



# Martins Ritins: The First and Still Brightest Star of Latvia's Culinary Sky

by Lucy Gordan | Food | 0 comments



Riga, the capital of Latvia, and the surrounding Riga-Gauja Region are the European Capital of Gastronomy for the year 2017. From April 20-23 “Live Riga”, the city’s Tourist Board, invited me and five Finnish journalists for a full-immersion tour of the cultural and gastronomic scene. We wandered down the old town’s narrow winding medieval streets, admired the unique neighborhood with “Jugendstil” or “Art Nouveau” buildings, visited several art museums, churches, the four pavilions of the Central Market, handicraft shops, and sampled “contemporary” cuisine at several restaurants. The oldest is “Vincents”, founded in 1994 by chef-owner Mārtiņš Rītiņš. The doyen of Latvian gastronomy, he is the appropriate first of several interviewees thanks to this trip. Rītiņš was born on October 19th, 1949 in a refugee camp in England after his parents and older brothers fled Latvia ahead of the advancing Soviet Army at the end of World War II. He grew up in the industrial town of Corby in Northamptonshire before moving to London to become a chef. He then spent many years in Toronto where he acquired a fondness for organic food and ran his own namesake catering business. After moving to Riga in 1991, for many years Rītiņš hosted his own cooking television

show on Latvian State Television called "Kas var būt labāks par šo?" ("What could be better than this?"), where he traveled the world and introduced foreign ingredients and taste experiences to a Latvian audience. He is President of Latvia's Slow Food Association and has adopted the State II Grammar School where he educates the students about the importance of understanding what we eat.

I always begin my chef interviews with the question: Our tastes in food are closely connected to our childhood; what are your first memories of food?

My mother's cakes.

Your parents were Latvian farmers who fled from the Soviets, first to Germany and then to England where you were born and trained as a chef. OK, you suffered from wanderlust so, worked as a chef in Jamaica and Saudi Arabia. Then you moved to Toronto where you had your own successful catering company for several years. That said, why did you move permanently to Latvia?

I was brought up first and foremost as a Latvian and to respect my roots. The occasion to return occurred when Latvia regained its Independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. I came for a three- week holiday; one thing led to another, and I'm still here after 25 years!

Are there any other talented cooks (I've read your mother) or professional chefs in your family?

My mother had three loves; the first was her garden, then her husband, and then her 4 kids. That was what we believed, but thanks to her garden, she fed her husband and her kids pure, local, organic vegetables so that we would be healthy. Mum was also a great baker and pastry chef; my father and three brothers were great food critics.



Alice Waters

Who were your mentors and what did you learn from each of them?

My mentor was Alice Waters of "Chez Pannise" – She has the same philosophy as my mother and Allison Millar, my chef with whom I worked side by side in Toronto: "From the earth to the table – keep it simple." Also my first boss Harvey Smith, chef of The Strathclyde Hotel in Corby, England was a mentor for me. He was a bastard, but he taught me discipline.

Is it fair to call you "The Father of Modern Latvian Cuisine" as well as its star chef? I've been called by many a name – some have stuck to me! It's good to hear what others say, not what I say about myself!

At "Vincents" you've cooked for many V.I.P.s, what has been the most unusual request you've received, plus the funniest and most stressful episodes of your distinguished career?

Mostly all the guests have put their faith and trust in me. The funniest experience was the enormous laughter I caused Boris Yeltsin when I made him a vodka sorbet. He was off vodka for medical reasons, but I made him a borscht sorbet with moonshine. I gave him a new lease of life. Other funny and sometimes stressful episodes were with George Bush, Angela Merkel, Tony Blair and our President Vaira Vike Freiberga, but that I will save them for my forthcoming book.

As I'm sure you already know, the Italian chef who put authentic Italian cuisine on the world map was Gualtiero Marchesi. Many of the younger chefs who worked under him and are now famous themselves are known as "Marchesi Boys". Who are "Rītiņš Boys"? They are scattered all over the world: Richards in Switzerland, Vitalijs in the UK. Gints in Canada, but in Latvia's Top 30 Restaurant Awards, the top places belong to former 'Rītiņš Boys'.

"Live Riga" took us to two restaurants where the chefs, Maris Jansons at Bibliotēka No. 1 and Kaspars Jansons at Muusu, could be called "Rītiņš Boys", but, who are the other talented Latvian chefs of YOUR generation? Is there anyone like you, of Latvian parentage who returned to Latvia?

There is Elmars Tanis who made Latvia's first Pizza – "Pizza Lulu". He made them for my company in Canada. (I am still waiting for royalties). I think I should sue him! Also Kārlis Celms – famous for his street food served at his "Silver Seed". A few others came, but left just as quickly.



Elmars Tannis

You teach in school. Many children in Italy and in the United States (I live in both places) are overweight or obese because of fast food, how do you convince them to eat healthily? Their parents are all short sighted because they can't read the small print on the labels. It's too difficult a task. Even some of my young staff should know what is pure and healthy, but won't discover it until it's too late. It depends on your upbringing; my mother did a great job with my brothers and me!

