

This article originally appeared in Issue 11 of *The World of Fine Wine* magazine. The article may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement.

Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world's finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews and comprehensive international auction results. For further information, and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit www.finewinemag.com or call +44 (0)20 8950 9117.



GUALTIERO MARCHESI

Franco Ziliani presents a profile of one of Italy's most famous chefs, and discusses with Marchesi himself his radical views on food-and-wine pairing

Born in Milan in 1930, and the first Italian chef to receive, in 1985, three Michelin stars, Gualtiero Marchesi marks a watershed in 20th-century Italian cuisine. It is incontrovertible that there was one type of cooking before Marchesi, and another after.

Marchesi arrived at a new way of looking at cuisine in a country that has a treasure chest of local gastronomic traditions but ran the risk of slamming it shut. Through meticulous research and technique, organization, and presentation, he rediscovered and revealed the essence of dishes, stripping away all the baroque flourishes and foreign influences that had obscured them. It is a calling that has lasted 50 years and has witnessed carefully calculated acts of provocation.

The dishes that have defined the different stages of this genius's career and that have since become classics—so balanced, so geometrical, so perfect—were designed to disturb and to force reflection as well as to thrill. To single out only three among many, there was his famed *raviolo aperto*, incorporating a large square of white pasta imbedded with a leaf of parsley; his *riso, oro, e zafferano*, a saffron risotto topped with a sheet of gold leaf; and his recent Jackson Pollock-inspired creation of *calamaretti* drizzled with three different sauces.

I have been a friend of Marchesi's for more than 20 years, ever since Milan was split into fanatical devotees and ferocious critics by his restaurant in Via Bonvesin de la Riva (named after the 13th-century author of the treatise *De Quinquaginta Curialitatibus ad Mensam*, a manual of table etiquette). I went to see him, on the occasion of festivities marking his first 50 years as a chef, in his restaurant in Franciacorta, Italy's *petite Champagne* where its best *méthode traditionnelle* sparkling wines are produced and where Marchesi moved in 1994. My goal was to discuss with him the relationship between his cuisine and wine—to discover his predilections and explore his idiosyncratic notions regarding “the culture of fine dining.”

Despite collaborating over the years with the ablest sommeliers—including Giuseppe Vacarini, Best Sommelier in the World in 1978, then director of the Gualtiero Marchesi restaurant in Milan from 1978 to 1983, and Antonio Dacomo, current president of the Association of Piedmontese Sommeliers—Marchesi was as unpredictable as ever on the subject, which he promptly turned upside down.

With a characteristic combination of irony and sincerity, and a range of cultural reference that is equally typical, he didn't so much



Gualtiero Marchesi

evade the questions I put him as suggest a shift of perspective: Should cuisine and wine continue to be considered as mutually rewarding, or should we, rather, see them as two very different universes?

Concentrating on the dish, not the wine

I begin by glancing at his restaurant wine list, which specifies the alcohol level of every wine. “People tend to request lighter wines, something not too ambitious,” he explains, “because they are taken aback by the higher alcohol and power of many of today's wines.”

Having got him going, I move on to a more personal question: “How did your relationship with wine develop, and how would

you describe it today?” Straightaway, he replied, “I now dedicate myself purely to tasting. When I drink *un caffè*, for example, I want it super-concentrated—I don't want to keep sipping it two or three times; very little is enough, and I am quite satisfied. I do still drink wine, though far less than in the past, and, again, I am happy with very little; any more just fills me up and, frankly, gives me no additional pleasure.”

“But looking at the matter as a professional,” I persist, “how do you now see the relationship between the creation of a dish—which for you has always been the result of a lucid intellectual process, with nothing left to chance—and the selection of the wine best suited to it?” He still won't rise to the bait but reveals that he no longer involves himself in the wine cellar, or in the selection of wines, as he did in the past. Rather, he delegates these responsibilities to his sommeliers, who make their choices on the basis of the menu, as well as on the expectations entertained by international visitors to a restaurant of this stature.

I attempt to discover whether he has always kept a certain distance from wine, even when his creation of dishes such as the *raviolo aperto* was revolutionizing Italian cuisine. “I always concentrated on the dish, not on anything else—and least of all on the wine. After all, I thought, the sommelier will take care of that... and very possibly ruin everything in the process. Pairing with wine was never a subject that interested me much. When I was considering a dish, I thought of wines only because I was so familiar with their characteristics, their aromas, and flavors, but to ‘marry’ food and wine always seemed forced to me. I grant you that if I am eating a certain dish, I might very well drink a particular wine, since I know the world of wine, but I am no longer a great enjoyer of it, and perhaps I never was.”

