

# THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEW

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## THE ARTIST OF FRENCH COOKING

*Acclaimed chef Alain Passard muses on his kitchen adventures, the splendor of vegetables, and the impact of globalization on cuisine à la française*

In salmon and gray striped trousers, a blue scarf tossed rakishly around the neck, **Alain Passard** arrives for an interview at his Left Bank atelier with the colorful exuberance of a rock star. And that is exactly what he is to legions of appreciative Parisian diners and to the food critics who consistently rank him among the world's leading chefs. His restaurant L'Arpège has been awarded three Michelin stars every year since 1996. One of the many testaments to Passard's talents is that three of his former *sous chefs de cuisine*, Pascal Barbot, Mauro Colagreco, and Bertrand Grébaut, currently boast three, two, and one Michelin stars, respectively, at their own restaurants in France.

At a time when other illustrious French chefs like Alain Ducasse and Joël Robuchon have leveraged their names to create global restaurant empires, Passard, 58, remains focused solely on delivering plates of exquisite (and expensive) fare to the loyal patrons of his restaurant across from the Musée Rodin. Among his claims to fame is his wizardry with vegetables, which he grows in his own natural gardens in Sarthe, Eure and Manche. In 2001, Passard demonstrated the depth of his creative integrity by focusing his menus on vegetables; for putting his Michelin stars at risk, Passard's move stunned the culinary cognoscenti.

Recently ranking L'Arpège at No. 12—and Passard the No. 1 French chef—the S. Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants 2015 pronounced: "In Passard's world, grapefruit and almonds form the surprising but effective complement to the sweetest of peas. Rather than being an understudy, beetroot steals the limelight when it's substituted for beef in a tartare replete with perfect, golden gaufrette potatoes, or in place of tuna in a take on nigiri, glistening with geranium oil. Passard is rightly considered a culinary genius." *Cairo Review* Managing Editor **Scott MacLeod** spoke with Passard in Paris on June 9, 2015.

▷ **Alain Passard**, L'Arpège restaurant, Paris, July 6, 2012. *Koos Breukel*

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Growing up in Brittany, what influences led you to become a chef?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** I've had fantastic luck in my life, in that I grew up in a very artistic family. My father was



a musician and my mother a seamstress. My grandmother was a cook, and I had a grandfather who was a sculptor who worked with rattan. And this was something that was fantastic when I was growing up. All around me, I was watching people work with their hands. I'd go to see my grandma, she was working with her hands. I'd go to see my grandpa, and he was working with his hands. I'd go to see my mother, and it was the same. Manual work was everywhere. And so very early on, I wanted to do something with my hands, because it was all around me. Oddly, nobody really talked to me about his or her work. My father spoke very little with me about music, my mother little about clothes making, my grandpa little about sculpting. But my grandmother took me under her wing. She made me understand that cooking wasn't a job, but an adventure. It was the end of the 1960s, early 1970s, in the heart of Brittany, a tiny village. So for my parents, cooking was something that seemed more accessible as a livelihood for me. They were afraid that music wasn't a way to really earn a living. Clothing, as a career, wasn't seen as being very accessible. But cooking, given all the restaurants in Brittany, being an apprentice cook seemed much more reasonable.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *To become a French chef, must you read the writings of Escoffier, of Brillat-Severin, and the other great figures in French culinary history?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** No. I didn't even know about that. I've never even opened a cookbook. I don't have cookbooks in my home. Cookbooks aren't really up to the task. I work from my ideas. I do understand that some chefs may find inspiration in books, but I find it in everyday life.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How did your work evolve over the years? How did you start and get to here, to become the chef of one of the world's most acclaimed restaurants?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** It's simple. There's nothing without hard work. You have to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty. Seven to eight hours a day, even ten, in front of the stove, every day. Nothing else. Nothing without doing the work. If you look at the major painters or musicians, like Stan Getz, or John Coltrane, it was seven to eight hours a day playing the sax. It's very simple.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *And how did your food and cuisine philosophy develop?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** It's always been hard for me to speak about that. Because I'm into what I do, sometimes I take paths and wonder if they are the right ones. I have trouble trying to articulate it. I work according to emotion. That's what I can say about it. I put a lot of emotion into what I do. And when I can add a little finesse to it, I'm the happiest person in the world. Talking about cooking requires simple words.

