

# Quiet showman

Anthony Genovese has won two Michelin stars for his risky marriage of Asian and European flavours at Il Pagliaccio in Rome. But it has taken longer to win over conservative Romans

**A**nthony Genovese has none of the bravado you might expect of a celebrity chef. There's no sign of a recipe book, wine label, TV series or world tour on his resume and yet he is of the most dynamic chefs in Rome with two Michelin stars to prove it. Even the vocabulary the quietly-spoken Genovese uses is not something you find on the lips of most of his peers. And there are none of the jokes that might come from someone whose restaurant is called Il Pagliaccio, or The Clown.

Genovese uses words such as colour, texture and sensuality to describe his individual approach to cuisine but most of the time he lets his delicate dishes do the talking. Whether he's serving succulent red prawns in a fluffy passionfruit sauce, a tender piece of beef or fresh sole dusted in citrus fruit, each dish has hints of hidden flavours and subtle spices that have traversed the old Silk Road.

"I feel the food inside myself, it's very personal," he says. "I have a respect for food. It's a sensual thing."

The 44-year-old chef has taken a break from the kitchen to chat in a cosy salon inside his elegant restaurant, which sits in a discreet quarter between the famous Campo dei Fiori market and the Renaissance palaces that transformed the city's streets during the 16th century.

Genovese was born in Haute Savoie in France just across the Italian border. His parents migrated there from the small town of San Lorenzo just outside Reggio Calabria on Italy's southern tip. Like many migrants, they fled the country's devastating postwar poverty in search of a better future and his maternal grandparents went with them.

Genovese spent a lot of time as a child in the kitchen with his grandmother, who was a gifted cook.

"When I was small we used to make cannelloni; they left me alone in the kitchen to play with the flour. Then I can remember when I was around 10 or 12 I started to invite my friends over. I grew up with great flavours. There was no grand cooking; it was very simple. There was home-made pasta, polpetta, ricotta and oil."

Genovese was also influenced by his grandfather, who had been a respected pastry chef in the Sicilian city of

Messina but was unable to find work in France. "In France there was a lot of racism. As an Italian he could not make pastries; he could only be a bricklayer. The French were snobs."

Genovese learned from both grandparents in a family where food always had a broad cultural perspective. "When we went to Calabria we took chocolates, and when we came back we brought salami and oil. Every year my father and my uncles would make capocollo and salami."

The family eventually moved south to the milder Cote D'Azur and at age 14 Genovese left school and began a cooking and hospitality course in Nice. Not surprisingly, the emphasis was on traditional French cuisine and recipes laden with butter and cream. It was a rude awakening for someone schooled in the simplicity of southern Italian cooking. When he graduated, Genovese worked with the innovative Dominique Le Stanc at the Hotel Negresco in Nice and later had a stint at the luxury Vista Palace Hotel in Monaco.

"When I decided to return to Italy in 1990, it was a scandal," Genovese recalls. "The French chefs thought Italy was a Third World country. They said 'You want to go to Italy and make spaghetti?'"

As a young chef he spent three years at the three-Michelin starred Enoteca Pinchiorri in Florence before becoming head chef when it opened its first Tokyo restaurant in 1992. That experience gave him a great respect for Japanese cuisine and his extensive travel through Malaysia and Thailand also had a profound influence on his cooking. "In Asia I learned a great deal about flavours. In Thailand and Malaysia I learned about spices; in Japan I learned about presentation and the respect for the product," he says.

Genovese later had a stint in London at the Hotel Regent and the Italian restaurant Toto's before cooking at the two-Michelin-star Rossellinis restaurant on the Amalfi coast. In 2003 Genovese took the plunge and opened Il Pagliaccio in Rome, with his particular interpretation of European and Asian fusion. "No one believed it would work. Rome is very, very traditional. I am the only madman who is trying something different, to have the courage to do something different," Genovese says

Anthony Genovese, chef and owner of Il Pagliaccio restaurant in Rome, uses his knowledge of world cuisines in his subtly spiced dishes





Those who dare to take the risk at Il Pagliaccio are well rewarded with a menu that marries oysters with burrata and lychees, marinates beef in beetroot juice or pairs grilled salmon and Granny Smiths and pineapple

quietly. “Now Italians are travelling to Asia and Australia. Ten years ago it was a different thing. When we began there was nothing.”

Il Pagliaccio is a sleek but intimate restaurant that seats only 28. The walls are lined with paintings and the bookshelves are filled with guides to top Italian wines and the cooking secrets of French gourmet Alain Ducasse and Sydney’s own Tetsuya Wakuda. But the menu here is very much Genovese’s unique creation and he uses the best of seasonal ingredients to update the menu and surprise his loyal clientele.

Many of his guests are Scandinavian, Dutch, French or American. Apparently the Romans have been less willing to abandon their hearty cuisine and sample the kind of fusion that has given him international renown.

“What we lack here is curiosity. We all have our cellphones, our iPhones, our iPads, but with food we have to eat what we know,” he says. “I love to cook at home and sometimes when I cook Thai food for my friends they love to eat it but at the end they say ‘That’s enough’. And I think, ‘What a shame’.”

Those who dare to take the risk at Il Pagliaccio are richly rewarded with a menu that marries oysters with burrata and lychees, marinates beef in beetroot juice or pairs grilled salmon with Granny Smiths and pineapple. There is a choice of degustation menus from three courses to 12 with one aptly entitled a “circus of flavours”. The wine list is tailored to suit the culinary experience and includes 1000 Italian and international wines — from as far as Israel, France, Slovenia and Austria.

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Daniele Cernilli, a food and wine critic and a founder of the respected *Gambero Rosso Guide*, was one of Genovese’s first customers and still dines at Il Pagliaccio at least once a month. “I knew he was a fantastic chef right away; he has a vision that few other chefs in Italy have,” Cernilli says. “He is not only an Italian chef; he is an Italian chef who looks at the world. But he is also a great chef because of his extraordinary technique ... There are only three or four chefs like that in Italy — him and perhaps Massimo Bottura and Heinz Beck.”

Only three years after he opened Il Pagliaccio Genovese was rewarded with his first Michelin star, which he admits he almost expected. But it was his second star in 2009 that surprised him. “Knock on wood!” he says.

Although backed by a loyal team including pastry chef Marion Lichtle and sommeliers Matteo Zappile and

Gennaro Buono, Genovese admits it is a challenge to remain at the top. “You have to have very strong discipline and self-control. We live in a world that is moving very quickly and you have to remain abreast of it all.”

On the wall of the restaurant hangs a painting of a clown his mother painted in honour of his late father. (“She always said she would give it to me when I opened my own restaurant.”) But the chef says it’s also a great symbol of the role that every chef should play for his patrons and the spectacle that creative cuisine can offer them.

“A chef should transmit the joy of his profession and give his best to his clients in his restaurant even when his mood is low. In a certain way you have to always wear a mask because you should never allow your own sadness to ruin the cooking. It is like performing a show. Out front you must always show good humour; in the kitchen it’s another story!”