

GIANFRANCO VISSANI: ITALY'S OUTSPOKEN BOCUSE

By Lucy Gordan

It's impossible to feel lukewarm about controversial and overly-candid, bear-like Umbrian wizard-chef Gianfranco Vissani, star of a weekday-cooking program on RAI, Italy's national television, and owner of his namesake

very-pricey restaurant, located in an old, recently renovated and over-decorated, farmhouse, about a two-hour drive north of Rome, on the shores of the man-made Lake Corbara, below the tiny hill-town of Baschi (150 inhabitants), not far from Todi and Orvieto.

Deemed "inexcusably self-indulgent and a major affront to good taste and judgement" by food-writer Patricia Wells, Vissani, pet chef of Italy's intelligentsia and of a former left-wing Prime Minister, was voted Italy's one and only top chef in L'Espresso's guide, I Ristoranti d'Italia 2003, with a 19/20, on October 18. His tongue being as unpre-

dictable as his ever-changing, almost-never-repeated dishes, which include roast salad of roe with tomato, blueberry lasagna and foie gras in sauce, and

salad of sea urchins, that same day he created a stir by announcing that Italy's new law prohibiting smoking in restaurants was too strict, even though Vissani was among Italy's first no-smoking restaurants.

Here Lucy Gordan interviewed him for *Epicurean Traveler*. On her lunch menu:

Fresh-water Shrimp in Artichoke Gelatine with Pecorino & Marjoram Sauce

Oak-Smoked Salmon Trout in Rocket And Anchovy Flan with a Salmi Sauce

Spelt Soup with a Filet of Turbot in Mint-Flavored Tomato Jam and a Julienne of Fried Zucchini

Acorn-Flour Ravioli in Hare Sauce

Mannicati Filled with Salted Ricotta

Rack Of Hare in Pumpkin-Scented Lobster Sauce

Dried-Apricot Pie in a Walnut Soup Topped with White Chocolate Curls

Accompanying wines:

Lungarotti 1997 Brut

Aurente Lungarotti 2000

Cardeto 2000 Nero della Greca

Cardeto 2001 L'Armida



LG — What's your favorite dish?

GV — I eat everything. Everything but *sanguinaccio* — blood sausage which I don't like. I have a weak spot for peasant dishes like *spaghetti all'amatriciana* with bacon, Umbrian pecorino cheese cake at Easter, and bread. Bread, baked in wood-burning ovens, is to die for. Bread is inseparable from its surrounding culture.

LG — Although you openly admit — even on TV — to not being a wine expert, what's your favorite wine?

GV — Il Sagrantino di Marco Capra — probably one of the world's greatest wines! Caprai's 25-year-old DOCG Sagrantino di Montefalco outruns all competitors.

LG — Are you a sweet-tooth?

GV — I love "roccciata" — a kind of Umbrian strudel — and "la crostina croccante" — a crunchy pie.

LG — Who taught you to cook?

GV — My father because he loved to cook. My mother cooks because it's her job. She's an expert. Oh her omelettes — especially her onion omelettes! Made-to-order. Sizzling-hot!. Tell me, what's more delicious than fresh country eggs? Omelettes with asparagus, ...with zucchini.... Fresh ingredients make all the difference. Cooking is a family vocation. My mother and my wife run the kitchen and my sister Paola is our pastry chef. My son Luca is following in the family footsteps.

LG — What do you like best about being in the restaurant business?

GV — Everything, cooking, waiting on tables, shopping. Especially the creativity. Gauguin, De Chirico, Van Gogh, Monet, Rembrandt. Like them, we chefs are promoters, artists, inventors. I don't follow recipes. I go by instinct. I'm a sky-walker! I predict the future. This restaurant is my life.

LG — You're on TV and travel everywhere on consultancies and to give

cooking seminars; why have you stayed in Baschi?

GV — Because I AM Baschi. It's where I was born and belong. Because I love my father, my mother. I owe a lot to Umbria. This restaurant was my father's dream and I always wanted to please him, even if we could have made a bigger splash and earned more money in a big city. But I'm content here.

LG — A few years ago you wrote a beautiful guide to Italian regional cuisine published by the newspaper, "La Repubblica", where for the past nine years you've written a column?

GV — Yes, up to then that was my best "work of art". Italian cuisine is much simpler than French. The recipes are not complicated. Unfortunately, the younger generation does not know how to cook because they've all studied and studied, graduated from university, even knowing that in the end they'd be unemployed. The downfall of Italy is the loss of regional traditions including cooking because after the war everybody moved to the big cities.

LG — You have a new book coming out?

GV — Yes, *Il Vissani, Il Vissani Uno*. Over 500 pages, it's organized with 400 recipes for 100 different meals. Published by RAI/ERI and beautifully photographed, it will be in bookstores at the end of November. The price is 42 euros.

LG — Is Italian cuisine the best in the world?

GV — Italian cuisine has superb ingredients and taste. Down with fancy techniques. I go for simple recipes as long as they're appealing to the eyes and to the tastebuds.

