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*organised with support from the Ministry of Industry (DGCIIS : agency for competition, industry and services) and the Ministry of Culture, and thanks to the sponsors of the École de Paris.*

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<sup>1</sup> For the "Technological resources and innovation" seminar

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(liste at february 1, 2013)

## JAZZ EN CUISINE

by

**Alain Passard**

Chef, L'Arpège restaurant, Paris

May 15th, 2012

Report by Sophie Jacolin

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## Overview

Nature sets the rhythm of life every day, regardless of season, offering a vast, structured, never-ending range of creative products. When one agrees to conform to nature's rhythm, one realises that it brings with it a degree of consistency. If one pays attention to the seasons, and matches flavours with colour, texture and form, then the result will be a success. When he discovered this, Alain Passard changed the way he cooked, and developed a vegetable-based cuisine which was open to improvisation. He serves his customers with dishes made from seasonal produce, and he improvises which means that he works so closely with his products that he knows them inside-out. This is made easier by the fact that Alain Passard owns vegetable gardens in which he and his gardeners experiment all the time trying to make vegetables a 'grand cru'. The chef is happy to play second fiddle to what nature has provided. However, he concentrates on the preparation of his creations and the precise skills necessary.

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## TALK : Alain Passard

### The 'two lives' of Alain Passard

When one chooses a marvellous profession – or, rather, an adventure – such as cooking, it becomes a life-long obsession and, like people, it evolves, becoming more precise, and it may change radically. I have lived two lives as a chef : one dedicated to gastronomy based on meat, and the other, which I am currently pursuing, dedicated to vegetable-related gastronomy.

I wanted to become a chef ever since I was a child in a family where everyone worked with their hands and did something artistic. My mother was a dress-maker, my father was a musician (he played the clarinet, saxophone, drums and musical saw), my grand-father was a sculptor and a basket-maker, and my grand-mother was a chef. From a very early age I remember that I liked watching them carve wood, work with fabrics and needles, rehearse a jazz number, or prepare a stuffing. As a result, I was very keen to use my hands and senses. It was cooking which appealed to me the most, but perhaps that was because it was my grand-mother who talked to me the most about her passion. For me, cooking is like sculpture, music, painting or sewing all of which are disciplines which form a large part of my inspiration.

I grew up in Brittany where family life was centred around the dinner table, and everyone knew how to choose quality products. We were especially fond of local produce such as shellfish, lobsters, crabs, fish, poultry, vegetables, and cooked meats. In my village there were a number of excellent bakers (I dreamed about baking for them during my school holidays), and butchers. This taste for good-quality products has never left me.

I was lucky to work as a chef's assistant in a prestigious restaurant near Rennes where there was a famous sauce chef and carvery chef. I was an apprentice there for eight years. This sharpened my senses. After this, I worked for the chef Alain Senderens in the mid-1970s in his Parisian restaurant 'L'Archestrate', and in Brussels and elsewhere.

In 1986, I decided to set up on my own, and I bought the restaurant where I had learnt to cook with Alain Senderens. I called the restaurant 'L'Arpège'. Ten years later it was awarded three Michelin stars. During my 'first' chef life, L'Arpège was a carvery where most of the dishes were meat. It was how I built up my *savoir-faire*.

#### *A creative change*

At the end of the 1990s, without really understanding what was happening to me, I lost my inspiration for cooking with meat. This did not worry me unduly ; instead I became more interested in vegetable-based cooking which I had completely ignored for twenty-five years. Up to this time I had been totally uninterested in vegetables. When one learns to cook, vegetables are regarded as the 'poor relation' : one learns about turbot and spring chickens, but not about turnips.

When I started working with vegetables, my creativity was stimulated. I told the restaurant critics at the Michelin Guide that I was taking all the dishes off the menu which had earned me three stars, and was devoting myself to vegetable-based cuisine. The Guide's director saw no reason why cooking vegetables could not be worth three Michelin stars, and in fact L'Arpège has kept all three.

