

If you are cooking on a TV-show wearing a mysterious gaze or a charming grin, and you are trying to induce people to think that a palette knife at home is a through-and-through necessity, and that the good pasta - *bronze-drawn, Madam: please!* - is made in *Gragnano*, then you are probably a star-chef. One of those whose slick face is ever-present at jet-set events, or on top the supermarkets shelves, close to the corned beef tin. If you are cooking at you family's restaurant, choosing ingredients carefully, studying your recipes and proposing them with talent and uniqueness, and transmitting the thoughts behind your creations, then you are only a starred-chef. Although the difference between "starred" and "star" chef may be merely orthographic, actually it is deeply ontological. Massimiliano Alajmo, three Michelin stars, Sicilian origins, Paduan identity and international fame, perfectly knows the difference. Distant from the

spotlight, he does not love the show cooking. He writes books where cooking is the pretext to talk about life, experiences, worldviews. Alajmo is an anti-celebrity chef. Rather, he is a philosopher-chef, as others depict him. Alajmo has his own-way to approach cooking: a maieutic and research-based personal journey, where the game of elementary sums magically matches with the raw materials complex alchemy. In this case, what is essential is clearly visible to the eye. And titivating the palate, seduces the heart. Cooking is research, says Alajmo. But it is also innocence, since the approach to authentic creativity needs of purity, otherwise it is not creativity. And then, obviously, cooking relates to raw materials; the best ones, which formulate the artist's thought. Being deeply rooted in the territory is surely a virtue. However, seasonal produce and zero miles are hardly signposts to great cooking. Art has no

boundaries and creation no limits. Being trapped in a slow food mantra can be short-sighted. Unless you would ask the Paduan chef to concoct a duck in a *Comacchio* orange sauce! Then, knowledge and culture are also required, since cooking is the result of a community's traditions; it safeguards them and represents the first laboratory for new ideas. Especially in Italy, a land with an immense wine and culinary heritage, where the ritual of cooking and eating has its own, relevant and well-defined identity. Here, education to taste should be a moral imperative, a kind of second compulsory literacy. Massimiliano Alajmo, *ça va sans dire*, has even a recipe for this: after all he is a starred chef, not a star!

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ALAJMO

WHAT DO EMOTIONS TASTE LIKE?

“*I believe that there are certain basic elements to cooking. First and foremost, sharing. And then, innocence.*”

Telos: You are a writer-chef, no doubt about it: your two books (*In.gradienti* and *Fluidità*) are tangible proof. Instead insiders often use the expression philosopher-chef to describe you. What exactly does it mean?

Massimiliano Alajmo: To be honest, I don't know. You need to ask them! It's true I have my own personal idea about cooking. If that's the way people see me, then yes: it's a philosophy, it's my way of expressing and conveying a concept. I believe that there are certain basic elements to cooking. First and foremost, sharing. And then, innocence. Cooking is how I communicate with others, the way I convey my messages, my meanings, and my relationship with ingredients. When I cook I convey a part of me. But at the same time I also learn. There's a continuous osmosis with my ingredients, my guests, and their feelings. Sharing produces unexpected and unforeseen results, that's why it's so interesting and inspiring. Obviously I also use my books to communicate; I try to transmit our concept of cuisine to people who can't come here in person. Cooking means discarding the superfluous and returning to basics, to simple things; it means using the creativity of an elementary idea to express an intuition. It's a journey in search of our roots, one where authenticity rejects what is futile. Cooking is a game, it's spontaneity and irony: in a nutshell, it has a strong childlike element.

Cuisine and territory has become a mantra in our part of the world, a sharp contrast with the exoticism of the eighties and dishes like *vitello tonnato* and *pennette alla vodka*. Nowadays all we do is talk about *zero miles*. Please be frank: what do you make of all this? Is this a new milestone, or another grand, trendy illusion?

