



L.A. KITCHEN

TESTO ROBERTO CROCI
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One city, one hundred kitchens: it is the stratified and chaotic los angeles of which top chef michael voltaggio seems to hold the keys



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STARTERS: HAMACHI TUNA ON A RADISH BABY SALAD WITH TEMPURA SAUCE MIXED WITH THE FAMOUS CAESAR ONE (A SOPHISTICATED VERSION OF THE CAESAR'S SALAD). Main course: Beef tartare with palm hearts, sea beans, chimichurri (Argentinean sauce that vaguely reminds us of pesto sauce), horseradish and rye flake cracker. Delicious. Grilled pork belly with infused grilled oil, BBQ sauce, fresh corn. A total must try. Dessert: caramelized apples, nuts and smoked ice-cream.

This the menu of my evening, consumed at Ink on Melrose Ave, West Hollywood, LA. The chef, Michael Voltaggio, is in the kitchen, tattoos and various fits of rage dictated by the devilish rhythms in the kitchen. A star and the winner of the Sixth edition of the popular TV show Top Chef, chef at Charlie Palmer's Dry Creek Kitchen where he earned a Michelin star, disciple of José Andrés in the famous kitchen of Bazaar in Beverly Hills, Michael (a privilege to meet him) is one of the new chefs of avant-garde kitchen, whose flavour intricacies is in contrast with the simplicity of the ingredients. Ink, his first restaurant as owner, has been nominated by several American papers as one of the ten new places of the year that can't be missed (and where to be spotted at). After eating in religious silence, we chat for a bit, and we both agree that, while the sloth is the pain of our times, gluttony and greed are two sides of the same coin: without one, we wouldn't have the other.

WHY THE NAME INK? WHAT IS THE PHILOSOPHY OF YOUR KITCHEN?

Ink as hinting stability, as an indelible impression of the food inspired by a myriad of micro worlds that populate the city of Los Angeles. Ink like my tattoos, like the modern kitchen of LA, classic flavours elevated to new experiences with incomparable quality ingredients and refined execution techniques. An elegant version of ethnic food, which is found in various parts of the city. When I was a child, I used to hate vegetables; since then, I now try and turn everything that I wouldn't normally eat into something exquisite. The theme of my restaurant is... there is no theme. There is nothing permanent, except for the walls that frame the kitchen.

DO YOU CHANGE THE MENU OFTEN?

We change something every day. I can't always cook the same things, and I like to experiment with new ingredients until I find the right equilibrium. When we managed to sell the same dish for a while, we get bored of making it and we change it.

WHAT DID YOU USED TO EAT WHEN YOU WERE A CHILD?

I was very limited, I was certainly not gifted with a gourmet appetite. I always used to eat the same things, spaghetti, grilled cheese sandwich, hot dog, fried



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chicken, chips, all the things that kids born over here tend to eat. My mother in reality is an excellent cook, she cooks all the typical American delicacies; pork chops, meat loaf, fried chicken, grilled T-bone steak, pumpkin pie. She's always been good at it, even though I was a lost cause.

WHY LOS ANGELES?

I love LA, I want my restaurant to reflect the love I feel for this city. I want my clients to be excited to come here to eat, I want my waiters to look forward to come to work. I want it to be an authentic place, intimate and with no frills, but of very high quality, the best.

THE FIRST TIME YOU VENTURED INTO THE KITCHEN?

I was 15, I wanted to follow my brother Bryan's footsteps who was studying at the Culinary Institute of America. Whereas I decided not to study and I did my apprenticeship at the famous Greenbrier Resort in West Virginia. I learnt all those things that perhaps I would have never learnt at school, like to fillet the fish to perfection until you never want to see it again for the rest of your life and how to skin deer and game.

AND THEN?

At 21, once I finished my apprenticeship, I was employed by the Ritz Carlton in Naples, Florida, under the leadership of Arnaud Berthelier, where I learnt how to combine my classic training with unusual techniques, revolutionaries, that then reflect my style. He used to work a lot with sous-vide (vacuum packed, editor's note) because he had worked under Alain Ducasse. I have learnt a lot from him, he knew things that I would have never imagined could have existed, including elements of the molecular gastronomy that have enabled me to cook a perfect carrot, holding onto all its flavour without changing its nutritious qualities.

WHEN YOU ARE NOT COOKING, WHERE DO YOU EAT?

You can find all sorts of cuisines in Los Angeles, it is a melting pot of cultures, flavours evolved in often more interesting recipes than the ones you find in its original country, also because here there is a lot of experimenting with different fusions. Each neighbourhood has different styles, Koreatown, Downtown, West Hollywood, San Gabriel Valley are places I recommend for Asian flavours, Venice for the 'new' American cuisines influenced by the rest of the world; Beverly Hills for classic French, Spanish and Italian, Hollywood for Mexicans and Thai; Culver City for the new and up-and-coming chefs; Malibu for new trends, even though many are way too pretentious. Then there's Roy Choi, the one who started off the food truck riot with Kogi, and



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Jordan Kahn by Red Medicine in Beverly Hills, with his fantastic Vietnamese cuisine. Los Angeles is an international city, where people don't cook traditional American food, but instead go for new LA food, in a 21st century style. When I fancy tacos, I go to Ricky's Fish Tacos in Hollywood: they fry everything in lard which gives fish and meat the perfect consistency: for sushi and sashimi I recommend Omi Sushi in West Hollywood, not one of the most innovative ones but a great value for money. For burgers with fried chicken I go to Son of a Gun, for ramens to Daikokuya in Little Tokyo, for Thai to Jitlada in Little Armenia, or, if I'm in a mood for experimenting, I go to Test Kitchen, a restaurant with various chefs from other restaurants who meet to exchange ideas, concepts and new techniques. A laboratory that this year is found on Bestia, Ori Menashe's new place, in the Arts District in downtown. If I fancy eating well and dress smart, I go to Bouchon by Thomas Keller in Beverly Hills, a great icon in the culinary world. For cocktail and serious drinks, The Roger Room in West LA or The Varnish in downtown.

HAVE YOU GOT ANY ADVICE FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO LEARN YOUR PROFESSION?

Cooking has taught me how to live, working by the stove has been my way to solve all my teenage issues. Cooking has taught me to control my anger, to filter my passion. It is a profession in constant evolution, where there needs to be a lot of discipline to be successful. Personally, I try to remain a student, I'm always open to learn new things, to perfect what I know already. I own my restaurant, I have my own style, yet the truth is that I never know what the fuck I'm doing.

IF YOU HAD TO CHOOSE ANOTHER KITCHEN TO CREATE YOUR DISHES, WHICH ONE WOULD IT BE?

I don't think I could create my own dishes in a kitchen that doesn't belong to me, however it would be at Pierre Gagnaire's, in Paris, one to the biggest artists of our times, the modernity of his dishes is disarming, it makes me want to change career!

No fucking way, Michael, please... keep on cooking! ●

