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CREATIVITY WITHOUT MICHELIN STARS : FROM LUCAS CARTON TO SENDERENS

by

Alain Senderens

Director and chef, Lucas Carton followed by Senderens

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Overview

Three Michelin stars in twenty-eight years. Alain Senderens knows what French cuisine owes to the Michelin Guide. The reason he gave up looking for Michelin stars and started a new restaurant was that he wanted to ease the pressure that goes with Michelin stars. He also wanted to be part of the change that is occurring in fine dining by breaking with tradition. In addition, it was a challenge to demonstrate his talent in more difficult conditions. His new restaurant has kept the trappings of three-star quality while incorporating economic constraints. Dishes which were too expensive have been eliminated : it is still necessary to source the best products and the best wines, but at a reasonable price and by devising original recipes to show them to their best advantage. The cost of the average meal is now one quarter of what it had been in Senderens' previous restaurant and there are twice as many covers. Regular customers need to be satisfied by altering the menus more frequently. Without Michelin stars, one can also produce good and original cuisine : at least, this is Senderens' hope.

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TALK : Alain Senderens

Senderens, my new style restaurant, opened a year ago. It is as successful today as the first day it opened and I hope that this will continue.

The day I gave back my three Michelin stars

Although the *Lucas Carton* restaurant had three Michelin stars, I decided to do something different. Change and innovation has always appealed to me : in my own profession, I was involved in the development of *nouvelle cuisine*. I was also the pioneer of choosing appropriate wines to go with dishes. Routine bores me. When I am cooking, I am incapable of following the same recipe every day. This is a big flaw of mine, but it is in my nature : I just have to add a little bit of this or that, or leave out the odd ingredient. Once I have devised a new recipe, I give it one to my chefs and I never repeat it, although customers always want to eat exactly the same dish again.

Having three Michelin stars is fabulous. It is the pinnacle of a chef's career. Every chef wants to have three stars. I fought hard to get them and for twenty-eight years I fought to keep them. When one has them, one does not count costs any more. If more cooks are required, one hires them ; if one needs an expensive product, one simply buys it. A meal can easily cost four hundred Euros per head, and there are customers who are prepared to pay this. Consequently, one can easily get carried away.

I began to consider this situation when well-known Parisian luxury hotels started hiring famous chefs and produced three-star cuisine. They were losing millions of Francs each year in their restaurants but they benefited from the publicity, and made up for their losses by a hotel business which included four or five hundred rooms. As an independent restaurant with three stars, we had to be financially secure because we could not afford to lose money. Other restaurants were trying to outdo each other in order to become the best, such as using solid silver cutlery and employing hundreds of cooks. In this atmosphere, we ran the risk of becoming a 'poor' three-star restaurant. I did not want this to happen. One day, I realised that it was outrageous that a meal could cost four hundred Euros.

A restaurant moving with the times

I started wondering what to do. Because I have a fantastic location in the Place de la Madeleine in Paris, it was out of the question to sell these premises in order to move elsewhere. I wanted to prove that I could do something different, such as changing from a luxury restaurant like *Lucas Carton* to a restaurant with a completely new style.

My accountant and I looked at various options. Firstly, we tried to eliminate all our lavish costs (such as ornaments and other outward signs of luxury) which had no bearing on the quality of the food, but which amounted to 350,000 Euros per year

With the generous help of one of my customers, Nelly Rodi, who runs a creative design agency, we invited tenders for work to be done on the *Lucas Carton*. Any modifications were difficult because the wooden panels were listed. There were other enormous constraints. We had three offers, and in the end we chose a very talented young designer, Noé Duchaufour Lawrance, whose project instantly appealed to me. We also employed a German architect, Axel Schoenert who enabled the costs to be reduced and the work to be finished on time in August.

We had been working on this project for two years before reaching this stage. After two years, I was ready to make a decision, but I did not do so because I was not convinced that such a change would be profitable until one day when I realised that keeping my three Michelin stars was just a way to boost my ego and was costing me 350,000 Euros. That same day, I called Michelin to inform them that I was handing back my three stars : these were the three stars I

had fought so hard to earn, and the day I had been awarded them had been the best day of my life. I gave them back in order to create a restaurant which moves with the times : an affordable, quality restaurant, with no frills, and with a contemporary setting and ambiance. We went from a meal which cost four hundred Euros on average, to one which cost one hundred Euros.

