



Slices of cuisine.

The ethical chef.

Text by Pietro Leemann

Photos by Julie Benz

GentleBooklets

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Via Dufour, 2
CH-6901 Lugano
gentle@gentletude.com
www.gentletude.com

Managing Editor for this issue: Stefania Ferrantelli.
Translation from the Italian by Emanuela Rosa Passerini
(e.passerini@almaviva.it).

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GentleBooklets It is a series of long-form articles written by different authors. The booklets, designed for a quick read, feature texts and images. We have kindly asked to the authors to comment on the term “kindness.” Authors and photographers have donated their work.

The motivations behind the project are the same as those of Gentletude, the desire to spread awareness about the need for “kindness” in our society, a society too focused on personal success to remember the basics of everyday living and respect for the environment that hosts us.

Our decision to present these ideas in a series of publications is due to the awareness that, in order to stimulate people to think about these issues, it is necessary to present some concrete examples. In this case, the examples are provided in the texts written by the authors.

My passion for cooking

My life looks like a transforming journey; in the years, I set milestones that I tried very hard to achieve.

My commitment to the cooking world is due to my childhood in an intellectual family who loved cooking very much and felt it very strongly.

My home was set in a natural environment, and we followed the rhythm of seasons even in our meals, often vegetarian, as our yard grew many veggies. One may easily guess that meat was not our favourite course.

I've always loved food, because I see it as a "people connecting" tool, but also as a source of pleasure. I remember that, when I was a boy, we often had guests for lunch or dinner at home, so food became a real element of community.

By chance, my father, who in his spare time led interviews for the Swiss radio, got to know Angelo Conti Rossini, famous chef in Brissago; they became friends, and one day he invited him home.

He brought a vanilla bavarese, called Charlotte Russe; it's a bavarese made from la-





dyfinger cookies; it was sublime, and it had a strong and deep effect on me. Then I realized that food could be a very powerful mean to transmit emotions and feelings.

I was just 15, and I dreamt of this kind of future waiting for me: Rossini, his environment, the Charlotte Russe. I was so fascinated that I decided I'd become a chef. Later, I started my training, just like many other chefs; but all along the way, I never lost contact with my needs, my principles and the life I wanted.

At the same time, I cultivated my love for philosophy and mysticism, different aspects of religion. In the past time, cooking emphasized cultural values aiming more to the satisfaction of pleasure, than regarding the true sense of existence, the search of real Truth. But the daily routine of cooking, with its basic rules, its simple passions, as soccer matches or poker games, where this truth was never requested, wasn't enough for me. I wanted to live and have people around me with a largest introspection. I worked for many years in luxurious restaurants, as Fredy Girardet's and Guido Marchesi's, where cooking was at a very high

level. After these important experiences, I went on with my personal analysis and took a sabbatical leave, during which I tried to focus on who I was and what I wanted to be.

When I was about 20/22 years old, I began to realize that the omnivorous cooking - that eats and cooks killed animals - didn't belong to me. I thought that this could lead to an aggressive way of living.

Therefore, in the early 80s, I became veggie. At that time, the vegetarian culture was at its beginning in the western world, and the few VIPs who had already embraced it were considered "freaks". I still remember the story of a Canadian mother who grew up her sons following the vegetarian philosophy, and just for that risked to lose their custody.

As the vegetarianism was born in the East, crib of the religious mysticism, I decided to leave and go there. I lived in China, Japan and India for more than two years, and learned to self-explore myself. Introspection became an instrument to understand who I was and what I wanted. I realized that my nature was vegetarian, so I decided to





turn definitively to vegetarianism.

When I came back home, I no longer wanted to work for restaurants that served meat, but the top catering was based on this kind of food. I very much loved cooking, and I was sorry that I had to put aside this lot of acquired experience, but for me to “do the right thing” was a must. Therefore, with a few friends, I founded “Joia”, the first vegetarian gourmet restaurant.

A cooking caring for the individual

First, you choose to become a chef because you take pleasure from food. A chef, traditionally, loves to eat to get an immediate pleasure; but, in the end, this lifestyle isn't healthy. Eating too much, drinking too much is a pleasure with no other aim, a limit to our own personal quest. Cooking should be savoured at fullest, but with a higher target. If this aim has gone amiss, we are caught in a negative jam.

Then, every chef wants to reach fame, during his/her career. The parameters to get there are changing very slowly from those of the past. Public and culinary guides don't take in the right consideration vegetarian cooking. So, top level chefs who want a quick fame have to offer fashionable courses, accepted and requested by guests.