#### *Making vegetables a 'grand cru'*

I embarked on this new cuisine with market gardeners whom I knew quite well. I realised very quickly that these products did not satisfy my need for flavour, scent, texture and colour.

My aim was to make vegetables a ‘grand cru’, and make the gardener the new, exciting profession of the future. People often talk about chefs, wine-growers and wine stewards, but gardeners are left off the gastronomic list. I realised that I had to get my own garden. I bought an old, disused vegetable garden of approximately a hectare in the Sarthe region near Le Mans. I was lucky to meet Sylvain Picard, a gardener who came from the area. I told him my story and my wish to create the first ever gastronomic cuisine based on vegetables. He loved the idea and we started working together.

Since that time, we have bought two other vegetable gardens and orchards in the Eure *département* and in the Mont-Saint-Michel Bay, both of which are completely natural : there are even horses which replace the machines. Our gardens are small ecosystems where there are likely to be hedgehogs, weasels, frogs, reptiles and birds ; such animal life spares us from using pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

With a total of ten hectares and ten gardeners, our yearly production is nearly fifty tonnes, and we are completely autonomous. We deliver produce from the gardens to L’Arpège every morning. We buy nothing from outside these gardens. When we run out of a vegetable, we do without. If the turnips get a disease, we just get rid of the entire row. Our maître d’hôtel has no problem explaining these sorts of things to our customers.

I ask the gardeners to be as creative as our chefs, and to find new ideas while still respecting nature. I talk to them about beetroots like I would talk about a pinot noir, or about yellow carrots like a sauvignon : these are the vegetable equivalents of our wine varieties. The soil is sandy in the Sarthe region and more clayey in the Eure. We have to make do with these characteristics, the rain and the climate and figure out what is best for the vegetables. We plant the same seeds in two gardens on the same day at the same time in order to test which is the best site for each variety. This approach, which is the same as that of the wine-grower, enables us to develop and to enhance the flavours of a product and give it personality and character.

### **Creativity refreshed**

The garden has become a place for creativity. It was my first source of inspiration. Because of the garden, I discovered that the best cookbook had been written by nature. The garden also allowed me to rediscover and to respect the seasons, to understand that nature grows products which provide our bodies with what they need throughout the year ; tomatoes to quench one’s thirst in the summer, and root vegetables (such as parsnips, celery and Jerusalem artichokes) to build up one’s energy in the winter. We pull up vegetables from the ground when it is cold and pick fruit from branches when it is hot. These days I only have tomatoes and courgettes for three months of the year on my menu, and when peas appear every year, it is almost like feeling that a baby has just been born ! If all the products were available for twelve months in the year (as was meat in my first life as a chef) it would destroy creativity and would be unproductive. It is exciting to come to the end of the vegetable season and to look forward to rediscovering other products. People sometimes ask me if I have enough vegetables to work with throughout the winter, as if nature had stopped producing during these months. The range of products in the winter is perhaps smaller, but this stimulates my creativity and motivates me to continue.

When I started cooking with vegetables, I found creativity and pleasure again. I felt as if my creation was similar to painting, sculpture and sewing, and it reminded me of my childhood. It stirred something mischievous in me. It was a sort of ingenuity which I had never experienced when I cooked with meat. I wanted to open up a new place for an original cuisine. Other chefs have since followed my lead.

Finally, nature has simplified my creativity. I do not worry about what is in my saucepan any more ; I just put in it whatever the gardens have to offer. As long as one respects the seasons,

one cannot go wrong. It is when one mixes up spring with winter that cuisine fails. My priority is to respect nature's rhythm. It is very reassuring. I find serenity, comfort and at the same time, constant replenishment. I am close to my gardeners because we spend a great deal of time together, and they have become my companions. I am happy cooking because I have a story to tell, create and prove. Every day I see in my chefs' faces their enjoyment in learning, improvising and creating.

