan

LG: Did you ever think of hosting a blind tasting to see if you could recognize, say, your own dish, one of Heinz Beck, of Bocuse, of Marchesi etc.?

PL: I'd have each invited chef invent a new dish and then have everyone try to guess which dish belongs to which chef and why.

LG: What do you like best about your work?

PL: Communicating with my client through my food. Food is an important communicator. It's like communion in church. Food must unite people. I'm the liaison, the middleman. Food is not just a means of nutrition or of suppressing hunger. It's a means of enjoying our time together. At the most important occasions in our lives, we are seated at table for a meal. So food is also something sacred.

LG: The least?

PL: Spending too little time with my family.

LG: Your culinary philosophy?

PL: Nature is always the protagonist of my dishes. My each and every dish intends to glorify nature. I respect nature and love to live surrounded by its fruits. That's why I don't eat or cook meat. Killing an animal is a violation of nature. I enjoy having an intimate and respectful relationship with nature. The world is moving in that direction. If during the last two centuries, we controlled and exploited nature, today there's a trend towards appreciating it.

LG: In a nutshell, how would you define your cuisine?

PL: "Western Zen." Every cuisine gives a different pecking order to the five senses. In Japan it's sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing. In the West it's taste, smell, sight, touch and hearing. In China smell, touch, taste, sight, and hearing. Our enjoyment of food brings us inner peace.

LG: Your specialties?

PL: Through their symbolic names my dishes inspire, express an emotion: "Travel Notes," "Food for the Spirit," "Virtue," "Under a Blanket of Colored Leaves," "First to the Right and Then to the Left," "Happiness," and "Contact and Consent." Each and every dish corresponds to the idea I want to communicate to my guest.

LG: How often do you change the names of your dishes?

PL: Many are symbols that repeat themselves, that return. Since my cuisine is tied to the present, the present changes and consequentially so does my cuisine. However, I propose some dishes (for example, "Colors, Tastes, and Consistencies") with such important symbolism that they've been on my menu since 1990 with the same ingredients. In any case, my ingredients change with each season, even if the dish keeps its name and symbol. My menu also includes tastings called "Zenith," "The Importance of Nature," "Discovery," and the fish-based "Taste of Water." Not to mention my wine list with 800 different labels.

LG: The reason for your success?

PL: The originality of my menu because my proposals are authentic. Cooking is hands-on, a reality, it's not abstract.

LG: Up to now you've told me about Pietro Leemann the chef; I'd like to know more about Pietro Leemann himself. For example, what are your favorite foods?

PL: I'm a sweet-tooth. My favorite sweet is lemon pie. As for salty dishes: fried vegetables.

LG: Favorite wines?

PL: "Josko Grauner" a natural white from Friuli, and, "Massavecchi," a natural Tuscan red.

LG: Flower?

PL: Shocking-pink roses.

LG: Color?

PL: Blue.

LG: Since you are a vegetarian, what are your favorite fruits and vegetables?

PL: Asparagus, artichokes, eggplants, berries freshly-picked in the woods: wild blueberries, raspberries, and exotic tropical fruits.

LG: A dish you dislike?

PL: Cooked beets and borscht.

LG: Chefs are well-known for having collections, often of motorcycles, fast cars, or watches; you?

PL: A small collection of Japanese teacups. I drink lots of tea. At my home in Giumaglio, in the Ticino near Lago Maggiore, I've planted some tea in my garden. I drink the tea I produce.

LG: Last year you published a book entitled *Il piacere della tavola nella cucina antica e oggi: Yuan Mei, La cucina di Villa Suiyuan* (The pleasure of the table in the cuisine of the past and today: Yuan Mei and the Cuisine of Villa Suiyuan, sadly not translated into English. Are you a history buff?

PL: I'm a culture vulture who loves to travel. There are lots of ways to travel: reading, going to the movies, trying an unfamiliar cuisine, talking to someone of a different culture. Traveling allows me to discover other realities which in turn help me to understand who I am. *Il piacere della tavola nella cucina antica e oggi* is a travel book. It's about my experiences in China, a research project to help me understand a culture different from my own. It's also a comparison between Chinese and Western cooking.

LG: Other titles by you?

PL: *Gioia*, a book of my recipes, is for sale on my website: www.ioia.it.

LG: Are you writing a book now?

PL: Yes, I'm keeping a diary of what I cook for my own enjoyment and for my friends. The working title is "Diary of a Chef." It will be published by Ponte in October.

LG: Your feelings about food critics and restaurant guides?

PL: When you are starting out, a good rating in a guide makes all the difference in getting known. However, the majority of my guests don't return because of guides' ratings, but because they continue to enjoy "Joia."

Without a doubt, a Michelin star is a seal of approval. Michelin guides are used by foreigners, not by Italians who trust Espresso and Gambero Rosso. Personally I'd pay more attention to the rating of a guide written by the diners like the Zagat's. Diners choose a restaurant out of personal taste and to have a good time, with different parameters from anonymous inspectors who have to come for work. In any case a client comes more often...

LG: Other chefs you admire?

PL: Pierre Gagnaire, Michel Bras, both from France; Martin Berasategui from Spain; Enrico Crippa, chef of "Il Duomo" in Alba, and Massimiliano Alajmo, the owner/chef of "Le Calandre" near Padua.

LG: If they hadn't become chefs, Heinz Beck wanted to be a painter, Marchesi a pianist; Cesare Casella said cooking is in his DNA. What about you?

PL: Architect. If you like, I'm an architect of top-quality cuisine.