

08/11/13
10.15 AM

Sergio talks to a chef he threw out of the kitchen during service last night.

PEP TALK

Listen mate. I kicked you out on your arse yesterday. I know it's no fun getting a bollocking all the time. Not for you and not for me either. But you must understand that things can't go on like this. Your attitude... everything. It's not okay. I'm not talking about working hard because you do. But you have to work *meticulously*. You have to put every plate under the magnifying glass, know exactly what to do beforehand. Make sure that your *mise en place* is ready – always. You have to set an example for the people who work for you. You have to have everything under control, keep tabs on everything and most of all: get organised. If your organisation is under control, you'll be laughing. That is sixty per cent of success. I used to know everything by heart: I knew exactly where everything was, how much of it there was, when we were going to need more of it... You're not meticulous enough. You haven't got it in you. It doesn't have to be a problem but it means you're going to have to work very hard... If you don't work on it, you won't make it. I mean: it won't happen without a fight, eh? I don't want to kick you out man, that's not the point. It doesn't make sense for you to stop now. But you should spend some time on the sidelines. So I suggest that you work in the test kitchen for a few days, that'll give you time to think. We'll talk on Sunday. Because the point is for you to become a better chef and for you to think how you can achieve that. I would prefer it if I didn't have to give you a bollocking all the time. Because I don't do it for the hell of it. I'm not an asshole. But you have to do the job right, eh mate? Right. Now get back to work!

Sergio comes into the office. The first thing he sees is an empty coffee cup in an otherwise tidy office.

08/11/13
11.30 AM

GARBAGE

What's this mess? This is what I can't stand, right? I want everything to be clean and tidy. At home as well. If Ellemieke has been cooking with the kids I'll clean up before I do anything else, right down to the push buttons on the oven. Even if I come home in the middle of the night and am completely knackered. Everything has to be neat and ordered, otherwise I'll get nothing done – it's compulsive. A chef with stains on his jacket has to put on another one straightaway. We're not garbage collectors after all. And it makes me want to puke if something is wrong on the plate. If I get in at *Pure C* and see a smear on the wall or a stain on a chair... I hate that. I also can't stand it when the interior of a restaurant isn't up-to-date any more... Surely that means you don't care about the business? At the *Hôtel Costes* in Paris they get it. The last time I was there someone was retouching the flower boxes with paint. The owner was standing by and pointing out where the guy needed to add paint – and that is how it should be. Dotting the i's and crossing the t's. That is what gives me goose pimples.

7/12/12
6.15 PM

Still in the empty restaurant. Sergio is eating a cheese sandwich which – as usual – he smothers in a huge amount of Sriracha sauce.

FUCKING MUSSELS

After I'd spent about seven months at Spijkers' my dad got ill. His joints were playing up from years of hauling those enormous pans of mussels. So I went back without a second thought. Of course. You help your parents out, no argument: family means everything to me. The change was enormous: one moment I would see *poussin aux truffes* pass by at *De Swaen*, the next I was back in the same old mussel routine. *Oud Sluis* was chock-a-block twice a day; those mussels were selling like hotcakes. I mean: my dad was a good cook, he also had scallops and turbot on the menu. But in the end everybody wanted mussels. I thought that was terrible! I wanted to do something with what I had learned at Spijkers': create a pretty starter, a beautiful dessert. But in a place like ours an arty-farty salad would only make you end up looking like a prat. All in all, there were perhaps two tables who wanted to try my dishes. So frustrating! I would jump leaps and bounds whenever mussel season was over. Because then I would have two months to practise, to get better. But before I knew it I would read in the papers that the season was starting all over again. And then my stomach would turn. Fuck man, it was starting all over again: months of walking around frustrated.

My mother noticed that. She also noticed that I had something in me. At a certain point she took the plunge and decided that we would continue with my cooking. She had the balls to make a point about those mussels. But that was what people kept ringing up for. If I said that there were no mussels, they wouldn't show up. We went from one hundred customers a day to four covers. There were nights when the reservations book was empty, when I would stand at the window waiting for a car to drive into the car park. But nobody came. Well, nothing else can make you feel more ashamed in front of your parents! I had moments of such doubt that I wanted to close the place down. But if I did that I would have felt like a total loser. There was only one option: keep believing in myself.