Years later, almost by chance, I understood what motivated this change in creativity. I used to illustrate my recipes with collages of coloured paper. I had done nearly forty of these when, one day, I showed them to my co-workers. One of them suggested that I should make a book of them, and the publishing house Gallimard seemed interested in this idea. This book made me realise why I had 'changed lives' and had been drawn to cooking with vegetables : I had needed to bring colour and shape to my cuisine, to draw it, to feel closer to my mother's sewing and my grand-father's sculptures. Cooking with meat did not make me feel anything any more. In hindsight, changing from one form of cooking to another gave me a new lease of life and a wonderful accelerator which made me progress and discover the true nature of cooking.

## DISCUSSION

### Engineering an individual and group change

**Question :** *In your first life as a chef, you developed a very precise know-how for cooking meat. Now that you are focussed on vegetable gastronomy, do you feel that you are starting from scratch again ? How have you managed to be creative with vegetables which were ingredients of which you hardly had any experience ?*

**Alain Passard :** I learned a great deal from cooking with meat such as using the oven, cooking with gas, and seasoning. It is perhaps because of this experience that I have managed to create my vegetable cuisine today. The skills which I mastered from working with meat made the transition more serene and less worrisome. I knew I had to learn something else, and that meant when cooking with vegetables, I had to get more used to using my hands like those of a seamstress, a sculptor or a musician. Today, everything which I learned in order to cook meat, I use to cook with vegetables in order to invent a totally different cuisine.

Of course I like it when a vegetarian customer asks me to give him a menu with only vegetables, but I still prefer that the request for a vegetarian menu comes from an enthusiastic meat-eater who is ready to be pleasantly surprised. In fact, one can give an almost meaty taste to beetroot, carrots or turnips, for example. Like meat, vegetables can be flambéed, smoked, braised or roasted. Beetroot cooked in a salt crust and smoked onions never existed until I put them on the menu. We still serve some dishes with shellfish, crab, lobster, fish and poultry, but they are in the minority.

**Q. :** *How did your cooking staff cope with this transition ?*

**A. P. :** Those who were with me during my 'meat days' left. But this did not upset the restaurant. I put together a new team of about fifteen cooks who were anxious to learn, inventive and very young (their average age today is under twenty-five), who have been with me now for several years. They have a sparkle in their eyes and a *joie de vivre* because of the story I have shared with them. How many restaurants have their own garden, and ask their cooks to invent dishes by juggling with the various fruits and vegetables which are delivered every morning ? They benefit a great deal from this. They know that every day they will have to use different skills and they will learn. If one day they invent a new way of working with beetroot, they can do the same tomorrow with a broad bean or a pea. They keep on honing their senses and adding pages to their personal cookbooks.

I take a back seat in this team : it is the garden which dictates the recipes. When the gardeners arrive at L'Arpège with their baskets full of what they have picked in the garden,

our creativity is right there in front of us. We look, smell and touch the same things. We have the same ingredients and we can let our creativity flourish, and we improvise on this range of products. I observe my chefs at work, and I hardly notice any mistakes. They always manage to do things correctly. Sometimes I even have to encourage them to go a bit further and allow themselves to be more imaginative. I ask them always to be more creative because their dishes will always be perfect if they are in accord with the seasons.

**Q. :** *Do the cooks and gardeners talk to each other and exchange ideas ?*

**A. P. :** Yes and this is essential. I encourage them to communicate. I invite the gardeners into our kitchen so that they can see what we do with their leeks or their broad beans. On the other hand, if a cook has read, tasted or seen something interesting, he should work with the gardeners to create it. Cooking is a very tiring job, and from time to time I send our chefs to spend a couple of days in the garden to get some rest. They come back re-energised by what they have seen.

**Q. :** *Do you interfere with the imagination of your chefs ? Does the menu offer individual or group ideas ?*

**A. P. :** The menu reflects my creations as well as those of my chefs. I am never happier than when a customer calls me into the restaurant to tell me how much he has appreciated his meal, and I realise that it was made by one of my chefs. This proves that I have passed on my know-how.

I interfere as little as possible in my chefs' creations. I do not have to prove my creativity to them as I have already proved myself. They have seen me at work and we have spent hours together. They know how I cook and season vegetables, and so it is up to them to have fun and to show what they can do. Therefore, my role is above all to stimulate their individual originality and help them to express what they feel by playing with nature.

