

From Abruzzo to Chinese capital, a chef cooks up a storm

By Li Yingxue | China Daily | Updated: 2020-01-04 11:17



Chef Niko Romito (fourth left) and his team. [Photo provided to China Daily]

When Niko Romito and his sister Cristiana inherited their father's restaurant in Italy in 2000 he knew nothing about cooking and just as little about business.

Nine years later he would be the proud bearer of two of the world's most coveted culinary awards, Michelin stars for his restaurant in Rivisondoli, in the Abruzzo region, and in 2013, after relocating the restaurant into a monastery 14 kilometers away, another Michelin star fell into his lap and that of his cooking and management team.

Now, six years on, five stars shine in the Romito firmament, the latest two appearing as a result of the Italian's accomplishments in China.

"The dining concept brought to you by the renowned Milanese chef Niko Romito epitomizes Italian luxe," the recently published Beijing Michelin Guide says. "Classic recipes are given a subtle modern twist that adds sophistication, depth and bold flavors."

The guide's comments relate to Il Ristorante- Niko Romito at the Bvlgari Hotel in Chaoyang district of Beijing, awarded one star, just a few months after the Michelin Guide awarded the Shanghai version of the restaurant a star.

"The Michelin star for Il Ristorante- Niko Romito in Shanghai together with the one that shines on Il Ristorante- Niko Romito in Beijing is testimony that Italian cuisine fascinates and surprises at all latitudes," Romito, 45, says. "This is my greatest satisfaction, and I say this as a man and as a cook who is profoundly Italian."

Simplicity is the essence of his cooking, he says.

"My food is often described as simple. This is very true, in the sense that it is not complicated, which is not to say that it is without significant complexity. In cooking, complexity can be advantageous; complication never."

Romito's cuisine is based on intense research, he says, his inspiration mainly drawn by observing daily life, but also from the ingredients' structure, tradition and its possible evolution.

1/2

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At the beginning he took inspiration from the culinary tradition of Abruzzo, trying to update the local cuisine with early dishes that were at the same time contemporary and reassuring.

Then he started on his own path, consisting of research, solitary experimentation in the kitchen and a lot of trial and error and cooking attempts that went wrong.

"This has been a great advantage for me because I have let my creativity and philosophy grow autonomously, leading me toward new and innovative concepts. It's been a very personal and independent growth from a little trattoria to Michelin-starred cuisine."

At Il Ristorante- Niko Romito in Beijing, Romito updates the menu in accordance with the season. He and his team change the menu three times a year and create specials for all festivities such as Christmas and New Year.

In the cooking laboratories in Italy where everything started, together with the Bvlgari team, over a year Romito created a protocol, a database of recipes listing set ingredients, weights, temperatures and times that would need to be meticulously applied in every kitchen of Il Ristorante- Niko Romito.

After having been awarded three stars for his restaurant in Italy, Romito thinks "every star is an important acknowledgment but when you achieve the maximum award of three stars, you know full well the expectations are high. ...But more than anything, the third star to me is about content, not just on the plate but in the overall hospitality experience."

"The work I do with my team is not aimed at gaining stars but at satisfying the diner."

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