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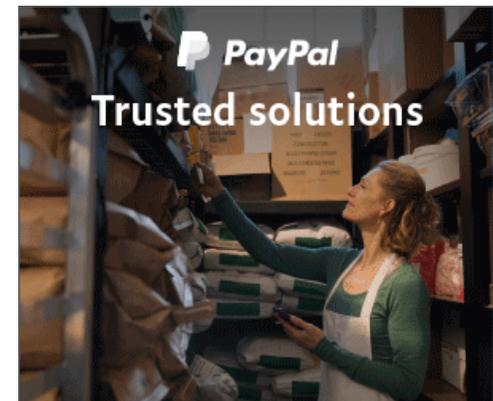
POST MAGAZINE / FOOD & DRINK

Niko Romito, chef with 3 Michelin stars, keeps it simple in the kitchen

The Italian, in Hong Kong for a guest stint at Tosca in the Ritz-Carlton, talks to Bernice Chan about Michelin-star moments and the virtues of simplicity

BY **BERNICE CHAN**,
5 MAR 2016

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Niko Romito. Photo: Edmond So

What are your impressions of Hong Kong? "The food and restaurants are of a very high quality - it's definitely a foodie city. What is impressive about Hong Kong is that we can get practically everything we desire from any part of the world. For example, I was missing an ingredient from Italy and I ordered it on the phone and, two days later, it arrived."



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How did you become a chef? "I was a stockbroker in Rome but, when I was 25 years old, my father became ill. He passed away in 1999. He ran a small restaurant called Reale, in Rivisondoli, a village in Abruzzo. Up until that point I had only gone to the restaurant to eat; I didn't know anything about cooking. My sister and I originally planned to fix up the restaurant and then sell it. But after three or four months I started to enjoy it. My father didn't want me to stay in a small town of 700 people; he wanted me to be in a big city with a different lifestyle.

"When I started I didn't know how to cook, but I felt lucky at the time because I could do everything on my own without following someone else. I started to learn more about the ingredients and figured out how to bring out their natural flavours."



What was your reaction when you were awarded your first Michelin star, in 2007?

"Until 2000, I didn't even know about the Michelin stars so it was very emotional for me to get that first one. That's when things started to change. Two years later, we got the second one. In 2011, we moved Reale to Casadonna, a 500-year-old monastery, which



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also has a nine-room hotel and a culinary school. Two years later, I got my third Michelin star. I felt on top of the world.

"I'm currently focused on the school, which has 16 students and all the teachers are from the University of Turin's food sciences department, as well as chefs who specialise in things like pastry and butchery. The graduates of the culinary school can work in the three restaurants that we own but they run, called Spazio. We have one in the original location of Reale, in Rivisondoli, one in Milan and one in Rome. Now I'm planning to take Spazio outside Italy."



What is the secret to your success? "When you don't have a foundation or rules, you are free to do whatever you want. Reale was a traditional Italian restaurant but today it is completely different. I wasn't afraid to fail and didn't have a master chef to follow, so I chose my own path. The more I studied, the more my concept became about simplicity. But simplicity doesn't mean boring or easy, it's the concept of respecting the ingredients and presenting them at their best. My dishes look simple, but there's a lot of work behind them."

Can you give an example? "The best way to describe how I create dishes is with my dessert called Essence. I use a kind of horseradish that grows on top of the mountain



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where I live. I infuse it with milk and then make a white ice cream out of it that tastes sour. The brown cream is made with hazelnuts and almonds that taste sweet, but no sugar has been added. Then it's topped with coffee powder that's bitter.



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"I study a lot, learning a lot about how ingredients work and how they react, and try several times until something nice comes out of it."

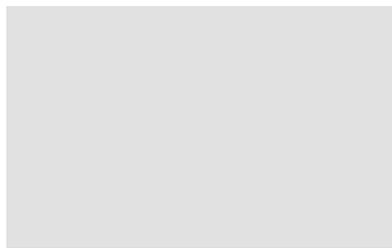
What do you do when you're not in the kitchen?"I am too busy running my business, but sometimes I play tennis or run along the river near where I live."



Bernice Chan

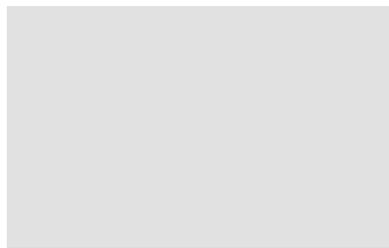


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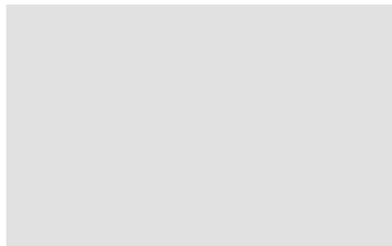
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