My chefs talk to each other a great deal. Nevertheless, it is difficult to work together on original creations. When one has a certain degree of maturity, one begins to create by oneself. When one conjures up a dish, one is already thinking about taste, flavours and consistency, but one cannot be sure if everyone else feels the same. It is very personal.

**Q. :** *Could your chefs work without you at their side if, for example, as some of your fellow chefs have done, you opened a restaurant in Tokyo or New York ?*

**A. P. :** L'Arpège has undergone such change and has such an unusual story that I really ought to be with them. I like this place where I learned to cook with Alain Senderens in the 1970s, and where I have now formed my own team. Despite everything I have taught my chefs, they need to have me round them seeing how I work. It is because of this that I am able to keep a stable team.

I am often asked to open another restaurant, but I refuse to study any such proposals. It is not simply that just because I have been successful at L'Arpège that I will be successful in Japan ! I have always wanted to succeed at what I do. If I opened another restaurant, I would have to have gardens close by to supply fresh produce every morning as I need to know that the products that I use come from places which I know. I need to be reassured. These are my roots.

Finally, one needs to keep time for oneself and have another life apart from that of the restaurant, so that creativity can continue to flourish.

**Q. :** *A restaurant's menu is usually fairly stable. It is an indication for customers of what it is that they are going to eat, and also for the chefs to know what they have to cook each morning. Is the menu stable at L'Arpège ?*

**A. P. :** We do not have any specialities as this would be restrictive. At L'Arpège, the menu changes practically every month. There are more than four seasons. For example, we only have asparagus two months in the year. Nature offers such diversity that we simply have to

make use of it, and adapt our menu accordingly. The chefs found this unsettling in the beginning. Today, it means that they do not get bored. The maître d'hôtel and the wine waiter have a decisive role when they explain the menu, advise customers and 'sell' our garden.

### **Chef, gardener and CEO**

**Q. :** *To what degree does your role of CEO interfere with your activity as a chef ?*

**A. P. :** L'Arpège is owned by me. There are no shareholders. Consequently I am the CEO of a company employing forty people. All the creativity which I put into the cooking and the gardens, I also put into the running of the business. I even ask my accountant to be creative ! I keep a very close eye on certain aspects of the business which I discuss with the members of the team every month including the wine waiters and the chefs, such as the electricity bill, the water bill, and our expenses for glasses, cutlery and crockery. I have very strict rules : have the chefs left their ovens on for too long after dinner service ? Have they thrown too much away ? Have the dining room staff been slow to turn off the lights in the restaurant after the last customer has left ? It is essential that I tell my young staff about these management issues so that they understand that they are important. One day they will have their own restaurant and they will have to take care of it.

**Q. :** *Has the change in cooking had any effect on the financial situation of the restaurant ?*

**A. P. :** I have hardly altered the prices since I changed my cuisine to vegetables. Some people are surprised considering that vegetables are cheaper than meat, but they do not realise that my cuisine is very labour-intensive. I have had to hire an additional three or four chefs, employ gardeners and buy gardens. This all costs 30,000 Euros per month. This may explain why our carrots are a little more expensive at L'Arpège than elsewhere. The change also meant that some of our wines had to be sold because vegetables tend to be eaten with white wines. We sold all our excellent Bordeaux and Burgundy wines.

### **Drawing inspiration from all the arts**

**Q. :** *Painting, music and the arts are constantly emerging in your creative processes. In general, what are your sources of inspiration ?*

**A. P. :** Colour is one. I noticed that it was attractive to arrange vegetables according to their colours. This also works well from the point of view of taste. Every morning, I like to chose a colour as my central theme of creation, and concoct a dish based on this. I take my basket and arrange my bouquet like a florist with everything which has a touch of purple, for example : turnips, asparagus, kohlrabi and rhubarb. I put my bouquet on a plate. If I like the look of it, I start cooking.

