

Marco Sacco

The proprietor of the Michelin two-star Piccolo Lago, on Lake Mergozzo, in Italy, and consultant chef of Isola, in Central, talks about his father's invaluable advice, Asian influences on his cuisine and eating out in Hong Kong.

Tell us about your childhood. "I was born in 1965 and that year my parents opened their first restaurant. It was a pizzeria that ran for eight years. When I was little, I was always in the kitchen, quietly making a mess. I was only five or six and I ate a lot, non-stop. They would give me pizza with beans and onions under the table and I was eating for hours and listening to people. This is what my mother tells me, not that I remember. When we changed restaurants [and opened Piccolo Lago, which is now in its 41st year], I started to look at cooking more seriously. I was very short. My father would put a wooden crate under my feet so I could reach the big stove. That's when everything opened to me and I never abandoned this career."

What advice did your father give you about cooking? "After I did military service, when I was 20, my father asked me, 'What do you want to do when you grow up?'" I said I wanted to be a chef. He replied, 'OK, I give you three years. First year, we'll train you in the kitchen but you won't make any money. Second year, I want to see you develop your own customers. And after the third year, you must leave here or you'll end up doing the same thing year after year.' After I left, I



slowly started to change. I picked up experience in a French kitchen and learned what a star kitchen is all about. Even now, I leave for two months every year to learn. That's how a simple Italian trattoria changed to what it is now."

You recently left the prestigious Beijing restaurant River Club, which you helped to start. How do you feel about your time there?

"It was very complicated in Beijing. The market is not mature enough nor ready yet in its tastes. With each of the dishes, I had to change a little bit for the customers. Only about 20 per cent of the dishes suited Chinese tastes [there]. The advantage of Hong Kong is my dishes here are more original without changing anything. The people here understand the food and appreciate it. Also, I can find anything I want in Hong Kong and get the produce I need. So we offer more of an authenticity here."

Does Asian cuisine inspire you? "It does influence me a lot. When I come to Hong Kong, or to Asia in general, I always discover styles and ingredients that we don't have in Italy. As a chef I am very curious to buy things then bring them back to my laboratory in Italy. We try to transform Asian ingredients into an Italian environment. I made a dumpling where the dough was Chinese but the filling Italian. We take ingredients like dried seaweed and dried

fish and transform them in stock, but we serve them in a way that always has Italian elements. It's a fusion."

How did your venture with Isola begin?

"We started by collaborating on some Italian Cuisine World Summit events and Paolo Monti [culinary director of Gaia Group, which operates Isola] invited me over here. We became good friends and I liked the idea of working with them; I like them as a group. They are very dynamic, allowing you to bring ideas to the environment, and this is very important to me. Plus, Hong Kong is fantastic. In 10km there is the whole world."

What do you eat when you're in Hong Kong? "I like to go to the little alleys and have soups and the street food. Some people suggest I should go to all the famous French restaurants but I would rather just go to the ones in France. In Hong Kong, I come for Hong Kong food - it always surprises me and gives me a lot of ideas for Piccolo Lago."

What do you eat when you're not working? "In Italy, I like to eat bread with butter and anchovies, or spaghetti with tomato. It is the simplest thing but the best."