My parents never stopped helping me. *Oud Sluis* has always been a family business and it still is. My mother was still doing the flowers when I had three stars, my younger brother Michel is maître d' and does the accounts... The take-over went very gradually. I dreaded it, thinking: I can't do this, all that responsibility, the pressure. What's more, I never had a partner to help out at the restaurant, I've always done it on my own. That has been very hard. But however hard it was and however often I cried my eyes out, anything was better than those fucking mussels.

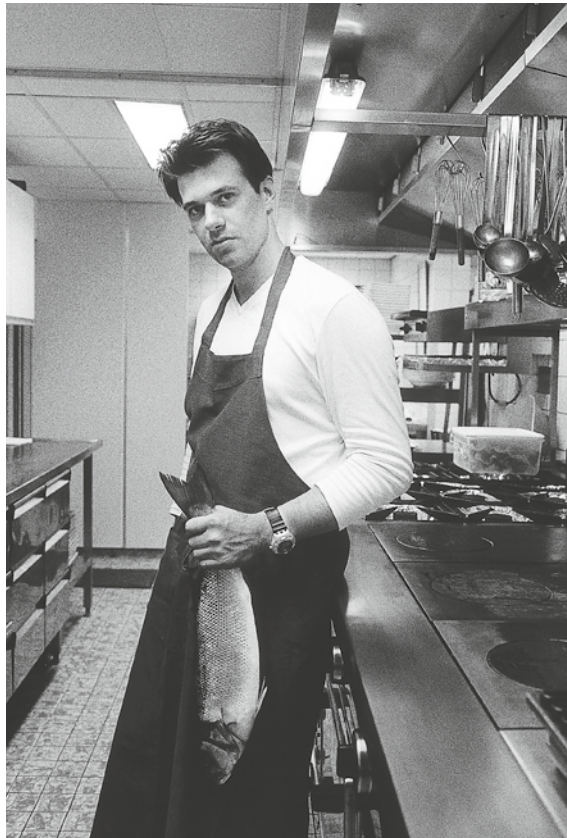


The centre of this dessert was a visual specially designed for *Oud Sluis* by *Studio Job* representing all the elements of a farm: from buckets to pitch forks, from horseshoes to pigs (fig. 2). This element was created by filling a silicone mould with a soft raspberry *crèmeux* with a touch of vanilla. That was perhaps the hardest part of this dessert: a *crèmeux* needs to feel soft in your mouth but for this dish it also had to be sufficiently firm for all the details of the farm visual to remain visible. As is often the case in pastry it's that zero point x amount of grams that makes all the difference. And yes, this means that sometimes you have to try something out dozens of times before you get it right.

Underneath the raspberry *crèmeux* we created a mirror of raspberry jelly that was a little bit firmer in texture (fig. 1). And underneath that was a mascarpone cream that I made by folding puréed raspberries into mascarpone. Around this lot I poured some oat milk thickened with xantana, adding some pistachio oil from Piedmont and a little lemon zest to it to create a marbled effect. I thought this created a visually startling result: the stark white of the oat milk with green specks of pistachio oil.

I arranged different textures of raspberry around the farm visual (fig. 3). That was tricky as well: whenever you work with different textures everything has to be just right. There should be a difference but the difference mustn't be too great. I made raspberry crisps by allowing raspberry coulis and sugar syrup to set in the oven, cutting them out and sprinkling them with oat flakes. You could taste the sweetness of the raspberries and the crispy texture of the oats – lovely! I also made a shortcrust crumble with finely chopped toasted pistachios, freeze-dried raspberries, powdered yoghurt and powdered raspberries. There were also tiny macaroons with a filling that echoed the dish's main flavours: oat milk and raspberry (fig. 3). Then we made a *dacquoise*: this is a biscuit based on egg whites, sugar and ground almonds – no flour – added oat flakes and spread it thinly on a silpat sheet. We dusted it lightly with icing sugar and baked it at 185°C – short and sweet – so the top layer would caramelise while the bottom remained soft and gooey. We cut out rounds of the *dacquoise* and arranged them in between the other elements to add extra texture.

