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As told to René Kladzyk, 2513 words.

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On pushing for the vision you know is right

Chef Elisa Da Prato discusses the importance of being confident, sticking to your vision, and creating intimacy with your audience. To begin, where are you now and what have you been working on lately?

I'm back in Italy right now—I'm based in Lucca. Lucca is a really beautiful, very chic medieval city, which is very close to Florence and also very close to the beach. My family is from this small village just north of Lucca, so I've been coming to Lucca my whole life. In fact, I'm named after the Princess of Lucca, who was Napoleon's little sister, Elisa Baciocchi Bonaparte.

Oh my gosh. You started a restaurant in Italy before, right?

Yeah. For the last 15 years, I've been pretty consistently spending a few months here or going back (and forth). And then I moved to Barga (Italy) and I opened a restaurant in June of 2019. So six months later, the world shut down. And restaurants obviously took a pretty hard hit. Restaurants that had been open for six months took an especially large hit. We had a pretty valiant year, but it was really, really difficult. I don't want to sound whiny, because I know a lot of people went through a lot worse, but it was really, really hard for me. I mean, it really felt like getting the shit kicked out of me.

That was your first restaurant?

Yeah. So in any event, all of the sudden I'm locked out of the world. Italy was on a really hardcore lockdown. It was like three and a half months without any human contact whatsoever, which is pretty crazy, especially for somebody like me. I live alone. I don't have any kids.

The following fall Italy shut down again in October. I went back to New York, I did all these different things, and then I lived moment after moment of a lot of really difficult stuff, but I just kept going for it. I kept doing pop-ups. I kept doing things. I kept pushing and pushing and pushing. I was dealing with this broken leg. I had no insurance. At one point I was even doing pop-ups on crutches.

Oh wow.

But I managed to pull out of it. And I did some really serious work on myself. I just fucking hustled around. I was introduced to these guys who wanted to open an Italian restaurant. They had this location on Stone Street (in Manhattan). They had other bars that seemed very lucrative, and they seemed to have a lot of money behind them. They seemed to be really well organized, and they seemed really into my ideas. There were some friction-y things at the beginning, just little small clashes about style or taste. But you know what? I pushed really hard to do the style of the restaurant the way that I thought it should be done. They wanted something much more commercial that felt more like all of the other restaurants in New York right now.

They all kind of feel like airport bars to me. And that I think is a real shame. This is where I get very manifesto-y and ranty. But I really believe in restaurants as a cultural space. I grew up in restaurants. I love being in restaurants. I feel cloaked in a grandmother's love in a restaurant. I like having the people around me. I like the wall of sound. I like the drama of it. I like the ballet of it. I like to eat. I like to drink. I like to hold court. I like to sit with people. I like to talk to waiters. I like

to watch people move. It's a whole show. I like to watch people move around. I like to watch people emote and do things. I like the smells of it. I just really fucking love everything about it, very genuinely.

I grew up in restaurants. Not only did I grow up in restaurants that my family ran, we just went out to dinner a lot. Italians go out to dinner a lot. They spend all their time in restaurants. So at Etrusca (Da Prato's New York restaurant), I just sat one of the owners down one day - they wanted to do this really corny build out. And I just sat him down and I said, "Listen, I care a lot about this project. There's going to be a lot of people coming. This is a big step in my career, and I really just want it to be done right."

And you know what? I really respected him because he heard me and he went, "Okay, alright." And so they ended up spending a bit too much money on the build out, which I know he regretted. But every person who came into that restaurant said, "This is fucking incredible. There's nothing else like this in the city. This feels like a restaurant in Italy in the 1960s, but in the best way." It felt real. It felt earnest. It was an homage to all of my favorite parts of restaurants. It had a very chic minimalism to it interspersed with these botanical little explosions. To me, there's something so cool about putting a crisp white tablecloth in front of a corroded, decayed, crumbly wall.

How do you know when you need to push back and be uncompromising with your vision versus when you need to make concessions?

The design aesthetics of shared public spaces actually affect us. And I think that the homogenization and the airport bar-ization of every hospitality space in New York thanks, no thanks to Danny Meyer and other people, is a fucking nightmare. Pardon my French. It's a tragedy. It tears down human connections. It tears down any kind of fun societal intimacy. I mean, can you picture Gertrude Stein having a salon in a restaurant that feels like a Bobby Flay steakhouse? Can you imagine proposing to your girlfriend or proposing to your boyfriend in a restaurant that feels like some carbon copy of Carbone made five times over where the ink is smeared, and it just feels like some corny impersonation of itself?

Another colleague of mine came and ate with a bunch of his friends, and he was like, "I can't believe you've got real candles on the table." Our standards are so low. I was talking to this woman and she goes, "Well, what if you just didn't care as much? What if you just treated this more like a gig and just build them the restaurant they want and get your money?"

And unfortunately, for better or for worse, I am incapable of doing that. I knew that there were eyes on me. And aside from that, I want to do good. I mean, it wasn't just about me. I want to do good work, and I want to put my money where my mouth is.

How do you feel like you arrived at this level of trust in your own vision? Or is it just innate?

I just know that I'm right. And most Italians are exactly like that. It is a very Italian thing to know you do not serve cappuccino at four PM. Everyone thinks that Italy is like some lawless, well-dressed orgy, but there are in fact many rules. And I have always been stubborn. Also, I've always gotten a lot of really positive feedback on my work. People cannot fuck with my food. I've made some mistakes. But, I hate to say it, but I just know that I'm right. I know that I'm right.

