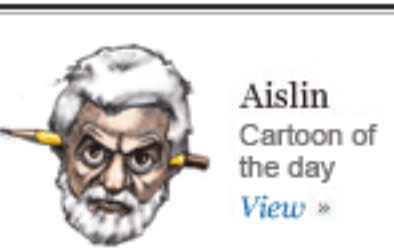


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Amuse Bouche: Passion, creativity make a great chef: Féolde

BY LESLEY CHESTERMAN, GAZETTE FINE-DINING CRITIC APRIL 20, 2012 1:57 PM

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STORY PHOTOS (4)



The chic chef Annie Féolde (left), who runs the three-Michelin-starred Florence restaurant Enoteca Pinchiorri, is known as "La Diva de la Cuisine Toscane." She says the greatest challenges for a female chef are to be respected and understood. Photograph by: Allen McNis, THE GAZETTE

MONTREAL - Annie Féolde was the first woman in Italy who was awarded three stars by the Michelin guide for her restaurant in Florence, Enoteca Pinchiorri. Also a "Restaurant Grand Chef" in the ne-plus-ultra hotel chain, Relais & Châteaux, Enoteca Pinchiorri is renowned for its modern take on traditional Tuscan flavours.

Working alongside her companion, Giorgio Pinchiorri, who rules over the restaurant's world-class wine cellar, Féolde is originally from France and today jets between her home town of Nice, her Italian restaurant in Florence and a second restaurant she runs in Nagoya, Japan. With grandparents who owned several hotels and parents who worked in the legendary Hotel Negresco in Nice, Féolde says she has "hospitality running in my blood."

Féolde was in Montreal last week as the guest chef for the fourth edition of the Les Grands Chefs event held at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel. A benefit dinner with 230 Montrealeers in attendance who wine and dine on luxury foods and the finest wines for the steep price of \$1,500 a plate, the Les Grand Chefs event raises funds for finishing students from l'Institut de tourisme et d'hôtellerie du Québec to attend extended work-study programs in Relais & Châteaux restaurants and hotels abroad.

The idea behind the dinner is to give a huge crowd a taste of a cuisine usually reserved for a restaurant with less than 50 seats, which is a feat of gargantuan proportions. And yet Féolde, alongside three of her restaurants' cooks, did a bang-up job.

Between sips of Parmesan water and a sunny Gaja sauvignon blanc, and bites of a veal tendon and langoustine risotto brilliantly matched with the seductive Tignanello from the house of Antinori, fashionistas, foodinistas and big biz types oohed and aahed until the final bites of a chocolate and olive oil dessert served with a Vin Santo di Montepulciano that tasted like a liquefied raisin tart.

How this chic "femme chef" known as "La Diva de la Cuisine Toscane" managed to prepare hundreds of portions of her exquisite signature dish of red snapper and seared foie gras with Jerusalem artichoke purée remains a mystery to me (perfectly cooked hot foie gras is a challenge for a chef to prepare for a table of four, let alone a room packed with hundreds of discerning gourmets). Yet so many other questions I had for this little-known star chef are no longer a mystery, as I got the chance to sit down with her a day before the Grands Chefs meal to talk about her beginnings in the kitchen, her favourite styles of food, the challenges of being a woman chef and the restaurant she was most eager to try while in Montreal.

What is rotting in the back of your home fridge right now?

Mayonnaise, French mustard, the best-quality soya sauce. There are also small cans of corn, which is something I like to eat for lunch.

What ingredient do you always have in your refrigerator?

Parmesan, and ginger because I like to make Thai soups.

What snack food can you not live without?

I like to snack on smoked ham, and cheese but I'm trying to cut down on it since I discovered I'm lactose intolerant.

Who or what inspired you to cook?

My grandmother, but not the one who was in the hotel business. She was such a nice cook. By her behaviour she taught me to cook in a simple way respecting every ingredient. With her I learned that simple could be very good. She made an excellent roast chicken, and a soufflé from the chicken liver, which I tried and tried to replicate but I never could.

What was the first dish you remember cooking as a child?

Hot chocolate.

Do you still drink it today?

Not at all! (laughing)

The cuisine you prepare in your restaurant is very intricate, with a high-end international style, and yet we see Tuscan cuisine as quite rustic and ingredient-based. How does this work?

I don't like the term "international" when it comes to cuisine. That would mean I take influences from everywhere. I'm in Florence, where tourists expect Italian food. I don't make traditional food but food coming from our traditions.

At a dinner party, what would you typically serve friends?

That depends where I am and what people I am with. When I'm in France, I cook Italian. When I'm in Italy, I cook French or something exotic to make a change. But I don't cook Japanese because the products are too difficult to acquire.

If you could have dinner with two people from any time in history, who would they be?