Being part of a wider social change

My decision raised questions within the profession. Some time later, the Michelin people came to see me to ask me what I would change in the Michelin Guide. I told them I would keep the red colour of the book, but change the typography and revise the symbols. I would, of course, keep the system of awarding stars, but I would keep parts of the grading system separate. For example, the luxurious surroundings in the restaurant have nothing to do with the cuisine and I would grade them separately. The same goes for the wines which are increasingly important today. The wine cellars in a large number of restaurants are not air-conditioned and consequently, the wines are not well preserved. There should be a special category for the quality of the wine cellar, and similarly for the decor, the cuisine, the presentation, the service, and so on. If such a system were adopted, the luxury hotels would have the potential to obtain three stars in each area, while the bistros, which are unable, or do not want to operate an exceptional service, (because they do not consider that it has any meaning today), could be graded on their cuisine or their wines. Nowadays, many young, talented chefs who cannot open a restaurant open a bistro and are excluded from the Michelin Guide. This may well create problems for French cuisine in the future.

It is thanks to Michelin that French gastronomy is what it is today. Michelin is the driving force for us. I have nothing against Michelin – and I did not do what I did in defiance – but I think that we have come to the end of one era and are starting another. We still have the experience and the culture of the past to help us plan for tomorrow. I would be pleased if my decision helped to change things.

The new restaurant

When I began to think seriously about the change, I told all my head chefs. All of them were very enthusiastic and took part in the project. When we took the decision, we discussed it with everyone. Only four out of sixty-six employees chose to leave. I was lucky not to have to start from scratch. I knew I could rely on the people who knew me.

We worked in two teams in order to adapt to the more varied demands of the new method. With *Senderens*, everyone has three days 'on' and three days 'off'. Today, no-one wants to go back to how it was before. Several of my staff have even taken up golf. They are happy, and if my team is happy, I am happy. To cap it all, I have a social life again ! At *Lucas Carton*, we rarely had more than 80 covers. When *Senderens* opened on September 19th 2005, we reduced the number of covers to sixty for each service. When we found that this worked well, we increased the covers to eighty, and then to one hundred. When we reached one hundred, it became a bit difficult. Even though we no longer have three stars, I insist that we work as if we still had them. However, with twenty or thirty additional covers, it is very difficult, particularly at lunchtime when our customers all arrive at the same time. There are some days when we really suffer at lunchtime ! As a result, we have had to change our organisation to cope with the number of covers : at lunchtime, for example, we need an extra cook. We kept one hundred covers for more than a month before increasing to 110 or 120 for each service.

Dishes to match the wines

In spite of these changes, I kept the method which helped me gain my reputation regarding the menu. For each course, I wrote the name of the wine first and the accompanying dish underneath it. As far as I am concerned, gastronomy is the marriage between what one eats and what one drinks. Often, the chef decides on his recipes without consulting the sommelier. These days cooking has changed a great deal and there are influences from all over the world,

especially in the form of spices. This may give rise to wonderful cuisine, but the spices upset the taste of many wines. Wine is expensive and I think it is unforgivable if the wine does not match the meal correctly.

I have always been closer to my winegrowers than any of my suppliers. I meet my sommelier every day to taste several bottles of wine, and we put the wines we like to one side. I then create dishes to accompany these wines.

I have been doing this for the past twenty-five years. I could even write my own definitive set of rules, assigning a certain grape variety from a certain area to a certain dish, or the same grape variety from a different wine area to another dish. I have created my own artistic palette, with lemon and lime zests, and different sorts of peppers and spices, which help me give the finishing touches to a dish in order to help it accompany a particular wine. Since I never have enough wine to meet my needs, I have to use one winegrower for half the year and another for the remaining six months. Since the wines of each grower have unique tastes, I have to adapt my dishes accordingly. I created a dish of langoustines with sweet vermicelli in a shellfish sauce for an almond-tasting Meursault from Dominique Lafon, but if I were to serve a wine from our neighbour, Coche Dury, which has a hazelnut taste, then I have to adjust the dish.

