

Hospitality

Life is Full of Surprises

An Interview with Heinz Beck, Executive Chef, La Pergola

EDITORS' NOTE In his current post since 1994, Heinz Beck is the recipient of numerous awards for outstanding achievement throughout a long and prestigious career. The menu at La Pergola is his greatest achievement to date – innovative and exciting while maintaining a respect for culinary tradition and remembering that great cooking is about fresh ingredients handled with sensitivity and passion. In 2000, Heinz was awarded the Gold Medal of the Foyer of Artists Award, an International Award from La Sapienza University of Rome, the first time the award had been given to a chef.



Heinz Beck

RESTAURANT BRIEF Housed inside the Rome Cavalieri hotel, La Pergola (www.heinzbeck.com) is a three-star Michelin restaurant, the only one in Rome to be awarded this honor. The restaurant boasts a wine cellar with over 50,000 bottles, a water menu with 29 choices, olive oils and vintage balsamic vinegars from the best producers in Italy, and the finest ingredients to be sourced in the Mediterranean. Diners are surrounded by fine paintings, a rare Aubusson tapestry, Sèvres porcelain, 18th century bronze candelabra, precious imperial furniture, and a wonderful collection of hand-blown glass by Emile Gallé. Panoramic windows and a candlelit terrace offer delightful views of landmarks like the dome of St Peter's. Since the year 2000, the major Italian gastronomic guides such as L'Espresso, Gambero Rosso, and Bibenda consider La Pergola the "Best Restaurant of Rome" and one of the best in Italy, as well as the best restaurant within a hotel in Italy.

How do you define your cuisine at La Pergola?

It is healthy, light cuisine, full of Mediterranean flavors.

What are your principal influences in designing the menu?

The principal influence is the selection of food products that are top quality, in season, and available in the Italian market. Therefore, my menus change seasonally throughout the year and the food is prepared in a way that respects

the integrity of the food product itself. The presentations must be healthy, tasty, and modern, respecting the Italian methods of cooking. Mother Nature offers me my first idea, and with the technique, I create a plate focusing on two priorities: respecting the tradition and creating healthy dishes. Using only organically grown and fresh vegetables, fruit, meat, and fish and choosing top-quality materials render a balanced and harmonious result that is wonderfully memorable.

What are two of your signature dishes?

The mullet wrapped in a pasta brick and amaranth with black mushrooms, tartufo nero, black truffles, and a poached egg. The "fiore di zucca" is a deep-fried zucchini flower with quail egg and caviar on a saffron consommé.



What do these two dishes offer and what makes them special?

The red mullet is made with sun-dried tomatoes inside the wrapping and Taggiasche olives from Taggia in the North Italy. The olives have a very smooth olive flavor. The dish is served with a fresh herb salad. The herbs are grown in my private greenhouse here at the hotel. Amaranth is a very healthy grain, slightly sweet in flavor. It works very well together with a slowly poached egg produced by free range organic chickens. The special touch is the Umbrian black truffle, which is the perfect blend for the egg and amaranth.

The "fiore di zucca" I have chosen for the cover of my first book, because it's beautiful



to see, like a shining sun, and it is the perfect equilibrium of consistency in the mouth.

You have been Executive Chef of La Pergola since 1994. What made you decide to accept this role, and what has made La Pergola a place you have wanted to spend over fifteen years of your career?

Life is full of surprises and it has been a great challenge for me coming to Rome. I love this country, the people, and the food. La Pergola has become part of me, my passion, and I hope to continue for many years to come.

Has the restaurant's position within the hotel driven more customers to dine there, or is your clientele more local?

Eighty percent of my guests are Italian, coming from all over the country and 50 percent of these are local Roman guests. There are as well many people that link their stay in the hotel to a dinner at La Pergola, and vice versa.

How has the food and beverage business, and your venue specifically, been affected by the economic downturn?

We are so lucky to be still fully booked every night, even with this economic downturn. People choose our place because we give them more than they expect and we offer a good value for the money.

What are your key priorities as you look to the year ahead?

My key priorities for the next year are to consolidate my clientele and grow my wine cellar, because this is the right moment for investment. Also, in September 2009 I opened my restaurant in London, Apsleys a Heinz Beck Restaurant, in the Lanesborough Hotel on Hyde Park Corner. In its first month, it had already received its first Michelin star and its development will continue to be a priority. ●

La Pergola inside the Rome Cavalieri hotel