Ravel, and Colin Powell. I ate with him once. We had breakfast together for a Relais & Châteaux congress in Washington. He's an incredible man.

The chef you find most inspiring is ...

There are so many. That depends on what kind of cooking. I could jump from Thomas Keller to Seiji Yamamoto, the chef of a three-Michelin-starred restaurant in the Roppongi district of Tokyo called RyuGin.

What is the greatest challenge for woman chefs?

To be respected. And understood. The normal reaction from men is not to respect ladies enough everywhere in the world. I don't care, really. Everyone has to find a way to go ahead and find the best way possible to do that. But it's important for a woman not to try to become a man. Stay a woman and don't try to compete with a man and be more important. We are complimentary. Since we have to live together, let's live together in peace and comprehension.

How did you manage to last 40 years in a business that's so competitive? What's your secret?

Funny you ask, because we are writing a book about just that. Ultimately, it's about always looking for quality. That drives you far. If you are not satisfied with what you are doing, improve. We are never satisfied, really. There is always something to add. Never being satisfied like that is a nightmare, but it is a big part of what we do. But you have to stop and relax every once and a while or you'll get depressed.

Italian food is also so focused on wines. What role do Italian wines play in your food?

In 1972, our restaurant began as a simple wine bar. Giorgio started out selling wine, but there was no food. As he explained every single glass of wine to the customers, I stood there and thought, "We need food." So I started to prepare snacks, then a buffet, then pasta, then meat. By 1979, we decided to turn it into a sit-down restaurant and we lost everybody! (laughing). But we soon developed a new clientele. From the beginning, wine was completely part of the choice of the cuisine we'd serve. Sometimes people even ordered their wines before their food.

What ingredient do you despise?

I used to hate tripe. In Florence there used to be wagons in the streets selling tripe and it was smelly. But once I was dining in front of some very important people and I had to eat it. And I did. I like it now.

And what ingredient do you rely on most?

Vegetables.

This event is to raise funds for bursaries for young chefs, what for you are the most essential qualities for being a great chef?

Many, like in any business. You need great passion, nice knowledge, being creative and strong. In good health. You have to have a good character, because if you don't care about the people working with you, you are already finished.

Do you think it is more difficult to become a chef today or easier?

I'd say it's different. Before, there was no need for a diploma to work in the kitchen, no controls, yet there was a lot of need. It was easier to get a job. Today it's much more difficult because you need a certain education. And it's expensive for a restaurant to hire staff today. But if you're special, you should make it.

Is it important for chefs to have international experience?

Oh, yes, and not just France. You have to travel and eat as much as you can around the world. And I wouldn't even say anywhere specific anymore. When I go to New York in a few days for another Relais & Châteaux dinner, my chef and I will eat around together. My chef travels all around the world to eat, and I send him with great pleasure.

What's your one weakness as a cook?

I'm maybe too mild, too gentle. Maybe not tough enough. Even if I don't like to accept it, it's true that people sometimes need to be yelled at, to be shocked.

And your strength?

They used to call me the best pastry chef in Italy.

Is the Michelin star rating important to your business?

It is, because the guide is important all over the world, and I think it's great that they found so many nice restaurants in the U.S. and Japan. It would be nice to see one in Canada, too. It's interesting, though, that when we lost our third star in 1995 due to a fire in the wine cellar that caused us to lose attention in the dining room, we saw no difference in our business when we dropped down to two stars. We were shocked, disappointed and offended, but we examined our business and improved. We got the star back and we are one of the only restaurants to do so.

Do we make too much of an issue about chefs being men or women? Or not enough?

I'm glad to participate in events and conferences about my position as being a woman chef, because I did something good in that category. But besides that, I don't care. I don't feel inferior or superior. I just do my best.

The next big trend in Italian food is ...

The best quality ingredients. Also, good research on very basic items. And cooking in an economic style – using everything. It's interesting to see this Scandinavian influence, where they are discovering all sorts of new herbs and greens. It's very popular. But that doesn't mean I'll cook that way.

Your favourite food city?

Paris, Tokyo and New York.

If you could dine anywhere in the world tomorrow night and price were no object, where would that be?

Well, you were telling me I should try this restaurant DNA with its Québécois ingredients and Canadian wines, so it would be DNA. (laughing)

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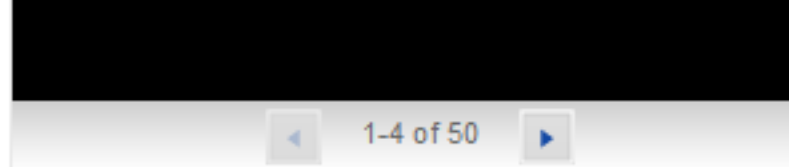
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