My aim is to find the dishes which accompany the wines best, or better still, to find the best accompanying wine for the dish. When a vintage has a particular taste, I try to find the dish which will go best with it. Wines have primary, secondary and tertiary aromas. I prefer the tertiary aromas because game, truffles and other products, which are interesting to cook with, go well with tertiary aromas. These products are not so good with young wines.

Blending form, texture and volume is fundamental and most important. Once this has been accomplished, the rest is a magical mix of individual taste and what each chef brings to the dish. This principle of marrying wines with cuisine has become so important for me that I am now incapable of creating a dish without thinking about the wine which accompanies it, and vice versa. Furthermore, this 'coupling' is constantly changing : for example, the acidity of a white wine will change after a few months. If one does not change the recipe a little, the marriage will be satisfactory, but not great.

I continued to adopt this method in the new restaurant but I had to do so with wines which were less expensive. I was very lucky because even though in certain *appellations* (a guarantee of origin) there are some wines with a well-documented history which are very expensive, one can still find similar wines which do not have the *AOC (Appellation d'origine contrôlée)* but are still fabulous. I have found a few which are reasonably priced. I had to try hard to get hold of them because the vineyards are small, and the wines do not have the complex structures of more famous wines. However, they cost less than ten Euros a bottle. In the end, this formula 'wine + dish' is extremely popular as 80 % of our clients choose this menu.

Bringing to the fore less well-known produce

When I launched *Senderens*, I decided to start afresh to show people that I wanted to do something different. I did not put any of my previous dishes on the menu. I also now look at the price of food whereas I never did before. For example, in *Lucas Carton*, I would look for the best truffles, or if a certain dish required lengthy or careful preparation and if there were not enough staff, I would bring in an extra chef. We never had to worry about the price because the client was always willing to pay. Today, I wonder how I allowed myself to do this : after all, a centime is a centime.

When I lacked inspiration, I took a sea bass and added a spoon of caviar to an ordinary sauce. It tasted very good but it was not a creative dish. Many chefs do this because there are times when they lack inspiration and when there are not have enough new recipes. I cannot do this any more because these products are too expensive now.

When I replace a product by another in the same recipe, for example a Bressan fattened chicken with a Challans fattened chicken with black feet ; I can save 50 Euros without writers noticing the difference. The same goes for the wines : I have to find wines which are good but although they cost less, they do not necessarily have the same reputation.

I used to buy turbot. Turbot is a very expensive fish, half of which is made up of scraps. I now use whiting instead of turbot but use the best whiting on the market. I just have to find ideas which are more creative, sharper and original than before. The recipes I used for turbot cannot be used for whiting because the flesh is not the same. Because we have regular customers, we are obliged to change the menu more frequently than before.

To create new dishes, I work with my chef and my sous-chef/deputy chef. If we decide to change the fattened chicken because it has been on the menu for three or four weeks, we then discuss what to do. When we find that calves' sweetbreads have become cheaper and we can afford them, we decide to do a dish with calves' sweetbreads. Sometimes, we go back to recipes which we have used before ; sometimes, we find new ideas. We have just put a cabbage cake (*gâteau de chou*) on the menu : it is country cooking, but it is delicious ! We serve partridge, but not grey partridge as it is too expensive. Instead, we have red partridge and I can assure you that with the cabbage cake the result is exquisite.

Our sous-chef spends a great deal of time shopping for our produce because he has to check the fresh produce every morning, weigh it, check the quality, and so on.

In the past, price was not important and consequently life was easier. Now, if I want to prove that I am talented, I have to show it with produce which is more demanding. This is the spirit of *Senderens* : gastronomy which is accessible to more people.

A very positive balance sheet

We have reduced the price of our wines. We do not have tablecloths and we have practically no floral decorations. Instead, we have created a decor which makes all this redundant. Having eliminated all these costs, our profit margins are much greater. The customers who used to come once a year now come three times a week. Also we have new customers. We are earning more money because we have 200 covers every day, whereas in *Lucas Carton* we only had between 60 and 80 covers a day, and we were closed three days a week.

