



Haute Cuisine

Featured Chef Jeffrey Vella

By Kimberley Lovato

Croatia has risen from the ashes of its tumultuous past and is now a top tourist destination thanks to its thousand kilometers of island speckled Adriatic shoreline. Yet its capital, Zagreb, remains an enigma, and a former socialist city with a distinct Austro-Hungarian flair too often found on the wrong side of a comparison. But those willing to stay a while are in for pleasant surprise, especially if they pull up a chair at the Regent Esplanade Hotel, where Jeffrey Vella, an award-winning Maltese chef whose inventive menus and twist on tradition are making waves.

Vella's love of cooking started young, in his native Malta, where his uncle was a top chef. Vella has worked for important hotel chains in London, UAE, Jordan, Italy and in Istria, Croatia before coming to Zagreb, and has served former presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton, French president Nicolas Sarkozy, and a long list of celebrities such as Robert de Niro, Madonna and Al Pacino, among others. But it's the recognition as 'European Chef of the Year' in 2003 that he's most proud of, along with the work he and his team are doing at the Regent Esplanade.

Gastronomique En Vogue's Kimberley Lovato sat down with Vella who shared a little about his passion, about Zagreb diners, and about who he hopes comes for dinner in 2012.



How long have you been at the Regent Esplanade? And how are you finding it this far?

It's over three years already. This is a challenging market so it's been interesting. Yes, let's say that! From a culinary perspective, it's been rewarding and fun – trying to win over an audience very much set in their ways. But I've got a loyal following now, and strong support from people who 'get' what I do. We're also highly respected amongst the diplomatic community which is great, so I'm forever doing countless tastings and the dinner for the next big dignitary in town; as Croatia is on the last leg of EU accession and has now joined NATO, there's a lot going on.

You've cooked in major hotels in Europe and in the Middle East. What appeals to you about working in a hotel kitchen versus, say, having your own restaurant or working in a restaurant outside of a hotel?

One of the great things about working in all these different places is learning to work with and cook for people of different cultures, with different work ethics, and different culinary expectations. The variety of hotel work really appeals to me – here (at the Regent Esplanade) I have two restaurants (The Bistro and Zinfandel's), room service, a bar menu and events menus so sometimes I can be jumping from sending out a plated dinner for 200, to cooking a tasting menu for six, to finishing placing a buffet for 150 and chatting to the guests in between. Also the volume we have here, although I've worked with significantly bigger, allows me to have the size and

diversity of team where we can be a little bit experimental, be it making our own cheese, butter and salami, coming up with a gourmet menu completely centered on olive oil to celebrate this year's pressing, or doing a bit of deconstruction. When I'm given the freedom I enjoy here and in the past to 'play', I don't have the same need to break free that most chef-proprietors are seeking.

You seem like a young, dynamic, innovative chef on the move. What appealed to you about working at The Regent Esplanade, a traditional (albeit beautiful and iconic) hotel in a capital that not a lot of people are talking about, yet?

Jet Set Magazine, in January 2007, labeled me "the most dynamic and out of the box innovative thinker in the Middle East" so I guess I have that reputation. I'm always on the lookout for something new, be it with our food, presentation, or service. People see the hotel as traditional sometimes but, in fact, we are far from it.

The Esplanade didn't stand still in 1925; it's always been at the forefront of the progressive movement in a country with a long history in groundbreaking design and art. I'm proud of that association and I like to think the food we're presenting is contributing to that very image. Of course, we have to keep a few dishes for those that thought that time stood still the day they fell in love with the Esplanade, but even some of the great traditionalists applaud what we're doing.

Since arriving, what have you changed or introduced in your kitchen?

I've changed a lot, starting with myself! We have changed views towards food and how we impress with food, how we can show flair and maybe keep up with the best in Europe. We indulge in modern techniques but we're not obsessed with molecular gastronomy and deconstruction for the sake of it. Produce and flavor combinations remain the most important part of what we do, but we do try to appeal to all the senses and create surprise. It's an over-used word but I get a lot of satisfaction seeing the passion in the group.

Would you describe Croatian/Zagreb diners as more traditionalists or are there 'adventure' eaters?

We are slowly changing mindsets and there are some real foodies around who wanted to be challenged and share their thoughts with me and celebrate innovation. I've just started publishing tasting menus because people were always requesting them, and I was making them up on the hoof. That shows that the adventurers are out there. The traditionalists have their place and I can't expect business people staying in the hotel to want to be experimental four nights a week. We all like our comfort food and our menus always have that level of diversity.

Who are your diners? Mostly hotel guests or do you get a percentage of local regulars too?

Actually we are hitting both sets and we have a very loyal local following in both restaurants. *The Bistro* has had a stormer of a year, driven mainly by local diners attracted by the great value and ever-changing, quirky stuff we do there. It's been satisfying to go around the tables in *Zinfandel's* and see familiar faces, loyal supporters and also new 'locals' – people from Zagreb who've heard about the changes.

For someone dining at your restaurant for the first time, what dish would you recommend they try and why?

Well it depends in what time of year they come. We change the menus seasonally. I think my favorite dish of the year has got to be the one inspired by a Paul Smith shirt I own - flowers, licorice snow, raw Adriatic langoustines, Sicilian blood orange mayonnaise – such a pretty dish and it just flew out the kitchen door.

I found Zagreb to be an interesting place, with an obvious continental Europe/ Austro-Hungarian flavor, yet a Mediterranean spirit, perhaps thanks to the proximity to the seaside. Do you agree with this description of Zagreb? And if so, do you plan your menus accordingly?

Absolutely, it's a real crossroads of a place, both culturally and in its cuisine and it's all the richer for it. The menus reflect this heritage and the season, of course. As the economic hub of the country and, before, of the region, Zagreb is hugely cosmopolitan and each immigrant brings their own culinary ideas and heritage. Thus culinary identity evolves rather than exists and we can expect that to take a bit of a jump in the next few years as Croatia joins the EU and people widen their horizons a little.

What do you think of Zagreb? Is it an 'up and coming' capital city worth a visit?

Oh, definitely. Within the next decade Zagreb will be something to talk about – it the new Prague but in a slightly more tasteful and stylish way. Assuming, that is, we get civic leadership that understands their role in developing all aspects of tourism.

For 2012 and beyond, what new things can we expect to see from Jeffrey Vella and his team?

Maintaining our points of difference, constantly. Trying to surprise our guests, of course. And maybe, just maybe, convincing those nice people at Michelin that there may be a border to cross, but cross it they can!

Regent Esplanade Hotel
Mihanoviceva 1
Zagreb, Croatia
+385 (0)1 456 6000
www.regenthotels.com

Kimberley Lovato is a freelance writer based in San Francisco.
<http://www.kimberleylovato.com>
www.kimberleylovato.com
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