You also teach in culinary school. It is very "in" these days to become a chef so how do you convince your students that being a chef is very hard work? Do some of your best students become interns at "Vincents"?

First I try to put them off and tell them how tough it is! Only the determined stubborn ones will succeed. I reckon there is only 1 in 50 who will achieve success.

Is it fair to say that you went around the world to introduce foreign cuisines on Latvian television for some 20 years, but that in your kitchen at "Vincents" you introduce modern Latvian cuisine to both Latvians and foreign tourists?

I call it educational TV. On my TV show I talk about my travels and introduce the food culture of other countries. Then I show how you can prepare this same food here at home.

Other Latvian chefs you admire?

I admire the ones that can take the heat in the kitchen. They are all helping to put Latvia on the world map!



A pizza margherita a "Naples"

Non-Latvian chefs you admire?

Heston Blumenthal, Grant Achatz, and Rene Redzepi.

I've read that Riga is now considered a destination for food-loving tourists, that it's called "Paris of the Baltics"? Do you think that's a fair or exaggerated nickname? Besides "Vincents" where would you send food-loving tourists to Riga?

Riga before the Soviet invasion was known as "Little Paris". Today there are so many food-loving destinations. Just pick up the Nordic White Guide and Riga's Top 30 Restaurants. It wouldn't be cricket for me to name them. But my favorite is "Naples" on the romantic island Andrejsala!

What are the essential qualities of a top chef?

Blood, sweat and tears! Think, dream, and breathe your work!

What do you like best about your work?

Fantastic products, great staff, fascinating guests. Every day is so different. It's never boring!

The least?

The hours! From early morning to late at night! Sweaty derrière!

What's your culinary philosophy?

To give the best, not the second best!

In a nutshell, how would you define your cuisine?

Fine dining influenced by Escoffier.



If Kilometer 0 is a fair description of modern Latvian cuisine, Slow Food of which you are the Head in Latvia and modern Latvian cuisine are philosophically one and the same? I belong to a worldwide organization and know many farmers – SF farmers and I am proud to boast where each and every product comes from. On the other hand, I have started a SF alley at Kalnciema Market and two other locations. However, if I worked with only local products, life would not be so exciting.



Your opinion of restaurant guides?

They are sometimes outdated even before they go to print! The best guide is word of mouth!

Many chefs aspire to being awarded Michelin stars, what about you?

David Hayler quoted that Vincents Restaurant would be worthy of 1 star. Many chefs have stars but I can't understand from which solar system their stars were awarded.

You wrote a book "Eating with Mārtins" which is a collectors item; shouldn't it be reprinted or shouldn't you write a new book since Latvian cuisine is so "in" now?

As I said before, I am writing a new book but it won't be a recipe book, even though I'm throwing a few in. The working title is: "People Who Have Met Me."

Is your restaurant called "Vincents" because that is English for Rītiņš?

No, the artist Vincent van Gogh inspired me!

What are your signature dish and other specialties?

Langoustines from the Faroe Islands. We receive them live and there are so many ways to prepare them. They are much better than lobster. Also our own smoked salmon from the Faroe Islands beats any Scottish and especially Norwegian farmed salmon.



Up to now you've told me about Mārtiņš Rītiņš the chef; I'd like to know more about Mārtiņš Rītiņš himself. For example, what are your favorite foods?

I have in the last two months become a vegetarian. I wanted to fathom how vegetarians live and I am enjoying it very much. Not many chefs pay respect to vegetarians.

A Latvian dish you always asked your mother to make for your birthday?

As I mentioned, Mum was a great baker and pastry chef; her gateaux were the talk of the town!



A dish you dislike?

I'd always disliked tripe, until I met Joseph Viola at "Daniel & Denise" in Lyons.

Your favorite color?

Burgundy, red, scarlet.

Your favorite spice or herb?

It has to be coriander.

What is never missing from your refrigerator at home?

My own chicken eggs. I have 12 hens and one rooster. I call them Faberge eggs as the feed my hens get make each egg priceless.

Your favorite ingredients to work with?

I get excited about whatever's the freshest that comes through the door.



Chefs are known for having collections of expensive watches, motorcycles, or fast cars; do you have a collection?

Copper pots and Marianne Faithfull vinyl!



Marianne Faithfull

Your favorite restaurants in Italy and the USA?

In Italy it's a toss up between "Combal Zero" in Rivoli, just outside Turin and "Osteria Francescana" in Modena, fantastic experiences in both, and in the USA: Grant's and Nick's "Alinea" in Chicago!



What profession would you have chosen if you had not become a chef? To name a few, Marchesi told me a painter; Heinz Beck a painter; Thomas Keller a baseball star. I've read that you wanted to be a pop singer or a journalist, correct?

I see that you've done your homework about me; I still could be both!

Do you have a pipe dream?

The same one as all the Miss Worlds and Universes! To have world peace.



---

#### Related



**MARINO MARINI:**

November 9, 2014

In "Food"



**FAO HONORS SLOW  
FOOD PRESIDENT  
CARLO PETRINI**

May 27, 2016

In "Food"



**GUANGZHOU: CHINA'S  
CAPITAL OF  
GASTRONOMY**

October 10, 2014

In "Food blog"