We have a better work environment now. In *Lucas Carton*, we were constantly under pressure. Today, we only have our own professional conscience to satisfy. At only one hundred Euros, I cannot be criticised.

Our customers' behaviour has changed completely. At *Lucas Carton*, there was produce which we were forbidden to use. If I put salt cod on the menu, people would say '*we do not come to Lucas Carton to eat salt cod.*' This winter, I made a *brandade* (a dish of flaked salt cod) and it was very successful. In the past it was very formal and there was a certain distance between us and the customers. Now the same customers come casually dressed, the atmosphere is relaxed and if customers want to talk to me, I come and sit at their table. I would never have done this before ! I did it once when a customer invited me to smoke a cigar with him and the next day, horrified customers from two tables complained to the Michelin Guide. Another time, I came back from holiday sporting a ponytail and again, numerous customers wrote to Michelin to denounce this outrage ! It was a different époque. This does not mean that I am less present or that I pay less attention to my restaurant, but I trust my team. Everyone knows what they have to do. We know what we do well and therefore we have nothing to lose. In the past, there was a penalty for strictly adhering to Michelin rules.

DISCUSSION

Question : *Have you lost customers as a result of this change ?*

Alain Senderens : Of course ! Two years ago, the son of a friend, together with other people of his age, came to the restaurant. They were young people who had made their money in the computer industry and they came to my restaurant in jeans and without ties. I seated them in a corner so that the rest of the customers were not shocked. When I talked with them, they told me that I was a bit of a fuddy-duddy and that going to my restaurant was a bit like going to a museum... I do not take everything people say literally, but this made me think.

Having said that, I do not know if I have lost customers, but I have a better turnover than I had before.

Q. : *You have lost a sort of freedom by depriving yourself of caviar and truffles. In spite of that, do you still get the same pleasure from creating dishes as you did before ?*

A. S. : It is a fact that the decision to exclude certain produce in order to keep our prices reasonable is difficult, but I do not want to go back to how it was. All the same, when I find an excellent recipe with a product which is not very well-known, it gives me immense satisfaction.

The Michelin Guide's obscure reviews

Q. : *Why did you give back your three stars rather than letting things follow their natural course, and how did Michelin react ?*

A. S. : The Michelin stars do not belong to you. You cannot give them back, you cannot refuse them, it is the Guide which decides to award them. Why did I telephone them ?, Because I am honest ! I had three stars as a result of having a certain style of cuisine, service and restaurant, and I intended to change everything. I felt in duty bound, both to Michelin and to my customers who came for the three stars, to inform them. Subsequently, my relationship with Michelin has been very good, and they have even awarded me two stars for *Senderens*. I did not expect this at all, and it even made me feel a bit uneasy, because, once again, I was in a situation where I risked losing them. My team, on the other hand, was extremely happy.

Q. : *Does the fact that the Michelin Guide gave you two stars mean that the third star was only for the luxury of the décor ?*

A. S. : I do not know. The Michelin Guide is very hard to make out. We do not know what their criteria are. We do not know the rules of the game. We can only imagine them. In order to be sure of getting a star, the well-known restaurants have added on various luxuries in a sort of escalation, because gaining or losing a star can make a difference of between 20 and 30 % of one's turnover. This may be crucial. Voltaire wrote '*A very common mistake is to confuse luxury with taste*'. We felt confident in investing in something exceptional because there has never been a three-star bistro before. There was a sort of continuity, but it did not mean anything to Michelin.

I do not know and I do not want to speculate. I have distanced myself slightly and I am not concerned about it. I took the decision for myself, partly because the Michelin Guide was set in its ways. What I have done is now their problem. If I make them change the way they operate, it would be fine. However, if I lost a star today, I would find that difficult to take.

Is the chef a one-man band ?