**Q. :** *When you start to make up a dish, do you know what you are looking for ? Do you have a laboratory where you test out dishes ?*

**A. P. :** I have learned that one should not make demands on creativity. There is no point shutting oneself away in a garden for five days to carry out experiments to try to invent a new dish at any price. I let creativity come to me and show itself to me. This changes everything. These are moments which one cannot pull out of thin air and should remain rare. A dish often emerges from an association of ideas. For example, I smell a geranium and I wonder how I can transmit this floral scent to a dish. Automatically a door opens. This is how I thought up my geranium oil. One day I tasted a nasturtium. It left me with a salty taste in my mouth which gave me the idea of making a creamy soup with it. At the end of cooking, I added a few tidewater mussels and a dash of saffron to enhance the floral side of the nasturtium. In this dish, I also managed to create a family of colours with the orange/yellow of the shellfish bringing out the nasturtium and saffron.

**Q. :** *Your story is full of poetry. What names do you give to your dishes ?*

**A. P. :** The names which they have from the garden are already so lovely. Why change them ? The names of our dishes emphasise the variety of vegetables, such as golden turnips, globe turnips and so on. Their names create their own images.

### **When style is all about concise technique**

**Q. :** *You mentioned your concern to take a back seat with nature and just be one of the team. Is it possible to say that there is an Alain Passard style ?*

**A. P. :** My style is about precision and purity. My cuisine requires particular skills. When cooking with vegetables, one's hand is like a dressmaker's hand, whereas with meat, it more like that of a sculptor. One's hand is different according to the seasons. In summer, it is lighter and transparent, and in winter, warmer, generous and simmering. A dinner plate is the same size as a vinyl record, and I sometimes dream that my hand has the same dexterity and precision as the jazz musicians Dexter Gordon or John Coltrane ! Movements of the hand above a plate are very important. There is a way of sprinkling fleur de sel so that it falls uniformly over the plate. I take a great deal of care when I cut up vegetables into mouth-size pieces. I then throw them into a large saucepan with a little water and space them out so that they do not touch each other and that there is some space between them. This way they cook in a few minutes. Once the small amount of water has evaporated, the vegetable is cooked and tender, and I do not need to do anything more.

Originally I cooked dishes using about ten different hand techniques ; today, I use half that number. Those which I use are so precise that they are the ones which 'make' the dish. One's hand must be precise and become better, more balanced and at the same time, more discrete, almost as if it did not exist.

Throughout the day, I correct my chefs for their hand movements ; sometimes they are too emphatic or rigid. I constantly ask them why they use the gestures they do. If there is no good reason, we get rid of it. Before thinking up a dish, one must think about one's hands. When I go to a restaurant, it is simply to experience a particular chef's 'tour de main' as each person has his own particular way.

**Q. :** *Contrary to pure cuisine, molecular gastronomy features the staging and the theatrical side of dishes and has taken pride of place in the last few years. Do you think there is a lack of creativity here ?*

**A. P. :** In the word *cuisine*, there is the French word *cuire*, which means 'to cook'. There is no cooking in molecular gastronomy. Where are the broilers, cooking with gas flames and using ovens ? I do not call this approach 'cuisine'. It is in the realm of sensations or the sensational, whereas I am in the realm of exception, the exceptional. Sometimes it has produced intelligent and fun things but it has mainly put a generation of young chefs at a disadvantage as they have hardly any personality and have rushed into this slot, ruining their careers. Cooking is an art. One must play with the product and know at what moment to turn it, to water it, to lower the heat, or to open the oven door. Before ovens were padded like they are today, one monitored the cooking by listening to the oven. One heard the dish whistle in the oven. It is the chef's investment in his dish and this is how I see my profession.

Presentation of the speaker :

Alain Passard : chef of the restaurant L'Arpège, he is the author of the book 'Collages & Recettes' (pub. Éditions Alternatives, 2010). He is also the main character of the comic book jointly written with Christophe Blain and entitled 'En cuisine avec Alain Passard' (pub. Éditions Gallimard, 2011).  
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