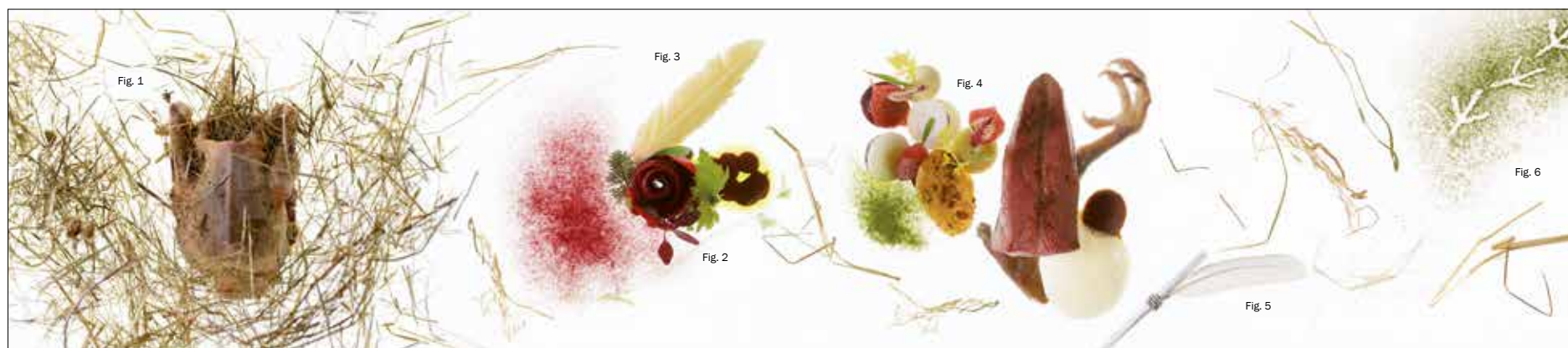
“AS IS SO OFTEN THE CASE IN PASTRY, IT'S THE TINIEST AMOUNT THAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE.”



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The pigeon breast was served on the plate carved open. We also served the leg (fig. 4). I wanted to serve the leg as brutally as possible, that's why it was completely intact with the claw still on it. Served on the side were the pigeon jus and a second jus made with truffle, hay milk, tonka beans and lime. We also served the pigeon heart. This was first pickled in brine and then cooked with butter, stock, salt and pepper in the *Roner* at 64°C. Then we sliced the heart in half and dehydrated it in the *Easy Dry*. After that we ground it to a powder and mixed it with *fleur de sel*. At the last minute the pigeon was seasoned with its own heart. The dish was garnished at the table with shaved black truffle for a celebratory finish.

Every detail of this dish was connected to my farewell. When I think about goodbyes I think about flowers. So that's why there was also a rose made of beetroot (fig. 2). The beetroot was marinated, vacuum-packed and steamed. The rose was then assembled leaf by leaf with every rose consisting of twelve to fourteen leaves – a hell of a job but I absolutely wanted it: I thought it was a lovely poetic element on the plate. The vinaigrette that was served with it was flavoured with merlot vinegar and the rose was surrounded with baby herbs and twigs, symbols of a new beginning.

The beetroot came back in other textures too, for example the crisps in the shape of rosebush leaves. I had a mould made especially for that. The mould was filled with an emulsion of cooked beetroot and rice flour, then baked to crisps in the oven at 90°C. Next to that on the plate were tiny dots of beetroot gel, rounds of beetroot jelly and freeze-dried beetroot powder (fig. 4). We also made a beautifully smooth beetroot emulsion with a little vanilla, grapeseed oil and olive oil. The biscuit you see there is flavoured with grains that pigeons like to eat.

And then there are the feathers... The feather on the left is edible and made from root vegetables (fig. 3). It's an ode to two of my greatest sources of inspiration: the fashion designers Martin Margiela and Ann Demeulemeester. These are people who stir something up with their own unique style – at least in me. And they often work with feathers, so there you go. The feather on the right was real (fig. 5). There was a pigeon ring attached to it with a little note bearing a personal message to my customers. What did it say? That it's time to take the next step in my cooking career. That this is why I'm leaving the nest heading towards a new future in search of new flavours, new creations and new challenges.

“THIS DISH WAS MY WAY OF SAYING: SWEET PEOPLE, THIS WAS IT.”