Q. : *You do an impressive number of jobs : the cooking, the service, and the management. In the kitchen you are not only the chef, but also the sommelier and certainly the pastry chef. How do you manage to do all this at once ?*

A. S. : One becomes a chef just as one enters a seminary to become a priest - with passion. I was brought up by my grand-mother. When I was in boarding school, I stayed with her. There were always about 12 or 14 people at the table. We used to go poaching and my grand-mother would cook our catch in a large chimney. It is possible that my taste for cooking comes from that period of my life.

Baking is part of cooking. The appetizer is the chef's way of saying 'hello' and the pastries are his way of saying 'good-bye'. As far as wine is concerned, like all other chefs, I was not a connoisseur when I started. When I was awarded my three stars, I met Jacques Puisais, a remarkable man who could have been my father. He was very cultured and became an eminent oenologist having previously been in charge of a nuclear power station. One day in 1987, we were having lunch together at *Lucas Carton*, which I had just opened. He said to me 'your food may be excellent, but none of your wines are in keeping with the cuisine.' It was true that the only wines I knew anything about were champagne and claret.

I learned about wine by going on wine courses, first at the University of Bordeaux and later in Dijon where I met a number of vineyard owners and learned about Burgundy wines. After these studies, I realised that Jacques was right. It was then that I created a set menu consisting of a starter followed by fish, meat, cheese and dessert, and each dish was served with a different glass of wine. Thirty to forty percent of my customers chose this menu. I was delighted, but this upset the turnover of the dishes. I devised a second menu based on this principle, and it was just as successful, so I decided to make the entire menu like this. My wife, my sommeliers and everyone else were opposed to this and thought we would lose money. But it worked right from the start. During the first month, 65 % of customers chose the set menu with a glass of wine with each course and later, 80 %, when we started publicising this and invited the press. This formula was viable.

Management is more difficult. I employ an accountancy firm and a full-time in-house accountant. There are three employees in the office which is the control centre for the business. Every morning when I arrive, I look at the previous day's financial figures. These are the only figures I look at. When I see that my income and expenditure balance is good, it means that everything is working well. That satisfies me. My wife and my manager look after the rest. I am not interested in the day-to-day workings. The rest of my time is spent in the kitchen.

I also have a consultancy which deals with hotel chains and manufacturers. I prefer being a consultant rather than setting up bistros like other chefs, because that would mean that I would be in the same daily routine, looking for cooks, restaurant staff, and so on. As a consultant, people ask me to do an audit and to find solutions. It is very interesting. And I do not have any financial investment : I just sell my know-how.

Q. : *What do these industrialists think of you and what do you think you can give them ?*

A. S. : Either I have an idea and because of my status I am able to telephone the CEO of a group and suggest my idea to him and we decide to proceed or not ; or people come to me to create or improve a product. If it is a ready-made meal, I ask for the recipe in order to see if I can add anything to it. Given the same recipe, if one changes a product one can sometimes improve it by increasing the cost very slightly. In the making of the product, one can also change many elements. I also sometimes suggest ideas which are very different from what clients had envisaged in the first place.

I have been working for Carrefour for a long time. I also worked for McDonald's. If I am able to help them to make improvements, this is very good for our children.

Q. : *In your profession, there is also the matter of training staff and this is especially important as there is a big staff turnover in the restaurant business.*

A. S. : In my entire career, I have only employed four chefs who remained with me for a very long time. Why ? Starting out is always difficult, but I give them a great deal of freedom to try out dishes. I want there to be a *Senderens* style and I do not want them to make dishes which they have made elsewhere. I keep a very close eye on the cooking of dishes. Cuisine is the art of seasoning and cooking a dish to perfection. Everything else which accompanies the dish is merely a reflection of our culture, our taste and our refinement. This is where opinions may

differ. The wine gives the dish a framework and tells you whether there is too much of a particular ingredient, too many aubergines, too much pepper, and so on. I have a real conversation with a bottle of wine ! Chefs who work with me realise this and learn about wine. They need six months to adapt to this and understand this.

I look for the best balance between what is on my plate and what is in my glass. This is the most important element for me. It is man's quest to look for harmony everywhere. This reveals what kind of person he is. I also send my younger chefs to museums and concerts and make them read books. Sooner or later, a certain sensitivity develops. This becomes apparent when they present a plate they have decorated and realise that it is not very attractive. A certain amount of patience is necessary to reach this point.