This defiance, in the best Marchesi style, has its effect, and I am stung into testing whether he really is quite this uninterested. I get him to admit that “in the kitchen I drink just a small amount of wine, just to get a good idea of it, to see if the pairing will work, just to make sure that the wine will remain subordinate and not overwhelm the dish, that it will instead bring out the dish's essential features.” He also insists, however, that wine is more important in the kitchen than in the dining room. When deglazing, for example, the alcohol evaporates, but the acidity and flavor remain. In this process, he concedes that the choice of wine makes a great difference. “Right now, for example, I am making glazed chicken with Riesling, since the qualities of this wine will determine the character of the sauce.”

Marchesi is most passionate about Champagne—“a superb, perfect wine”—believing that it solves a raft of problems inasmuch as it is such a pleasure to drink and pairs well, particularly the Crémant. (Small wonder, then, that he now lives and works in Franciacorta, which uses Champagne's grapes and method but with a different terroir and tradition, producing, inter alia, a Crémant-like blanc de blancs known as Satèn.) But despite Marchesi's faith in Champagne's versatility, he still stresses that “pairing food and wine is not a science, simply an attempt to find a certain balance.”

Separate wines for each dish

By now we are well into the deconstruction of the classical food-and-wine matrix, with Marchesi affirming a position he has never hidden but has seldom stated in such stark terms. We appear to proceed from paradox to paradox, through contentions that seem outrageous but in reality flow from a certain subtle-but-



Fish dripping, a dish inspired by Jackson Pollock

undeniable logic. The rest of our conversation is concerned largely with his attempt to refute my starting premise—that a great chef is obliged to consider wine as a complement to his work.

At this point, Marchesi, a connoisseur of Asian cuisines, administers a rebuke to the Japanese, “who now drink wine with their cuisine,” recalling them to Nipponese purity that allows one choice only—sake—and, of that, “only a little, to cleanse the palate.” He tells me, “I like very much this way of drinking, because it serves simply as a pause and as a means of returning to the dish, and it is easier to achieve than a successful pairing.” He cites as an example sweet-and-sour sauce, “which better fits our culture than a soy sauce thinned with tuna broth. The sweet-and-sour essence is quite stimulating, but it doesn't go well with wine.”

Ruthlessly following his own logic, he continues: “To be totally coherent, a complex meal comprising various courses should have a separate wine for each dish. But seven or eight wines for a meal of seven to eight dishes is unreasonably complicated, impossible even, and compromises have to be made.” I find it hard to say that he's wrong, but much harder to agree when he goes on to condemn wine as “a disturbing element in the correct appreciation of the dishes” that make up his cuisine.

Marshalling arguments that at least deserve consideration, he explains that “when a sommelier tastes wines, he does not eat, but interrupts the process only with a piece of bread or some water. Physical pleasure is all that's needed for drinking, but tasting requires experience, intelligence, and sensitivity. If you bring no experience to your tasting, you cannot make comparisons, because you lack parameters.”

In Marchesi's opinion, “to fully appreciate the bases and the qualities of a cuisine, one needs to create an almost clinical distance, drinking only water with the dishes, and carbonated water rather than tap water, since it helps cleanse the mouth. The problem is that when people eat and drink, they enjoy the eating and drinking and cannot consider anything else.”

Another equally surprising proposal follows. “We should copy the Ancient Greeks at their symposia, where they ate first and drank afterward. That would be quite interesting. We would eat, then move to a table with comfortable chairs and drink a fine bottle, conversing and enjoying the rest of the evening together.” This is the setting, he suggests, that “would best suit most Italian wines, especially the most ambitious, fullest-bodied, most powerful wines.”

Despite the fact that such symposia would send to the archive hundreds of articles and books on the matching of food and wine and bring down the curtain on the sommelier, Marchesi is in no doubt. “When you are tasting wine,” he declares, “you can't be eating, or you're no longer tasting. But then why should the contrary be true—namely that to appreciate my dishes, you have to drink with them? We have been trying, in the name of

Photograph by Riccardo Marcialis

Photograph by Massimo Borchi

conviviality, to blend together two pleasures—the appreciation of food and of wine—that should really be kept distinct.”

The right glass for the job

Marchesi has hurled his strongest challenge yet—all the more provocative in that it comes from a figure working in a rapidly rising wine region and in a restaurant owned by a major Franciacorta producer, Vittorio Moretti of Bellavista in Erbusco. He allows himself to be drawn a little farther, however, on his paradoxical relationship with wine.

