

# Profil Profile

## Heinz Beck Rome's Best Chef

by Lucy Gordan



Heinz Beck, Executive Chef of Rome's Cavalieri Hilton.

As the saying goes, "All roads lead to Rome," but who could ever have imagined that the "Eternal City's" best chef is not Roman and not even Italian. Since 1998, when he won three forks in the *Gambero Rosso* guide, this honor has belonged continuously to dynamic and scrupulously meticulous Heinz Beck, who was born on November 3, 1963, in Friedrichshafen, also the birthplace of the airship zeppelin, on Lake Constance in Württemberg.

A blond, wiry, left-handed elf straight out of a Grimm's fairy tale, Beck grew up and was trained as a chef in Altötting, halfway between Passau and Munich. "I didn't want to become a chef," Beck told me in the lounge of La Pergola, the elegant rooftop restaurant of Rome's Cavalieri Hilton, where he has been executive chef since 1994. "I wanted to become an artist, a painter. My father, who was a jeweller, wouldn't let me because, unless I turned out to be extremely talented or lucky, I could not count on a steady income. My identical twin Hermann wanted to become a chef, so I said: 'OK, I will too.' 'God forbid,' my father thundered again, 'with two chefs in the family, the dinner conversation will only be about cooking.'"

So they flipped a coin and Hermann went off immediately to hotel management school and then to the Holiday Inn management program. He became manager of a Holiday Inn and eventually the Holiday Inn Food and Beverage Development Manager for Asia, Africa, and Europe. Then he left the hotel business, moved to Dublin, and became the Development Manager for United Distilleries. "However," said Beck, "Hermann missed the personal contact he'd had with his 'guests,' so, in



2000, he bought the Holiday Inn Royal Victoria in Sheffield, England."

Unlike his twin, Beck's professional training was almost exclusively in Michelin-starred restaurants in Germany: Commis de Cuisine at Feinkost Kaefer in Munich, 1985 to 1986; Chef de Partie at the Colombi Hotel in Freiburg, 1986 to 1989; Chef de Partie at Heinz Winkler's "Tantris" in Munich, 1989 to 1991; and Sous Chef at the Residenz Heinz Winkler in Aschau, 1991 to 1993.

Winkler was Beck's mentor. "From him," explained Beck, "I learned first and foremost the business side of running a restaurant. To be a successful restaurateur you have to know how to manage money, not just your kitchen. Winkler taught me how to make a profit. Secondly, he taught me self-discipline and efficiency. Your staff doesn't need to love you; it should respect you. Thirdly: Winkler taught me how to balance flavors – the four principal tastes – salty, sweet, sour, and bitter, and lightness."

Winkler was also instrumental in sending his prize protégé to Rome. He recommended him to fellow-German Hans Fritz, the former director of Rome's Hilton (now of the Hotel Raphael), as the candidate he needed to open a world-class restaurant at the Hilton. "We inaugurated La Pergola, meaning grape arbor, on October 10, 1994," continued Beck. "To appreciate my cuisine, it's important to understand that my recipes are not German, Italian, or Roman; they are Heinz Beck. You won't find the dishes on my menu elsewhere. My masterpiece is Fried Zucchini Flowers with Crustacean and Saffron Consommé."

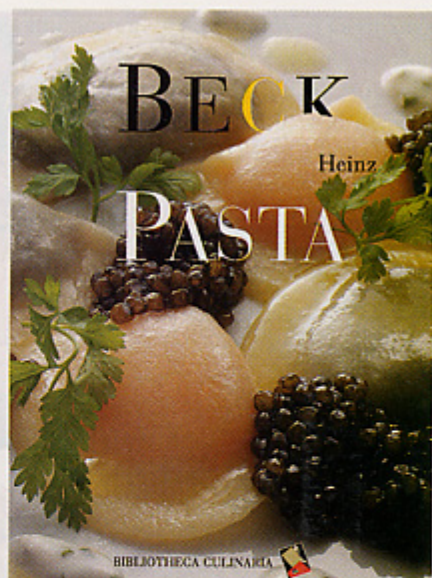
Since 1998 La Pergola has been fully booked every night and, since 2000, has had two stars in the Michelin Guide to Italy. Its 2003 ratings include: *Michelin*: two stars and five red forks, number one restaurant in Rome and among the twenty restaurants in Italy with two stars; *Gambero Rosso*: 93/100 and three forks, number one restaurant in Rome, second-best in Italy; *Espresso*: 18.5/20 and four toques, number one restaurant in Rome; *Veronelli*: three stars and

number one restaurant in Rome. They all designate Beck as one of Italy's top five chefs.