I've yet to see you be wrong. Can you share your opinions with me on food as an art form, or the intersection of food and art?

When you're cooking, you're dealing with something that's alive. And so maybe, going back to this idea of rules, you have to understand how things work. Certain things don't go together. They just don't. There's a lot of wit involved in making fun culinary decisions. You're playing with context.

My original background is in experimental art and consciousness philosophy. I got really into Manuel DeLanda and different aspects of architectural theory, and also early philosophical metaphysical writing, which talks about the inherent potential in all material things and inherent qualia. But an egg, for example, has the potential to become a thousand different things. It can be an omelet, it can be a pie crust, it can be pasta. It has the potential to really explode into all of these different directions.

So you're also always playing with context, against context. If I'm in New York and I'm making fried rabbit, which is a super classic dish here (in Italy), how am I going to play with the expectations of that?

But in terms of art, there has to be a cohesiveness to it. It has to make sense. I always talk about harmonics and color theory. If you think about (food) in terms of color theory, certain things just match. They go together. They have additive and negative qualities that complement or do, then other things clash.

With food, I want it to be beautiful. I like making food that feels really familiar and homey, but there's also something completely alien about it at the same time that maybe looks unrecognizable. I want to work at the intersection of romance and precision. You want things that feel romantic, that feel abundant, that feel sexual, that feel bosomy, but they have to be precisely executed or else it all falls apart.

So in terms of art, I don't like cookery cuisine, "cheffery," whatever you want to call it: that's too tight, too masculine, that feels overwrought. You want the imprint of the chef, but you don't want to watch him jerk off.

Your meals always make me feel as though I'm living inside a Peter Greenaway film—there's this luscious, sensuousness to it.

Luscious, abundant. Bosomy, I use "bosomy."

Bosomy! I love that.

Bosomy. I want people to enjoy things and I want people to get excited. And what I love about food is the same thing I love about music. It's like tickling someone from the inside out. I was always jealous of musicians, and I never got to be a musician, but this is kind of the closest I can get. To make someone's body feel good is a really exciting idea to me. And that comes into play also with the nature of the design and experience of the restaurant. You want candlelight, you want good music, you want the right temperature. You want all these fun little views and things to look at. It's very energetically sensitive.

You have to be in control. I'm not saying I'm good at everything. I know I've made a lot of mistakes, which I try to learn from all the time, but I do know what I'm talking about and I'm correct.

Do you have advice for people who are trying to get a creative business off the ground?

First things first, you have to really gut check anyone you get into bed with 1000 percent. And this is something that I've learned in every aspect: even in these small private dinners, bigger relationships, work relationships. It's just like dating, you never know when someone is just going to turn out to be a psycho. If someone wants to open a restaurant, my advice would be similar to what a film teacher told me in film school: you need to make the films that you will want to see. When it comes to a restaurant, you want to build a restaurant that you would want to be in. You want to create a place that you're happy to be in.

One thing that being back here also has taught me is you can do small scale things that are very impactful to other people, that really make a difference in people's lives.

With chefs, my advice would be to not copy other people's work. It doesn't get you anywhere. I think you have to go and look inside yourself and find instincts and find things that really turn you on and get you excited. I don't think that it's a copy and paste project because it's so personal. And a lot of people have taken elements of my stuff, and I see it sprinkled in their work. Sometimes it's flattering and you see that it's sincere. And other times you see people are just making some corny pastiche of a bunch of things they saw on Instagram and they're trying to repackage it or something.

If you are sincere and you are making real work—real sincere work, real food, and it's coming from this real sincere place—people will respond to it. They will feel the difference. I think being kind to others is also very important. The hive mind is in trouble. What the hive mind needs, in my opinion, is more honey and more love and care. I know it sounds corny, but there's something about honesty and humility and trying to do something because you want to create something that's bigger than yourself.

I'll leave you with this thought: I knew when I was in film school that the odds of me becoming a Jim Jarmusch or Stanley Kubrick were slim to none. But then I thought about how much other work I've seen by other people, and (how) it creates this kind of collective unconscious. So then I started to think about art as a parade. The way a parade works is by everybody participating in it. And the way that you move the parade forward is by, even if it's just a little thing, even if you're just hanging out, twirling a baton, you're in the parade, you're pushing it forward. To a little kid it's like the coolest thing you've ever seen in your life, and it's a collective thing from everybody. So I thought if I could just make one float that pushes the parade forward and keeps the hive mind moving forward, then I'll have at least done something.

It's this fact that we're all in it together and that we're all throwing flowers into the parade, putting our energy into the parade, and we've got to keep it moving. It's the only thing that keeps us from falling apart, some kind of sense of joy from somebody else taking a chance and willing to put themselves out there and put what they want to see into the world because they care about it and because it's real.

Elisa Da Prato recommends:

Arturo's on West Houston

Noodle Pudding in Brooklyn Heights

The olive oil of Aurelio Barattini in Lucca

The cinematic masterpiece that is Wayne's World

The entire discography of The Brian Jonestown Massacre, Spacemen 3, and The Stone Roses, respectively

Name

Elisa Da Prato

Vocation

chef

Fact

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