Next he expounds his ideas about wine glasses, advocating a small glass for a small wine, a big glass for a big one, and dismissing the concept of a different glass for each wine as promoted by some wine-glass producers. “If one wants to ensure the correct serving temperature of a wine,” he goes on, “then only a very little of the wine should remain for any length of time in the glass, because otherwise the wine will warm up. A small glass will thus hold just the right amount at just the right temperature. And the same goes for the flute. Enjoying each wine at the right temperature means that one can continue appreciating each wine under the best possible conditions.”

A creature of habit in some respects, he prefers Rosso di Montalcino to Brunello—“softer wines, because I like to chill wine to 14°C [57.2°F], a temperature that makes it more enjoyable.”

Gualtiero Marchesi

Born in Milan in 1930, Gualtiero Marchesi's first experience of food preparation was in his parents' restaurant in Milan's Hotel Mercato. He began his vocational training at the Kulm Hotel in St Moritz and then at Ecole Hôtelière in Switzerland. Back in Italy, he began working in the Mercato restaurant, creating an avant-garde cuisine still respectful of tradition. Keen to expand his knowledge, he worked in the finest French restaurants, such as Ledoyen in Paris, Le Chapeau Rouge in Dijon, and the Troisgros restaurant in Roanne.

In 1977, he opened his own restaurant, Gualtiero Marchesi, in Milan. In its first year he won a Michelin star, and in the following year a second. Gastronomic critics Gault and Millau declared in an interview published in *The Times* that Marchesi was one of the finest chefs in the world. His name was listed in the most famous food guides, and in 1985, for the first time in Italy, the *Michelin Guide* recognized his achievement with three stars.

Along with Paul Bocuse and Pierre Romeyer, Marchesi was one of the promoters of Euro-Toques, the European Community of Chefs established in Brussels in 1986 by the EEC.

In September 1993, he moved to Franciacorta in Lombardy. His restaurant is in the L'Albereta hotel, a 19th-century luxury villa with 44 suites, a banqueting hall, swimming pool, sauna, and tennis. From 1994, he initiated several international projects, especially in Japan, where his culinary philosophy resonated strongly. As chef, consultant, and personality, he has been well received on the world stage. Since 2004, he has been rector of ALMA, the Scuola Internazionale di Cucina Italiana (www.alma.scuolacucina.it), which has its headquarters in Colorno near Parma.

He says he loves “to examine it, gauge it, to see even by its hue whether it will be my kind of wine,” and he quotes a phrase of Arnold Schönberg that he particularly likes: “The heart should stay under the control of the brain.”

What he is really looking for in a wine, he explains, “is not balance, but an application of something I feel inside and that is an intimate part of me. I like the Alto Adige wines, but they're too Nordic. I like Valpolicellas; the wines of Breganze; 1971 Castello di Roncade; 1977 Merlot Campo del Lago and Pinot Nero Rosso del Ròcolo made by Villa dal Ferro-Lazzarini in the Colli Berici near Vicenza. These are the wines that still linger in my memory, as much as the standard Dolcetto and the Ligurian Ormeascos that I recently tasted. Lively, well-rounded wines that achieve a harmony that few others do. Winemakers in Piedmont and Tuscany are always pushing the body, the structure, the tannins, or the concentration, the depth, the fruit. The wines of the Veneto that I like display balance and harmony; they possess a naturally pleasing smoothness; they respect my palate, which is delicate. I am always looking for a Lombard-Venetian moderation, in food or in wine; for a smoothness that, I admit, sometimes becomes exaggerated and has to be reined in, lest it become flaccid.”

For Marchesi, “cuisine, like all art forms, is elegance, subtlety, intellectual acuity,” so powerful wines hold no attraction for him. “For my palate and for my cuisine, there is absolutely no place for muscular, overextracted wines, slathered with oak, that are aggressive, massive, and as far from elegance as one can get. For me, they are without personality, soulless, with no roots anywhere; they reflect not terroir but technique. Technique, Jackson Pollock tells us, is a trap, and if technique remains technique and is not subservient, then you have a problem.” Such modern wines, as he sees them, “lack the attraction of emotion, which sometimes can reside even in a defect, in a limitation; it can be a sign of naturalness, of a thing not finished, something that could have been perfect but remains structurally open and available for our interpretation.”

Citing Paul Klee, one of his favorite artists, who maintained that art is found between the paint and the canvas, Marchesi expresses his belief that the soul of a wine can be found “in its ability to express a land, a grape, a wine grower's hand, without becoming dumb and stiff through too much rigid, technical perfection—a condition that doesn't allow us margins or spaces for interpretation, the opportunity to interact with the wine and become excited. If a wine remains in the glass or the bottle, something is not working. Wine for me has to be a true pleasure, something that tempts you to drink, that satisfies you, creates no barriers, puts you at your ease, and makes it impossible to put down the glass.”