Besides his omnipresence every evening, Beck emphasized that the key to his success has been understanding his market. "Seventy to eighty percent of my clients are Italian. My clients have to find their traditions in the flavors on my menu. Therefore my recipes must have Italian roots. Otherwise my clients won't come back, which is the barometer of how successful a chef I am."

Although he misses elderberry fritters, Bavarian stuffed peppers, duck, goose, and snow at Christmas, Beck, who three years ago married Teresa, a Sicilian from Palermo and former assistant of the Hilton's guest relations, goes on to explain that if his menu offered only Nordic dishes, an Italian would come once and never again. Rome is in southern Italy with a very different climate, different local ingredients, and thus a different style of cooking from Bavaria. It's much warmer than Germany so the body needs less energy and hence a lighter cuisine. "As for my non-Italian clients," he continued, "they don't come to Italy to eat sauerkraut. If I'd gone to New York instead of Rome, I'd have invented another type of menu. If a chef works in a foreign country, first he has to figure out his market. Then he can start to cook. Life is not a picnic. We chefs have to satisfy our clients, not our egos."

Unlike many successful chefs, however, Beck, whose favorite dishes are Teresa's pasta with sardines and her spaghetti à la matriciana, has never considered opening a restaurant of his own because La Pergola's infrastructure gives him the peace of mind he needs to be creative and stay top-ranked in a profession that he confirms is grueling due to its long hours and constant pressure. "If a soccer player scores twice in one game and then for the next five doesn't score," Beck insists, chopping his right hand with his left for emphasis, "he's still a genius. Instead, if a chef concocts a dish unanimously judged as sublime, but



Heinz Beck's latest cookbook *Pasta*.

the rest of the meal isn't perfect, he's done for. You have to be tops even if you have a fever, a headache, have fought with your wife, the management, your maitres, or your suppliers. For example, my clients don't care if my suppliers don't bring me fish because of a hurricane. They don't forgive. They don't come back. We three-star chefs are not gods, but we're not allowed to be common mortals either. The higher your rating, the higher the clients' expectations, the higher your stress."

Decorated in different shades of green with fresh roses on each table (Beck's favorite color and flower), La Pergola is closed Sundays and Mondays, but Beck's five twelve-hour workdays are by no means all spent behind the stove. His job covers many roles besides cooking. Outside the Hilton: public relations, meetings with clients, suppliers, and producers, interviews with journalists. Internally: weekly meetings with the Hilton's management, the food and beverage sector, with purchasing, and the owners, in addition to weekly meetings with La Pergola's Heinz-picked staff (Heinz and Anna, the Slovak hostess, are the only non-Italians) to decide on the menus, new equipment, the decor, the flowers, and other similar matters, and a daily meeting with his kitchen staff of fifteen.





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At the end of each month Beck always goes over the accounts with management. "La Pergola is and has to be a profit center," says Beck. "All my suppliers know that I send back everything that is less than perfect. That's an ultimatum that guarantees top quality. I pay on delivery and working for me is prestigious. Believe me, I'll have no problem in replacing a supplier. He'll have a problem replacing me."

Beck's energy and enthusiasm seems endless. As if his days weren't filled enough already, two years ago he added writing to his list of roles and accomplishments. His first monograph, *Beck Heinz*, published by Biblioteca Culinaria, in Italian, English, and German editions, needless to say, was an instant success. It was judged the best chef book in the world at the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards (from among 3,500 competing volumes published in fifty-six countries in thirty-three languages), the world's most important prize for a cookbook.

In October 2003, Biblioteca Culinaria published another monograph by Beck, again in English, German, and Italian editions entitled *Pasta*. Like *Beck Heinz*, *Pasta* is a beautifully illustrated book of newly invented recipes including Teresa's pasta with sardines. Both volumes can be purchased online from Beck's website located at [www.heinzbeck.com](http://www.heinzbeck.com), where you can also make reservations for La Pergola.

Forthcoming in the first half of 2004 will be a third volume called *L'arte del Servizio*, (English title still undecided), about restaurant management. Written by Beck together with La Pergola's restaurant manager Umberto Giraudo, maître Simone Pinoli, sommelier Marco Reitano, after a brief introduction on the evolution of the "restaurant," its several chapters will provide fellow-professionals with advice on how to choose staff, set up a wine cellar, write various types of menus, decide on decor and lighting, profile perspective clients, bill, relate to suppliers, and last, but certainly not least, conserve food products. **GL**