Sadly, the catering world has always been avoiding a reflection about the kind of cooking that is right to perform. I believe it's important that in the courses we offer there is something revealing what we are and what we do.

Well, times are changing. Many of my col-





leagues are approaching vegetarianism, and today (in the past it was not so!) a chef is lean, eats healthy and balanced, and practices sport.

Of course, chefs still pursue their own success, and are sometimes attached to some specific food, that they can hardly ban from their menu. Possibly, they are confused and they don't know what to do.

When we cook, we have a responsibility which goes far beyond giving pleasure to our guests; we have to bring him/her health and well being. If we don't, it's just as if we introduced cigarettes in a primary school and gave them to children. In other words: could I allow my daughters to drink alcohol? On the spot it may seem a source of pleasure, but in fact it would bring an unhealthy state, and a bad habit.

I'm inclined to eat properly, and I'm in good health; if I do good, I receive good in turn, but if I behave badly, I get back worst. Sooner or later, we get to a point where we have to face the consequences of our acting, and I don't mean just being on the magazines pages; it's more than that.

That's why I favour this motto: "I don't cook

vegetarian because it's fashionable, but because I'm vegetarian"; I prepare food that is good for my clients because I think it's the right thing to do, putting fame and money lower in my ranking. At last, I got satisfaction because "Joia" is a top restaurant, even if it got there slowly and without fuss.





We are what we eat

Our own life is shaped on choices that we take without constraints. The first difference between man and beast is just there: man can choose. Free will may become a two edged weapon, because it can help a man to get better, or worse. The choice should be completely free: we can't be trapped by habits that strangle us, so we have to understand if we choose a particular food without any constraints, or if our decision was forced in some way.

Sugar is an example. Today, food industry overdoses sugar, so that customers are obliged - because they're used to - to look for very sweet food.

At the same time, there are foods that lower our level of consciousness. For example, if an animal is killed, the caused suffering may affect us and, as a consequence, we become less conscious, happening to be unable to choose.

We also have to quit bad habits that aren't strictly connected with food, but that could become vicious, such as smoking, drinking and gambling. Vegetarianism and healthy

cooking mostly preserve our freedom of choice.

In the last years people have changed, and have become much more sensitive. 25 years ago, when I opened my restaurant, the eating habits in Italy were much different; the progress has been extraordinary, but most of it is connected to this free choice. Vegetarians are growing: today, 10% of people are veggie. They chose to quit a lifestyle that didn't belong to them anymore.

People have built networks to dialogue through Internet or others. The main aspect of this phenomenon is that we are interlaced in a more constructive vision: anybody who eats a too rich cake "feels" that it's not right. This evolution emphasizes the feeling. In practice, vegetarianism is a silent revolution: we don't demonstrate with flags and truncheons, but we simply put in practice this choice.





The positive transformation through what we eat

To the not vegetarian, I suggest to try it as soon as possible as, if we stop eating meat, the difference becomes quickly visible, and one can get the real meaning of the assertion “what we eat transforms ourselves”.

The main aspect is the new feeling we nurture towards other living beings; our counterparts, at the beginning, but then also animals and the environment we live in. Lately, our society relies more on economical wealth than on feelings; but even a man with little money can be happy, without a TV set or the newest mobile. We live in a confused time, and many are trapped in a condition that prompts them to act only in order to reach a certain economic status, leaving feelings behind.

I'd give my sons love, rather than money. I have a Christian belief, but I think it's a big mistake not to take position against meat; one shouldn't be kind only towards human beings but towards all beings, as God created everything, not just mankind.

It's easy to love your own son, or a friend,

but sometimes it's difficult to love to the same extent somebody you see different from you. This is why we don't love animals so much, but the right impulse should give love to everything and everybody.

Our life should be an effort to abandon all that distresses us, in order to love wholeheartedly. You can't love everyone and everything if you don't loosen all your burdens.

Food is an extraordinary vehicle: we eat everyday, and food transforms us; so by choosing what we eat, we can set our own direction.

This is one of the few contexts where we are still free to choose. In the western world, we are very lucky because we can eat whatever we want; this chance is very important, and we have to take advantage from it, as there are many others who can't.





The respect towards food

Picked up food is perfect: an apple, an asparagus, a carrot are perfect because they are natural, and nature is perfect. We are nature, and if we eat natural we are healthy. When we part from it, we loose contact even with ourselves. The process is to take a natural component and to transform it, still keeping its natural essence.