After we have got as far as we can with wine, a subject that intrigues Marchesi intellectually but fails to touch his spirit, we return again to his concept of cuisine. For him, a chef “becomes accomplished when he can recognize the quality of a dish without even tasting it, when he simply looks at the plate, because a dish is beautiful if it is good. Beauty is goodness, not beauty per se! We're not merchandising mere aesthetics; this Kierkegaardian is interested in the ethical as well—that is, the beautiful that must be good.”

Attracted by rigor and simplicity, and opposed to cooks who crowd things on plates, Marchesi can, even in the kitchen, invoke the spirit of Michelangelo: “The work of art is already there; you have to remove the superfluous, not add, to find the essence, or the heart of the essence.” Who will contradict him? ■

RECIPES

Penne miele, cannella, pecorino

(Penne with honey, cinnamon, and pecorino cheese)

Serves 1

2½oz (80g) penne rigate
1oz (30g) acacia honey
1 pinch (2g) powdered cinnamon
1oz (30g) pecorino romano cheese

In a small saucepan, cook the penne in salted, boiling water. Drain, place in a round bowl, and add the honey. Arrange on a soup plate, and sprinkle with powdered cinnamon and flakes of pecorino.

Pairing wine: Giacomo Bologna Barbera d'Asti Bricco dell'Uccellone Braida



Raviolo aperto (above)

(Open raviolo)

Serves 6

For the filling:

21oz (600g) pieces of fish (sole, scallops)
4¼oz (120g) butter
6 large parsley leaves
½ pint (10cl) dry white wine
1 small piece of ginger (for ginger juice in step 7)
salt and white pepper

For the green pasta:

3½oz (100g) white flour
2¾oz (80g) spinach leaves
1 egg
½ tbsp olive oil

For the white pasta:

3½oz (100g) white flour
1 egg
½ tbsp olive oil
salt

1. Wash and clean the spinach, cook in salted water, drain and pat dry, chop fine, and press through a wire-mesh sieve.
2. On a piece of marble, form a cone of flour, and put the egg, spinach, oil, and salt in the middle. Slowly knead together until homogeneous, then let it rest for at least two hours covered with a cloth.

3. Use this same procedure to make the white pasta.
4. Using a pasta machine, roll out a sheet of white pasta 3mm thick. Cut into 12 squares, each about 2in (5cm) a side. In the center of six of them, place a parsley leaf, cover with the other squares, and pass the double squares through the machine again, first in one direction, then another, so that the squares are extended in all directions, until a thickness of 1mm is achieved.
5. From the resulting thinner pasta sheets, cut out squares measuring about 4in (10cm) a side, keeping the parsley leaf in the center.
6. Roll out the green pasta to a thickness of 1mm, and cut out six squares, each 4in (10cm) a side.
7. Peel the fresh ginger root, grate, and press to release the juice.
8. In a saucepan, brown ¾oz (20g) butter, add the fish, and cook for a few moments. Add white wine, let it sit for the flavors to marry, then remove fish from the pan.
9. Reduce the cooking liquid, add 1 tbsp of ginger juice, and whip the sauce obtained with the remaining butter. Replace the fish in the saucepan to take flavor.
10. In the meantime, cook the pasta in plenty of boiling water.
11. Put a tablespoon of sauce in the bottom of every plate, place over it the green pasta, then the fish with sauce, and on top cover with the parsley-leaf pasta.

Pairing wine: La Ferghettina Terre di Franciacorta Bianco Chardonnay Favento

Riso, oro e zafferano

(Rice, gold, and saffron)

Serves 4

8½oz (240g) carnaroli rice
2oz (60g) butter
1oz (30g) grated Parmesan cheese
1tsp saffron stigmas
1tsp finely chopped onions
¾ pint (20cl) dry white wine
2½ pints (1 liter) water
salt
4 sheets of gold leaf

1. Toast the rice in a saucepan with ½oz (10g) of butter; add ¾ pint (20cl) dry white wine, and let it evaporate; add the boiling broth, then the saffron; heat until cooked, stirring occasionally.
2. In a separate saucepan, brown sweat the onion in ½oz (10g) butter; add the rest of the wine, reduce the liquid by half, then whip in the remaining butter in flakes, stirring until the butter becomes dense and thick (more easily done with an electric handheld mixer).
3. Strain the emulsified butter in a sieve to eliminate the pieces of onion, which by now have flavored the sauce.
4. When done, add salt, and then mix the risotto with the white butter and the Parmesan. Spread the risotto evenly over flat plates, position a sheet of 24-carat gold leaf on top of each, and serve.

Pairing wine: Valentini Trebbiano d'Abruzzo