

ASK THE FOODIE ANDREA OSCHETTI

I saw spas: how a homespun Italian chef found his calling

Catharine Nicol
foodandwine@scmp.com

If you spot a scarlet Vespa racing around Hong Kong's food markets, you'll have caught a glimpse of the ebullient Milanese chef Andrea Oschetti as he collects ingredients for one of his *cuore* ("heart" in Italian) private dinners (cuoreprivatechef.com). An evening with friends at home and his wife, Sandy, offers far more than a five-course dinner.

After a visit to Koh Samui health retreat Kamalaya, Oschetti lost kilograms, took up triathlons and was inspired to help his clients understand what is at the heart of good Italian food.

What was it that so inspired you at Kamalaya?

They offer food based on natural principles. My wife, Sandy, and I were looking for a really good detox place but didn't want to fast. At Kamalaya they don't dictate; they inspire. It's not about calories; it's about cooking food in the best possible way. Their cuisine was part of the well-being they offer, and completely changed my attitude towards food. Since then, eating healthily has never been difficult; it hasn't been a process of privation, but of discovery.

What inspired you to create Cuore Private Chef?

Food has always been a passion for me. When I was a young kid, both my parents were working, so after school I went to my grandmother's house, where she cooked for the extended family. The kitchen was the warmest place, and so it started there. I paid for my university studies by working in restaurants.

After I graduated, I worked in management consulting in London. Coming back home and cooking with my wife was a fantastic way to let go of all the stress. An aubergine demands your attention when you cut it – a mind clear of clients, your boss, your colleagues. You forget them all because you are focusing on the aubergine, and as a result, you are free.



Eating healthily isn't about the calories for Andrea Oschetti. Photo: Felix Wong

What is it about the philosophy of Italian cooking that you bring to Hong Kong?

Italian food is not just about the food; it includes the culture. Italians eat and drink a little of everything; there's no Atkins diet, no counting calories. And a key part is that this food is made at home. Italian food is not complicated; it is simple and relies on local produce.

I don't create fancy dishes. My guests experience what would happen if they were at my home in Milan. I'm not pretending to be what I am not; my home says who I am. If your home is messy, it is because you are a messy person, or it's full of art because you love art. Since I started cooking these dinners, I have had my understanding of local culture boosted. I see inside my clients' homes, and in return, I let them see mine.

When you're not in your loft or your clients' homes, where do you like to eat in Hong Kong?

What I like to do is explore the dai pai dong (street food stalls). They are fantastic. Some of the best local food you can find is in a dai pai dong. A favourite dish of mine is the wonton soup at Tsim Chai Kee in Central. Otherwise, I like high-level restaurants such as Otto E Mezzo, Bombana and The Drawing Room. I love Sushi Kato in North Point. The decor is overlooked, but the fish is fantastic, and it is always full of Japanese. There's also Yin Yang on Ship Street. Margaret Xu is amazing; she does really good food with ingredients sourced from an organic farm in the New Territories.

Do you also try to source locally?

It is good to eat and source locally; you don't need to bring ingredients from the other side of the world.

If you're in China, eat Chinese food prepared with local ingredients. However, if you want a Caprese salad, you have to realise that it is made with certain tomatoes and mozzarella. Mozzarella doesn't just come from Italy; it comes from a specific area. The mozzarella I grew up with in Milan sucks. I ate my first amazing mozzarella when I was 16 in Naples. So, for normal needs, go local and organic, but stay in culture. Don't say you want French cuisine made with local ingredients, or you'll be detaching the food from its source.

What else do you want your guests to take away from one of your dinners?

I want them to understand the capability of food to nourish you and make you feel good. We are in 2012; it's no longer acceptable as a chef not to look into nutrition and what our bodies need. Some restaurants add 80 grams of butter to a fish sauce and a lot of salt to make it taste of something. But butter, sugar and salt make it too easy, and we know better now.



The mozzarella I grew up with in Milan sucks. I ate my first amazing mozzarella when I was 16 in Naples

ANDREA OSCHETTI

Source the best ingredients and use techniques that bring out their natural flavours. I lost 25kg in six months after Kamalaya. Eating well made me feel energetic.

I wanted to go out and run, change my habits. And really that's not impossible for anyone. Fillet steak used to be one of my favourite foods. I didn't touch red meat for 1½ years after Kamalaya. I stopped eating it. I didn't crave it. You give the right things to your body, and it wants more.

15 MINUTE CHEF SPAGHETTI CARBONARA

A purist would say this isn't authentic carbonara because it should use *guanciale* – cured pork jowl. If you can find it in Hong Kong, feel free to use it; in the meantime, pancetta makes a fine substitute.

