

VareseNews

New Michelin-star chef is only 31; Massimo Mentasti among the chef elite

Pubblicato: Lunedì 10 Novembre 2014



Just 31, with a solid family tradition behind him, and a passion that has captivated him since he was a child and allowed him to enter the chef elite, while still very young. Yesterday (Tuesday, 4 November), at a presentation in Milan, **Massimo Mentasti, who was born in 1983**, joined the restricted and much sought-after circle of Michelin-star chefs that have received an acknowledgement from the prestigious *Michelin Guide*.

Alas, this triumph was built up far from **our province, where Massimo has solid family and working roots** ("My grandmother used to run a delicatessen in Via San Martino, Varese; my father still runs the one in Gazzada, which bears our name"), but where, for the moment, there is little room for a certain kind of cuisine. As a consequence, Mentasti's training and public recognition took place in nearby Piedmont; hotel-management school in Stresa and "ascent" to the restaurant "**La Gallina**" in Gavi, near **Alessandria**, where the young man from Gazzada has been a chef since 2008. He also trained in some prestigious Italian temples of cuisine, and gained important experience in such places as the Aosta Valley and Sardinia, in order to grow personally, and to snatch the secrets of the masters, as traditionally happens in this profession.

From Gazzada to Gavi, to a Michelin star. Tell us how it went in Milan.

"I received the invitation to the ceremony some days ago. I have to say the wait was rather agonizing; you know, you're there for that reason, you expect to be called, but until you hear your name, you're tense. But then happiness comes, because a Michelin star is the dream of every chef."

Did you expect to get this acknowledgement?

"No, I didn't, or at least, not this year. Over the last few months, I didn't think about the possibility of getting a star, I went all-out to improve my work and my restaurant. I'd say it was a rather unexpected award."

What inspires Massimo Mentasti in his cooking?

“I like to repeat a simple phrase, that encapsulates my philosophy: ‘I’m particularly fond of a cuisine of memories and personal temptations.’ I love to prepare classic and traditional dishes, knowing well, however, that they were conceived for people who had very different lifestyles from those of today. So, I like to prepare them, taking away the heaviness they originally had: I try to serve plain, distinct and clear flavours to rediscover some tastes that have been lost with the passing of time.”

Looking through the menu of “La Gallina”, I can see that you use a lot of local products.

“That’s right: the starting point of my dishes is always tradition, particularly that of Piedmont, which is not very different from the tradition of Lombardy, where I come from. The differences between the two regions often lie only in the details. As a rule I “leave” Piedmont only when I have to search for the products or raw materials I can’t find in the region I work in.”

Does it help to have your restaurant in a place like Gavi, which is famous for wine?

“It helps being in an area that is already well-known, that can provide lots of raw materials thanks to the very generous soil and nature. There’s wine, although some consider us ‘the unlucky cousins of the Barolo producers’. There are lots of truffles and much more still; it’s now up to us to make Gavi known from the point of view of cuisine.”

Now a trivial question, albeit a fair one: what dishes do you prefer to cook?

“Generally speaking, I prefer meats and risottos. On the menu, there’s one dish in particular with Gavi and ‘robiola di Roccaverano’, a goat’s cheese produced a few kilometres away, which I think goes well with the wine of this area.”

I have another question: do you think there’s any chance you’ll come back to Varese Province to head a high-class restaurant?

“I plead the fifth, because I don’t want to seem rude. However, historically, in our province, there has never been sufficient awareness of this kind of restaurant. I don’t personally know Ilario Vinciguerra (the owner of the Michelin-starred restaurant in Gallarate, which bears his name, *ed.*), who has the courage to stay and work where he is. Let’s be clear: the people of Varese have many good qualities, they even like to eat well, but not in refined restaurants. I don’t know why; maybe it’s due to the proximity of Milan, where you can enjoy high-class cuisine.”

Finally, what advice would you give to anyone coming into a Michelin-starred restaurant for the first time?

“I think the most important thing is to be willing to understand the dishes that are served: going to a restaurant is not only a pleasurable experience, but also a cultural one, and being able to listen is important. You should also use this approach when considering the prices: before judging the price of a course or of a menu, you need to understand the thought, the work, and the raw materials that went into it, the preparation required, and also the service, the cutlery, glasses, tablecloths, the room and the attention of the waiters and waitresses. All of these things make a dinner in a Michelin-starred restaurant more expensive; it’s right to assess the quality of everything together.”

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