Sometimes when I listen to other chefs, it bothers me a bit, how lofty it is. I think mine is a simple cuisine, a cuisine of movement and emotion, and any discussion of it needs to correspond to that. Meaning simple words about simple cooking.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *I read Pascal Barbot saying that your cooking is hard to classify. Is it Breton? French? Something else?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** Well above all, it's a cooking with a kind of momentum, in perfect harmony with nature, with the gardens. I don't write it down, outside of a few little books including my graphic novel. But on a daily basis it's not something I write about, so that I don't repeat myself. I force myself each spring to start afresh.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *But you would call it French cuisine?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** Yes. I don't use foreign ingredients. There are some restaurants where you find Thai or Chinese or Japanese flavors. The basis for my work is the garden, my spices and herbs.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *The idea of farm-to-table is trendy now. But you've been famous for doing it for years. How did you derive this concept and what do you think of it?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** My passion for color. This desire to put my passions and hobbies into my work. My painting, sculpting, and making collages. This passion I have for colors is a strong inspiration, and fifteen years ago I realized that only vegetables, with their colors, could do that. In this vegetable-only cuisine, I reconnect with the other livelihoods of my family, like sewing. If I wasn't a chef, I would have loved to be a major fashion designer. I'm passionate about material, colors, textures, and the transparency in it. When I arrive for work in the morning, I always look at what the women are wearing. I look right away because the clothing—their colors, fabric, textures, et cetera—attracts my attention.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What about nutrition, sustainability? Do you think about this in your focus on vegetables?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** Yes, it's part of each day for me. To respect the seasons, minimize my carbon footprint. We don't waste anything. When you work with vegetables, you remove the top, and what we don't use goes back to the garden for compost.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How does your restaurant work? Walk us through a day at L'Arpège.*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** Well, in general we have one or even two deliveries per day, from the Normandy garden for lunch and the Sarthe garden for dinner. Nothing is

