

The Bold and the Beautiful

Three days in Milan with ENRICO BARTOLINI convinces VICKI WILLIAMS that this rising-star chef is in possession of some exceptional powers

ENRICO BARTOLINI HAS JUST given me a taste of the most sublime olive oil. It comes in a small bottle that screams expensive and is measured out in droplets. It tastes like tomatoes. Exactly like tomatoes, and its taste still lingers in my memory.

Not long after, as I am observing from a corner of the kitchen in his two-Michelin-star restaurant, a junior member of staff turns, and time slows as he knocks the glass bottle to the ground. It shatters into tiny shards, the golden liquid slowly oozing across the floor. I hold my breath – maybe he does too – waiting for the response.

Bartolini glances over, as do most of the kitchen team. He calmly goes back to plating. As I come to learn over the three days I spend with Bartolini, his voice in the kitchen is always the quietest, commanding attention through respect rather than intimidation.

When I first meet the 37-year-old chef, he's wearing a slim-fit shirt with a mandarin collar, a tailored jacket and dark trousers, all in the same hue as his handmade shoes. This is his look, one that speaks of quality craftsmanship, yet is quite understated.

I imagine him to be shy, which is wrong, but a mistake many make. "I don't understand why people think I am shy – I am not," he says.

He certainly isn't shy in business – the chef now has four restaurants in Italy as well as Spiga in Hong Kong, which opened at the tail end of 2016. He's mild-mannered, calm and contained, but in possession of clever culinary powers.

His creations include a bottoni pasta with olive oil and lime, roasted octopus and cacciucco sauce – the pasta so fine it literally melts on the tongue, the octopus beyond tender, the lime bringing a bright acidity, all tied together with an intense fish sauce. It's a dish with heart, and I notice (the benefit of fine dining alone) other diners also connecting emotionally with the cuisine – with laughter, or surprise. A scallop carpaccio with Piedmontese hazelnuts, roasted lemon and sea snails croutons is also exquisite.



The contemporary cuisine can also challenge. A translucent pasta filled with Tuscany peanuts, sea urchin and chicken consommé is a delicate dish to behold. It's an explosion of boldness, a smack in the face that reaffirms there's nothing shy about Bartolini. It's a dish I'll never forget.

Bartolini notes his first memorable food moment came at three years old, the flame that ignited a desire to become a chef. "The first real lesson I had in the kitchen was at school when I was three. Our teacher prepared a caramel in front of the class. I remember being very surprised and very impressed, watching the sugar change colour and transform. I offered confidently to make it for my mother when we got home."



At five he was cooking crepes, taught to him by a French neighbour, and making fresh pasta. He got his first kitchen job at 13, in his uncle's restaurant. He remembers the exact date (May 13, 1993) and the many kilos of salad he was charged to wash that first day.

At 25, having worked in London, Paris, Berlin

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: CAPERS, ONE OF THE CHEF'S FAVOURITE INGREDIENTS, IN A VARIETY OF FORMS, INCLUDING FREEZE-DRIED, SALTED AND PRESERVED; BARTOLINI AT LUNCH WITH HIS SONS; LOMELLINA SNAILS WITH SAGE AND GREEN PEPPER, SERVED WITH AN ALMOND TACO FILLED WITH HERBS

and Italy (often for Italian chefs at award-winning restaurants), he was ready to open his first establishment, which subsequently received a Michelin star. In 2013, he laid claim to being the youngest chef in Italy to be awarded two stars. Now he's aiming for three stars in Milan, after his restaurant unveiled a new look last month, and is confident of retaining the star or gaining more in Bergamo and Castiglione della Pescaia, as well as earning stars in Venice.

Bartolini has an intriguing signature, with many of his dishes two- or three-parters. Each component can be complete on its own, but is designed intentionally to be more than the sum of its parts. I experienced this more than once, such as the outstanding half-fried, half-raw Sicilian prawns, served with soup (in Milan it's faux almond, in Hong Kong it meets shrimp and chickpea).

"I know for the best experience sometimes one dish should be preceded by another specific dish, but I cannot force the diner to order it. By serving more than one plate as one dish it becomes composed of the perfect combination," Bartolini says. "It becomes an experience. It's what I would have liked to propose to the diner from the beginning."

I've been interviewing Bartolini for 90 minutes now, and we are talking about his passions and obsessions (reading, bonsai, art, football, fast cars). "I can smell quality," he says, and he's not talking about ingredients, although that would be true, too. He's talking about another love: shoes. His father was a shoemaker.

"I know the smell of quality, of properly seasoned leather," he says. "I know too if the leather is from a male or female, and from which part of the body." At this point he takes off his shoe and shows me how it's made of leather from the shoulder of a young female. At Spiga, the wall of the bar is decorated with leather soles, something he said was



On his rare days off, his priority is to spend time with his wife and three charming children in Bergamo. I join the family gathering at his restaurant in the historic centre, having driven there (fast) in his head-turning sports car. His youngest child, Vittoria, is already showing an appreciation for food at just 11 months, trying – and enjoying – anchovies for the first time. Anchovies are one of the chef's guilty pleasures, along with champagne and caviar.

It is now the end of the third day and Bartolini is lying on the floor. Actually, on a white background board on the floor, because of an idea suggested by the photographer. The set-up has been created organically. After finishing in the kitchen, he came

to check on the progress of an ingredients photo shoot. Always with a clear direction of what he wants, he immediately became the stylist, working on the board with the same hands-on intensity and perfectionism that he brings to the kitchen.

Towards the end, the photographer suggests he join the photo. Hesitant but trusting, he agrees, and the intimacy between Bartolini and his ingredients is obvious. Ingredients are his muse, and this moment, this image embodies that relationship. **B**