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ILARIO MOSCONI:

THE ONLY ITALIAN CHEF OUTSIDE ITALY WITH TWO
MICHELIN STARS

Interview ©2009 by Lucy Gordan

Born in Ponte di Legno, a small town in Lombardy's province of Brescia, Ilario Mosconi, aged 51, moved to Esch-Sur-Alzette in southern Luxembourg when he was thirteen. There in 1986, together with his wife Simonetta, he opened his first restaurant, Domus, which received a Michelin star in 1997.

In 2000 Ilario and Simonetta moved to Luxembourg's capital city, where they opened Mosconi in an old house they renovated. It's located in the old neighborhood of breweries known as the Grund, below and just outside of the city's medieval ramparts on the banks of the River Alzette (13, Rue Munster, L-2160 Luxembourg, tel. 011-352-546994, www.mosconi.lu, info@mosconi.lu). In this bucolic setting our Rome Bureau Chief Lucy Gordan, his dinner guest as well as a guest of Luxembourg's National Tourist Board, interviewed Mosconi about his "atypical" career as a chef.



Our tastes in food are closely connected to our childhood — your first memories of food?

IM: The first foods I remember are typical of farms in the mountains of Lombardy: trout, roast chicken, rabbit, polenta, sausages, cheese, and risotto con funghi.

Have there been other professional chefs in your family?

IM: No

Why did you come to Luxembourg?

IM: For my father's work.

How did you meet your wife Simonetta?

IM: Simonetta's family originates from the Marches. She was three when she came to Luxembourg. We both grew up in Esch-Sur-Alzette, Luxembourg's second-largest city. We got married in 1982.

Why did you become a chef?

IM: It was always my dream to become a chef, but I didn't have the means or the courage. As a teenager to help my family I worked in a "traditional" Italian restaurant in Esch-Sur-Alzette. It certainly seems ironic now that I worked as

a waiter in the dining room and not in the kitchen.

Who was your mentor?

IM: Gualtiero Marchesi. I took several mini-courses and did internships at his first restaurant in Via Bonvesin de la Riva in Milan. From him I learned to respect fresh produce and how to best present food on a plate. He encouraged my self-esteem enough to liberate my creative side.



You define your career as “atypical.” What do you mean?

IM: Simonetta and I opened our first restaurant in 1986 in Esch-Sur-Alzette. We named it Domus. We worked together in the dining room. I was also in charge of purchasing — there too we served only Italian products. I traveled to Italy often to seek out only the best. It was only after three years that I started helping in the kitchen — a bit out of curiosity, a bit to test whether I was capable of achieving my dream of a lifetime. I desperately wanted to see a dish and be able to say: “It’s mine; I created it.” My enthusiasm took off immediately, but I wasn’t satisfied. I wanted to improve. Hence the reason for my courses and internships at Marchesi’s. I was already almost thirty when I started to cook professionally.

You also say that you are self-taught. Can you explain?

IM: I didn’t attend a hotel management or cooking school, apart from Marchesi. Everything I know I learned by observing my teachers and my fellow-students at Marchesi’s and tasting very carefully everything we made there.

What are the essential qualities of being a top chef?

IM: To seek out and use only the best available produce. In my case this has always meant I’m on the lookout for the best regional Italian produce. Now I have very reliable suppliers all over the peninsula who guarantee and provide me with only the best on the market. Ninety percent of my ingredients are shipped here directly from Italy. Then I go down at least twice a month to Italy to make new contacts and search for new top-quality produce.

What do you like best about your profession?

IM: Cooking, creating, and taking care of every detail of my dish’s appearance on the plate before it leaves the kitchen. Cooking is a joy and pleasure for me.

The least?

IM: The fact that I’m not in Italy, even though now it’s much easier than twenty years ago, to go there often and have the best Italian produce sent here.

In a nutshell, what is your culinary philosophy?

IM: The authenticity and simplicity of each dish. The sincerity of each ingredient. I try to highlight the produce, the raw materials. It’s fundamental to my cuisine to bring out the ingredient’s origin. I propose “pure,” genuine Italian cuisine.

Of all the awards you have received, which gave you the most joy?

IM: Receiving my first Michelin star in 1997 for Domus, my first restaurant. Here at Mosconi we received our first star in 2000, very soon after opening, and our second in 2005.

Can you tell me something about your Tasting Menu of 8 pasta dishes?

IM: I think Mosconi is the only restaurant in the world to propose a tasting menu of pasta dishes. Like everything else on our menu we change the pastas every season. For example in the winter at least one of our pasta dishes is a soup; in summer a pasta salad.

What do you believe is the reason for your success?

IM: My patience and my passion. You have to love being a chef.



Otherwise it's better if you never take it up as a profession. Then it's essential that you have a qualified and compatible team in your kitchen. We're eight: two pastry chefs and six chefs including me.



Simonette & Ilario Mosconi

Simonetta continues to work by your side?

IM: Yes, of course. I'd be lost without her. As you've probably figured out, I'm timid and taciturn. Simonetta is extroverted, enthusiastic, and bubbly. She runs the dining room and is in charge of public relations.

Why have you never written a cookbook?

IM: I've never had the time. I never take on a job unless I can accomplish it brilliantly. Thanks to this state-of-mind, we've reached the level of success we can be proud of today: two Michelin stars and a very loyal

clientele.

Up to now you have told me about Ilario Mosconi the chef, but my readers and I would like to know more about you. For example, what is your favorite food?

IM: My mother-in-law's homemade pasta and my mother's risotto con funghi, not to overlook tripe.

Your favorite wine?

IM: Full-bodied reds from Tuscany and Piedmont.

Flower?

IM: Red roses like the ones on the terrace here at Mosconi.

Color?

IM: Blue and black because I'm a fan of Inter.

A dish you don't like?

IM: Fast-food.

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

IM: Kitchen implements, especially corkscrews.



What are your feelings about food critics and restaurant guides?

Have they been a help to your career, or have they added stress?

IM: Both. They were important for getting known, but the fear of receiving a bad review, lowering your rating or losing a star, of course, creates stress.

Other chefs you admire?

IM: Aimo Moroni, whom I often go and visit in Milan. He and Marchesi are the history of Italian cuisine in persona. Every June Simonetta and I take advantage of Luxembourg's most important holiday to take a short vacation in Positano. Dropping by to eat at Don Alfonso Iaccarino's Don Alfonso 1890 is part of this tradition.

Of the young chefs I know, I admire Davide Oldani very much. Although much younger than me, like me he's a disciple of Marchesi. I also admire the young chefs of the "Le Soste" and the "Relais et Châteaux" guides. I can't single out just one because they are all my friends.

When it comes to pastry chefs, Ernst Knam is unique. My chocolate soufflé is named after him; it's my version of his recipe. I met him during an internship at Marchesi. We are very close friends and bounce ideas off each other.

If they hadn't become chefs, Heinz Beck wanted to be a painter; Gualtiero Marchesi a pianist; Thomas Keller the shortstop for the New York Yankees; Vitor Sobral a judge; and Léa Linster an actress; what about you?
IM: A farmer.



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Lucy Gordan is an award-winning travel writer and cultural journalist living in Rome, where she is Epicurean-Traveler.com's Bureau Chief. She can be reached at gordan@attglobal.net. Her website is www.lucygordan.com. Links to other recent articles by Lucy Gordan:

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