I think we need balance and common sense. Dishes are firmly rooted in a territory; how could it be otherwise? A territory, like the entire history of mankind, strongly characterises and influences our relationship with the ingredients, how we perceive them, and how we use them. One way or another they influence all our dishes. But cooking thrives on contamination which sediments, little by little. You can't be a fundamentalist when it comes to choosing the raw materials you



In 2002 **Massimiliano Alajmo** became the youngest chef ever to be awarded with three *Michelin* stars. At the time, Massimiliano - Max, as he prefers - born in Padua in 1974, was 28. Alajmo is an *enfant prodige*: raised in a restaurateurs family, after having learnt the ropes in some of the most important European restaurants (Alfredo Ciochetti's *Ja Navalge*, and Marc Veyrat's *l'Auberge de l'Eridan*), in 1993 Max sided his *Michelin* one-starred mother at his family's restaurant le *Calandre* in Sarmedola di Rubano. Quickly Max nurtures his talents: in 1994 he takes the restaurant's lead, and the *Calandre's* stars double in 1997. From then on, together with his brother Raffaele, he has reaped successes continuously. In 2006 the Alajmo brothers publish *In.gredienti*, a book where the chef summarises his gastronomic philosophy: in 2007 the book is awarded with the *Gourmand Cookbook World Award* as "*Best cookbook in the World*". In early 2011 the Alajmo family places a bet on Venice and starts running the *Caffè & Ristorante Quadri*: six months later the first *Michelin* star arrives. After the publishing of Max's second book, *Fluidità*, in 2014 it's Paris turn: in September the Alajmo family opens *Caffè Stern*, in a former historical engraving *atelier*. Alajmo brothers are also committed to the charity activities of the non-profit organisation they founded: "*Il Gusto per la Ricerca*" (*A Taste for Research*), by means of which they have involved the top of the Italian chefs and organised fundraising events for the scientific research on childhood cancers.

use when you create a dish. Because that's the crucial moment that sparks the communication process which, as I mentioned earlier, is the basic ingredient in any cuisine: by definition, creativity cannot be cramped or curbed. That's why the relationship with the raw materials in the territory is so important, but not as important as their quality. The zero-mile concept – the almost *moral* label designated by professional integralists – is simply stupid: whenever possible I work with local, seasonal produces. I think I don't need to explain that if I find a tomato that comes from Campania, and it's better than the one I grow, then I'll use the tomato from Campania.

Your family's deep roots with the territory, however, is not in question: eight restaurants in the Veneto region with a *penchant* for revamping historical venues, for example *Quadri* in Venice. And recently you've crossed not only regional but also national borders and opened a restaurant in Paris. How and why did you make this decision?

To some extent it's the result of a series of happy coincidences. Everything started when a unique opportunity presented itself: Gianni Frasi, a master coffee-roaster at the Laboratorio Torrefazione Giamaica Caffè in Verona, is our good and dear friend. He was chatting with us when I told him we were thinking of opening a restaurant in Paris, so he suggested a place he'd seen in the centre of Paris. When we went to Paris and saw *Graveur Stern* we were hooked! Located in the heart of the city, for almost two hundred years it had been an engraving boutique, but had long since closed. Now it's *Caffè Stern*, a magical venue with history and manual decorative art oozing out of the woodwork. It was truly impossible to say no, nor did we want to!

Let's travel from France to the ongoing bane of institutional support for development. To be successful you have to have excellent entrepreneurial skills, but active involvement by the authorities is equally useful. How can the government showcase Italian cuisine? France is a past master at it. What practical, feasible initiatives would you ask Matteo Renzi to implement in favour of the Italian restaurant business?

I'd suggest Renzi launch a big promotional campaign focusing in earnest on Italian cuisine. In the first place, it's important that Italy – the land of gastronomic excellence – regain a little of its true essence. One which has nothing to do with *show-cooking* or the current, popular, tooth-and-nail competitiveness that I prefer not to comment on. I'm thinking of a high quality institutional project emphasising Italy's unique polycentric position and its incredibly diverse regional production and products. In short, the political B side of the coin focusing on a search for roots and raw materials. Another giant step forward would be to trigger a *taste journey* for the Italians, starting with its youngsters: a sort of *sentimental education*. For instance in schools and canteens: the search for quality has to start from there, because this is where we can influence the sensibilities and palate of future Italians. Actually there's no sure fire recipe: in the world of cooking, as in all other human activities, knowledge is the fundamental premise for progress and growth.