Timing is critical for this dish because the ingredients don't actually cook together; instead, the flame is turned off once the egg mixture is poured in, and the sauce thickens in the residual heat of the pan. Have all the ingredients ready and waiting by the side of the stove.

200 grams dried spaghetti
15ml cooking oil
100 grams pancetta (rind removed), diced
2 garlic cloves, sliced
2 large eggs, at room temperature
60 grams freshly grated parmesan, plus extra for sprinkling
Fine sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

- Boil the spaghetti in a large pot of salted water.
- Heat the oil in a large skillet, add the pancetta and cook until the pork fat turns translucent. Add the garlic and cook until pale golden.
- When the pasta is ready, remove it with a slotted ladle (or metal tongs), leaving behind the water. Put the pasta into the skillet with the pancetta and garlic.
- Whisk the eggs in a bowl. Add some freshly ground pepper and about 120ml of the pasta water and stir immediately. Turn off the flame under the skillet.
- Pour the egg mixture into the pan and stir immediately and thoroughly so the eggs don't scramble; it should form a sauce that coats the pasta.
- Sprinkle in 60 grams of parmesan and stir again. If the sauce seems too thick, stir in more of the pasta water. Add salt if needed. Serve on two plates, sprinkled with extra parmesan.

Susan Jung
susanjung@scmp.com



TABLE TALK

Susan Jung
susanjung@scmp.com

In celebration of Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee, the Mandarin Oriental in Central is serving a royal afternoon tea in the **Clipper Lounge** until June 10. The tea – served in a setting that includes artwork by the Prince of Wales, Queen Victoria and



Prince Albert, as well as photos by Lord Snowdon – has a menu created by the hotel's executive chef, Uwe Opocensky, who cooked for Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip's 50th anniversary dinner. Tea (right), with a glass of R de Ruinart Champagne, costs HK\$488 for one and HK\$888 for two, and includes organic Welsh egg with caviar; mini Yorkshire pudding with roast beef, horseradish and watercress; royal Victoria sponge; Battenberg cake; and scones with homemade strawberry and orange preserves and clotted cream. Bookings: 2825 4007

Also celebrating the Diamond Jubilee is **The Pawn** in Wan Chai, which is serving a four-course dinner with wines on June 6. The menu – which includes maple and juniper-cured salmon paired with Chapel Down English Rose rosé 2010; and new season lamb shoulder



and rack with Chapel Down Trinity 2009 – is HK\$550 plus 10 per cent. Bookings: 2866 3444

Jorge Gonzalez of the Four Seasons in Mexico City and tequila barista Alfredo Sanchez from the Four Seasons resort in Punta Mita will showcase Mexican cuisine and drinks from tomorrow until June 10 at the Four Seasons hotel in Central. Gonzalez's menu in **The Lounge** includes braised oxtail and plantain

sopes; lamb rump roasted in agave leaf; Mayan chocolate cake and *tres leches* cake with wild berry sauce. In **The Blue Bar**, Sanchez's cocktails will include Paloma (tequila reposado with grapefruit soda, lime and salt) and Rosa Maria (mescal with organic pineapple, rosemary, lime and sugar). Bookings: 3196 8820

Yat Tung Heen, which has branches in Tsim Sha Tsui and Wan Chai, is serving Shunde cuisine until June 14. Dishes, available à la carte or on a set menu (HK\$460 per person for a minimum of two), include roasted crispy eel with honey sauce and deep-fried chicken wings with mushrooms, celery and carrot; sautéed prawns with tomato and vegetables (far left); and pan-fried mud carp stuffed with meat sausage, Chinese parsley and spring onions. Bookings: 2710 1093 (Tsim Sha Tsui) and 2878 1212 (Wan Chai)

> CONTACT US
Deputy Culture Editor: Choong Tet Sieu
tetsieue.choong@scmp.com
Food & Wine Editor: Mischa Moselle
mischa.moselle@scmp.com
Senior Food & Wine Editor: Susan Jung
susan.jung@scmp.com
Advertising: tel 2565 2435;
e-mail advertising@scmp.com

Printed and published by South China Morning Post Publishers Ltd, Morning Post Centre, 22 Dai Fat Street, Tai Po Industrial Estate, Tai Po, Hong Kong. Tel: 2680 8888
Both SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST and 南華早報 are registered in the People's Republic of China.
South China Morning Post (南華早報), Hong Kong's premier English-language newspaper, is audited by HKABC