At “Joia” this is a must: we prepare food and we have to do it with feeling, if we want to take care of our customers; food is to be transformed, interpreted but not adulterated. At times, maybe, while we cook we are worried, angry or unhappy; then, we have to purify food before we take it to our guests. To achieve that, we recite a mantra. This is called transubstantiation, and means that earthly food becomes spiritual food; it’s common in many cultures. For example, in Eucharist, a mix of flour and water represents Christ’s body when purified by the priest. Life is a journey towards change; if we evolve in a happy and peaceful way, we feel good.

15 Nutritional Rules

1. Our body is part of nature. If the food we eat is not artifact, we keep it easily in good health.
2. Alternate raw, more vital food and cooked food that can be assimilated more easily.
3. Food should be fresh and come from a nearby place, having been cultivated respecting nature and its seasons, cooked and eaten as soon as possible, no later than half an hour since it was prepared.
4. The cooking of vegetables should be fast and simple, in order not to alter their essence.
5. Color, taste, texture and nutritional values help to keep the body healthy.
6. Fruit is better raw, cereals and legumes should be cooked well and with good water.
7. Fats are essential to assimilate substances and perceive the taste but should be added at the end of the cooking process, as well as herbs and volatile spices, extremely important to stim-





- ulate digestion and pleasure.
8. Spices should be added at the beginning because the food can be assimilated more easily. You should eat fresh cheese. If it is seasoned, it cannot be assimilated easily.
 9. Besides, cheese should come from farms which respect animals. If animals are respected, the quality of their milk is better, more nutritive and energetic.
 10. Fermented foods (yogurt, miso, sauerkraut, dough, vinegar and yeast) facilitate digestion and the transformation of nutritive substances into energy at all levels.
 11. Choose unrefined food. The body has to assimilate the food slowly, for this reason sugar, alcohol and refined grains should be limited or avoided. To make them more appropriate you can combine them with a lot of vegetables that guarantee the sufficient amount of fibers, minerals and vitamins necessary for a good metabolization.
 12. Limit the consumption of stimulating substances such as tea (especially fermented), and coffee. In this case

the body is artificially stimulated, consumes energies faster, creating targeted physical and mental states that do not match our true essence.

13. Choose a balanced and varied diet, where vegetables and fruits are protagonists, cereals are in second place, followed by proteins and fats that should not be more than 10% of the total amount of ingested food.
14. Finally, it is better to eat a little than too much. Beyond the rules above described, Ayurveda teaches that you should never fill your stomach more than the half of its capacity.
15. Observe fasting once a week in order to purify your body.





AUTHOR

Pietro Leemann

Pietro Leemann was born in Locarno in 1961. In 1976, after a special meeting with the chef Angelo Conti Rossini, he decides to become a chef. In 1985 he becomes vegetarian and after dedicating some time to deepen his studies, he decides to travel to Asia. Here he is hired by the School Tsuji in Osaka, where he teaches Italian and French cuisine. After this experience he focuses on his real future goals. In 1989 he gets involved in a project with some friends and together they decide to open a vegetarian restaurant: Joia. In 1991 he publishes his first book “Alta cucina vegetariana” and in 1995 “Colori gusti e consistenze nell’alta cucina vegetariana”, which becomes an icon. The following year he is awarded with a Michelin Star. In 2010, after two inspiring trips, one in Shanghai and one in New York, he notes that what he creates in his restaurant Joia is innovative and groundbreaking.

www.joia.it

PHOTOGRAPHER

Julie Benz

Julie Benz is an English photographer, who has lived in Mallorca since 2012. She is keen to represent the island's food culture from the field to the table, especially its dying traditional methods , (such as used in wine, fish, olive oil and citrus cultivation.)

The reason for a late start in photography was her former life a successful jeweller and certified diamond grader. After 20 years, Julie sold the business to follow her true passions, of travel, cycling and photography. Largely self-taught , she has worked with and learned much from photographic masters such as Mary Ellen Mark and Tim Clinch.

Her commercial clients include Mortitx Wines and Chefsin, for whom she has photographed a number of recipe books, based on cookery class events held by Mallorca's leading chefs.

www.juliebenzphotography.com

GENTLETUDE

Gentletude is a neologism composed of the words “gentilezza” (gentleness/kindness) and “attitudine” (attitude). It pursues the aims for a better world without violence, arrogance and rudeness.

A world where caring and paying attention to others, common sense and balanced competitiveness are the most important things.

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Contact Gentletude on the website: www.gentletude.com

When we cook,
we have a responsibility
which goes far beyond giving
pleasure to our guests.
We have to bring him/her
health and well being.