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13 SEP 2015

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Chef Riccardo di Giacinto on working under Ferran Adria and Marco Pierre White

The Italian, recently guest chef at Ammo and Isono in Hong Kong, talks about working for famous bosses, his favourite places in the world to eat, and the one dish he cannot live without



PHOTO: JONATHAN WONG

What are your childhood memories? "I grew up in the countryside of Abruzzo, in Italy, where gnocchi is from. I remember asking my grandmother to make ravioli for us - mine and my grandfather's favourite. It would take her seven to 10 minutes to make it from scratch. But that's not how I got into cooking. When I was 17, I started cooking in a trattoria with a really good chef. After a while he pushed me to go abroad to learn, telling me to go to England. I thought I would go for six months, and it ended up being four years. The same thing happened when I went to Spain."

What did you learn from British chef Marco Pierre White? "Working for Marco was the hardest experience of my life. It's a training all chefs must go through. [It made me] grow up as a man and a professional. We used to work really hard. You learn respect, discipline and precision, but not creativity. When my wife, Ramona, and I opened our [now Michelin one-starred] Ristorante All'Oro in Rome eight years ago, it was just the two of us. Now we have 32 staff. Without the experience and discipline I learned in England, it would be impossible to manage my restaurant."

You also worked for Spanish chef Ferran Adria. What was he like? "My dream was to work for Ferran. For me, he is the best chef in the world. Ever. At El Bulli, I worked with Gianluigi Bonelli and Roland Schuller [who have both worked in Hong Kong]. Roland suggested Tony Cheng [founder of Drawing Room Concepts] cook in my restaurant for a year. He was a good student who worked very hard."

What do you like to cook? "I like to cook everything. I like ingredients with a strong taste, like anchovies, balsamic vinegar, parmesan cheese. I taste so many things all day long. Sometimes you need a strong taste to wake up the mouth. For me cooking at home with fresh ingredients, good music and wine is a kind of stress relief."



What motivates you? "I get energy from what I do, it's the only way to be a cook. If you get energy back from what you do, then being a chef is right for you. If you just think about money or success, you should do something else. At first, you cannot think about money, but learn, learn, learn. Now that I have a restaurant, I have to think about salaries for 32 people."

What's your favourite dish? "The only dish I cannot live without is a famous Roman dish called bucatini all'amatriciana. The sauce is made with tomato, pork cheek, onions and a bit of chilli and pecorino cheese. It's really yummy. I'm quite well known for my oxtail dish [above] that is presented like a Ferrero Rocher. For me, the most important thing [about food] is the flavour. If you do something good you remember it for life."

What are your favourite restaurants? "In Hong Kong, I love 8½ Otto e Mezzo because I think chef Umberto Bombana has successfully brought back traditional Italian cuisine. In Barcelona, I like Tickets by Albert Adria, for its simple concept following El Bulli, and Disfrutar, where I had a fantastic lunch. In Italy, there's Antica Corona Reale, a crossroads of traditional and modern Italian cuisine; Uliassi has some incredible, creative fish dishes; and I had an amazing meal at Combal.Zero."

You are expecting a son in February. Will you teach him how to cook? "We will teach him to cook if he wants. If he grows up in the kitchen, he's going to learn, no? It'll be natural for him to pick it up. My father was a jewellery maker and wanted me to follow in his footsteps. He sent me to Holland to learn how to cut diamonds, but I didn't like the job. When I started working in the kitchen, I said, 'This is my life', and he said I was crazy. He was probably right."

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