Changes in cuisine

Q. : *You were the pioneer of nouvelle cuisine which was just a fad. It consisted of large plates with food which looked good but there was so little of it that no-one could be sure that it was tasty ! It was very pretty to look at, but not very filling.*

A. S. : We should put this fad in context. All the famous chefs, like me, were brought up with traditional cuisine. We had to know l'Escoffier by heart. All the food looked the same : the same recipes, the same sauces, and so on. There was no question of changing it one iota. This is why many cooks wanted to set themselves up in business and create their own cuisine. Nouvelle cuisine was our way of wanting of offering something different. It was the 1970s and we were influenced by the burgeoning presence of Japan. I was the first to use soy sauce and Japanese-style ravioli pasta.

It is true that there were excesses. The tiny portions were a mistake. People were very shocked by that because it was so different to what they had been accustomed. But it was an important revolution. We made a point about health in what we ate. Previously we made dishes with sauces, such as *coquilles Saint-Jacques* (scallops) in Bechamel sauce *au gratin*. Man felt stronger about himself than he did about nature. Then, with nouvelle cuisine, we let the product speak for itself, in other words, there was very little sauce, more juice, and lighter, more delicate cooking. Scallops became lighter. It was a time when women started to look thin and appeared nude in newspapers. I think it was part of a more generalised movement : nouvelle cuisine, new philosophy, new novels, and so on.

It was also the time when ideas about fire and heat changed. Previously wood-burning, natural fires were used in cooking. Then gas heating arrived and people started to say that it smelled badly. The same was true of electricity. Because there were no more flames (the symbol of masculinity in China), there appeared to be sexual equality.

Each time there is a change in cuisine it is criticised. In medicine, people always want to be treated by the latest techniques, whereas in cooking people are very conservative. Man can go to the Moon but we must take our grandmother's recipes with us !

Q. : *What do you think about El Bulli's cuisine ?*

A. S. : Ferran Adria is very talented and I like him a lot. However, on a philosophical level, we differ. He changes the structure of food whereas we have been trying to improve it for centuries. He minces it, transforms it, adds aspic and spice. He makes some very good food but I am bothered by the principle. He has a melon caviar dish which consists of small balls of melon in caviar boxes. It is very good, it looks nice and it is fun, but I cannot see the difference between this and a slice of melon. I do not want to detract from his considerable talent. Perhaps he is the one who is right. But I am against the system which perpetuates this trend and which can be summed up by a cuisine based on mousses.

Q. : *With regard to the old style of French cuisine from which you wanted to distance yourself, is there also a sort of characteristic French self-centeredness which limits one's ability to change, as opposed to good cuisine in other countries which is fast developing ?*

A. S. : The development of a high standard of cuisine throughout the world during the past ten years is related to foreign chefs using French wine experts before developing their chefs. In

the 1970s, I often went to the United States to give cookery lessons. The butter was bad, the flour was bad, in fact all the products were bad. They have improved gradually. Twenty or thirty years ago, American wines were hopeless but French oenologists arrived and huge progress has been made.

However, as a French chef, I think I feel a certain responsibility towards French winegrowers. Not all French wine is good, but not all foreign wines are excellent either. Today, the press tends to lavish praise much more readily on foreign wines.

I pay attention to foreign cuisine. I travel a great deal, especially in my role as consultant. When I have the time, I spend a few days getting to know about the culture of the place, and I do not just mean the gastronomic culture. There are some great chefs outside France, but they produce the same cuisine as El Bulli. I am bothered that this cuisine is spreading, but perhaps I am conservative and I cannot recognise change.

Presentation of the speaker :

Alain Senderens : opened the restaurant *l'Archestrate* in 1968 (which was awarded its third Michelin star in 1978) and in 1985 established the *Lucas Carton* restaurant which is located in the Place de la Madeleine (Paris). It too was awarded three stars. The *Lucas Carton* became *Senderens* on September 19th, 2005. Alain Senderens has also written eight books about cooking.

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