left over from the previous day. We only work with vegetables that were harvested that morning. I don't want my vegetables to be refrigerated. The vegetables arrive and I inspect everything myself. And we're off. We begin to play. I see things, I make connections visually, I get ideas, note them, add colors, arrange some things.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *So you make the recipe as you start cooking?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** I improvise all the time. I throw myself off-balance in order to anchor myself. This is what I teach to my chefs. Nothing is written down. Memory is a muscle that needs to be exercised. It's gymnastics. And it's very difficult to do that.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Is this common? It seems unique, and most restaurants have menus. Some are the same for decades.*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** Yes they do and it's really boring. It's the same colors and movements and flavors. The same hands. I don't have the same hands in winter and spring. I work differently. So to bring this all together, for me, each day is the first day. Each morning I start naked, bringing nothing. I come just with my ideas.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *When does your day start?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** It could be 8 a.m., or 9 or 10 or noon. In general, I begin thinking around 7 a.m. I get to the kitchen at 12.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Many celebrated chefs in France once worked for you. Is it a coincidence that so many of your protégés are stars now?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** I spent time with them, all these chefs. I held their hands for two or even five years. I'm in the kitchen with them all day.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Is mentoring important for you?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** No, it just happens that way. They were with me for part of my life. It's a thing that happens. My job isn't to be a mentor. It's just my daily life. Every day is the first day.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What qualities do you look for in hiring your staff?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** There is no criteria. It's difficult to know in a first quick meeting. It's how he cooks when he's in front of the stove that matters. And seeing a passion in his eyes. Otherwise, for the rest of it, we can work on that. If his hand is a little too present, we can fix that. We can work on his presentation, his sense of smell, how he listens.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What is the secret to keeping your Michelin stars?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** It's not a secret. It's hard work. We care about constantly reinventing ourselves. We create all the time. There is nothing without that. And if we do those things, we will keep our stars. In my creative work, it has to be that way. To always be rising, not remaining stagnant.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Was your chocolate chicken a success? Do you make mistakes?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** I continue experimenting. That idea came from *mole poblano*. That's chicken in chocolate, basically. Yes, it was a successful dish.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Do you sometimes make mistakes in your improvisation?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** As I continue to know how to do it, I make fewer mistakes.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Brillat-Severin said that "the destiny of nations depends on the manner in which they are fed." Is this a living concept for the French people and French chefs?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** Feeding ourselves allows us to be joyous, be healthy, good hair and skin.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What do you think France has contributed to cuisine in the world?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** Obviously France is the world's pantry. We have the great fortune in France to have a real terroir: the poultry is fantastic, beautiful fish, cheese, wine, and shellfish. When France is spoken of in other countries, it's not our football teams that are talked about. That said, France inspires the rest of the world and always will. I see it at L'Arpège; the number of chefs who come both for lunch and dinner. Chefs from Australia or California or Japan, they all must come to France.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Can French terroir survive? I'm thinking about the European Union standardization rules affecting some food production, like in traditional French cheeses.*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** I think it's a good thing to have this openness.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *It doesn't affect you, your notion of French cuisine?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** No. I do like the openness, but that doesn't mean I agree with everything. Use of pesticides and chemicals, of course I don't at all agree. Nor vegetables that are at the markets out of season.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Don't we need that to feed the world, mass production?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** We can produce vegetables en masse, but all I ask is to do so while respecting the seasons. Producing tomatoes in January? No. We should produce parsnip or rutabaga instead. It will be better for our health than tomatoes or strawberries.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What is the importance of cuisine for culture? What is a chef's contribution to a nation's culture?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** Cuisine is a story. It all depends on what we do with it. There is an artistic side to it, especially for me, working with vegetables. We can write beautiful stories with it. What I mean by that is that when we prepare a dish, we bring so much to it, including the entire human aspect involved: the farmer, the fisherman, and the market gardener [produce person at a farmer's market]. So it's something interesting because from all of these factors we are telling a story. Cooking has a grace to it, like dancing. It's like going to a show. There is an audience, the dining room of the restaurant is like a concert hall, and we have a performance to do. It has to be like this. It's important to put your heart into it, all that you do.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Are you afraid of globalization? It seems like there is a hamburger on every menu at every French restaurant these days.*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** No, I'm not afraid. And it's really hard to do a good burger. The quality of the bread, its lightness and taste, the savory stuffing inside the burger itself. But of course it's a veggie burger here!

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Will we ever see burgers on the menu at L'Arpège?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** We actually have done that before, a steak made of winter vegetables: rutabaga, celery, Jerusalem artichoke, horseradish, and salsify.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Will the new generation of chefs and diners change the face of French cuisine, its formality?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** Yes, I think so. This is a generation that is very creative and talented. We can feel these young people and all these new restaurants.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *When we think of great French cuisine, are we really talking about an elite group of chefs? In the United States, there is an impression that French food is in decline. New York Times food writer Mark Bittman recently wrote: "The vast majority of restaurants disappoint. The people of France appear to have lost faith and even interest."*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** I don't go out to other restaurants much anymore. But I think, *au contraire*, that there is much talent now, lots of talented chefs, and French cuisine is not in decline. I have never seen so many Americans in my restaurant as I do now. More and more.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What do you think about Top Chef and other reality cooking shows?*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** I think it's good. I declined to do it myself but it's part of French cuisine, showcasing talent, and shows lots of distinction of what people can do in their kitchens. I simply can't take two months away from my restaurant, that's why I didn't take part in the TV show.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Unlike some famous French chefs, you have stayed away from commercialization. You have not opened a branch of L'Arpège in Las Vegas.*

**ALAIN PASSARD:** I wouldn't know how to do that. I'm happy in my one restaurant here, which is my home. The following is a very important sentence for me: At 14, I chose to be a cook, and I never changed my mind.