

Press release
6 August 2014

Good cooking also includes the word NO.

Last year, the WITZIGMANN ACADEMY presented its ECKART 2013 for Creative Responsibility and Enjoyment to Brazilian star chef Alex Atala. The prize is endowed with 10,000 euros by the BMW Group. In May we met up with Alex Atala in Sao Paulo and talked to him about his approach to cooking and his social commitment. We also wanted to hear what he had done with his prize money.

Let's talk about food. Burgers, sushi, latte macchiato – you can get them anywhere in the world. And the menus in top restaurants are looking more and more alike. What impact has globalisation had on Brazil?

Overall, it has been fairly positive. Maybe it has helped the Brazilians understand their country better and realise what our country offers them. I think that's very positive.

Has Brazil had an influence on globalisation?

I pray it has. Brazil has much to offer the world: a new flavour, served with a happy smile and with plenty of colour.

What are the current trends in Brazilian gastronomy?

We're really pleased with all the new attention we're getting, as Brazilian gastronomy was practically forgotten over the last 10 to 15 years.

Today, Brazilian ingredients are just as important to a young chef as the European ones. The young chefs are also noticing that it is not enough to create a nice dish. Food is much more than that.

They're realising that food can be very important for the culture, the environment – and socially, too, of course.

Also important is that a good chef needs good ingredients. To find these good ingredients, you need someone who knows how to produce them.

You run three restaurants in Sao Paulo. What's the idea behind your set-up?

A chef can certainly work in different restaurants and genres at the same time.

The Riviera is primarily a meeting place; the food is an "extra".

The Dalva e Dito is a family restaurant with large portions.

The D.O.M. is a gourmet restaurant. Our idea is to use Brazil's best ingredients to create the best menus you can imagine. The service at the D.O.M. is also very important for us. We even allow a bit of theatre to creep in when serving.

You are often described as someone who combines European cooking techniques with ingredients from the Amazon and the rainforest. This sounds spectacular and employs all the usual clichés. Do you think it's accurate?

What's important is not what people say about us, but what they take away from here. When you talk about the Amazon, this almost automatically involves clichés. And when people talk about how I serve ants on the plate, for instance, I don't take it as much of a compliment. But the most important thing for us is the guests leave the D.O.M. with the thought and the impression that it was better than they'd expected.

Is your work more craftsmanship or creativity?

I try to find a balance. Both components are important. The craftsmanship in the kitchen is probably similar to that of a goldsmith.

What does food mean for you?

Culture and nature.

What does flavour mean for you?

Sheer gourmet pleasure!

In your kitchen, there are three rules: do not run, do not stop, do not talk.

We always strive for the very best in a kitchen. To attain perfection, you need above all else to concentrate. What happens in the kitchen can be compared with a melody or a dance. If someone runs, it means they've done something wrong. If someone stops, it's because they're not helping someone else. And if someone talks, they disturb the others.

Where do you source goods?

That's a difficult question. We bring many things in from 5,000 km away. Some things I find at a distance of 200 to 300 km, meaning still in Sao Paulo state. But I go to the supermarket a lot as well. We turn our sourcing into a social programme. You think about the collective good and not only about yourself. It is obvious that every chef only wants to buy good products. But they really do have to be good. Otherwise – or if a product was not produced well – you have to say no. Good cooking also includes the word NO.

You use ingredients from the jungle. What criteria do you apply to select them?

The most important factor is the flavour. Although it is also important for an ingredient to look appealing, most of all it has to taste good.

What's more, we need to know how it was produced and who's behind it. We need to know how the products are treated and whether nature is being preserved. I firmly believe that gastronomy can help protect nature. We need to protect the forests and rivers much more. One thing we must not forget is the people working the land.

Some top chefs rely heavily on local produce. Your products have to travel a long way in some cases. What is your view on this?

Having to spend less on transport is one of our dreams. I often end up spending more for transport than for the product itself. Even though we do have these difficulties, it is always nice that we still manage to use our native products in our menus.

You have frequently commented that products from the Amazon also have potential for everyday meals and are not just of interest for top-level gastronomy.

Some ingredients, like hearts of palm, already play a major role today. But there are also still many underrated ingredients, including several spices. All in all, we're talking about ingredients that are still in their natural state and that are not currently found in the cooking of the general population.

You set up the ATÁ Institute in 2012. It supports projects with social work, and promotes small enterprises and local cultural initiatives. You say: "It is about more than just money. We want to change the lives of these communities." How important is ATÁ for you?

ATÁ attempts to connect knowledge with food, food with cooking, cooking with producing, and producing with nature. This is a chain that we are committed to. Sometimes it's the small things that you can and must do to change the entire chain.

How is ATÁ promoted and what does it achieve?

I'm possibly just the "dog" who sniffs everything out. I hunt down an ingredient and the person who produces it, for example. That's my approach. ATÁ is an interdisciplinary institute employing sociologists, psychologists, journalists and lawyers.

What brings all these people together? Food! It can make a whole lot happen. And the person who has the most intimate knowledge of the ingredients is the chef. But the modern chef, please note. The chef who lives here in the city loses contact with the ingredients. How many chefs do we know these days who can really clean a fish or a whole animal properly and use all of it?

And we're only talking about fish or maybe chicken. We shouldn't forget that plants are also part of this process. So much from plants is thrown away, even though some leaves and kernels can certainly be eaten.

The point is to bring it all together: knowledge and food, food and cooking, cooking and producing, producing and nature.

Last year, the WITZIGMANN ACADEMY in Munich awarded you the ECKART 2013 for Creative Responsibility and Enjoyment. How do you know Eckart Witzigmann and what does he mean to you?

Eckart Witzigmann is part of the history of haute cuisine. He is to gastronomy what Mozart is to music. I've known him for as long as I've been a chef. He's been to Brazil and that was fantastic. All a young person wants in life is to be recognised by his idol. That was very important for me, for ATÁ and for Brazil.

The prize included a large sum of money. Who did the money go to?

An initiative in the Amazon basin. The money went to a tribe of Indians. They produce an important ingredient, a very special, unusual variety of pepper. A very hot spice. We worked with an anthropologist to set up a centre for its cultivation. It's not just the product that's important to us but also the production. If we take something from nature, we need to give something back as well.

The interview was conducted by Uwe Prell.

Contact:

Witzigmann Academy

Otto Geisel

Lachner Straße 18

80639 München

Phone: +49-89-139 260 26

Mobile: +49 (0)172 - 61 41 871

mailto: office@ottogeisel.de

Witzigmann Award can be found at:

www.eckart-witzigmann-preis.de/home