

# King Of The Hill

Somewhere between the Eternal City and the stars, **Heinz Beck** has spun La Pergola into the culinary stratosphere. We meet the enterprising chef who's on top of the world – in more ways than one

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The name Heinz Beck comes charged with some pretty serious subtext. There's the small matter of Rome's only three-Michelin-starred restaurant, for starters, not to mention an ever-expanding empire of high-end eateries around the world. He's also a qualified sommelier and the only chef of his calibre to have published extensive nutritional research in addition to the usual shelf of cookbooks. But when I catch him mid-service at his first casual-dining venture, Dubai's Taste of Italy, Beck's warmth and easy patter – his native German softened by 23 years of living and working in Italy – belies his super-chef status. Watching him charm his way around the restaurant floor, all the while dipping in and out of the open kitchen – tasting a sauce here, tossing a pan there – he reminds me more of the magnetic proprietor-cum-showman you might find working his magic in some little Italian osteria.

"I love to stay in the kitchen," he tells me the next morning over coffee at the Waldorf Astoria, home to Social, the fine-dining arm of Brand Beck in Dubai. "It's like a fish swimming in the water: if you take away the water,

**“If you take me out of the kitchen, I will not live any more”**

the fish will die; if you take me out of the kitchen, I will not live any more." I don't doubt it. He's been in the kitchen for over three decades and, despite having a foot in restaurants everywhere from Tokyo to the Algarve, rarely misses a service at one in particular: La Pergola, his culinary HQ since 1994, and the holder of three Michelin stars for the past 11 years.

Perched atop the Monte Mario hill, with unmatched views of the Eternal City from the roof of the five-star Rome Cavalieri hotel, it's clear La Pergola remains the last word in dining for Beck: "It's such a beautiful setting, such a beautiful city. It's a very beautiful experience." When he was offered the job, he recalls, "I was very much blown away by the view, and when I came up to the rooftop there was nothing – no kitchen, no restaurant – only the big

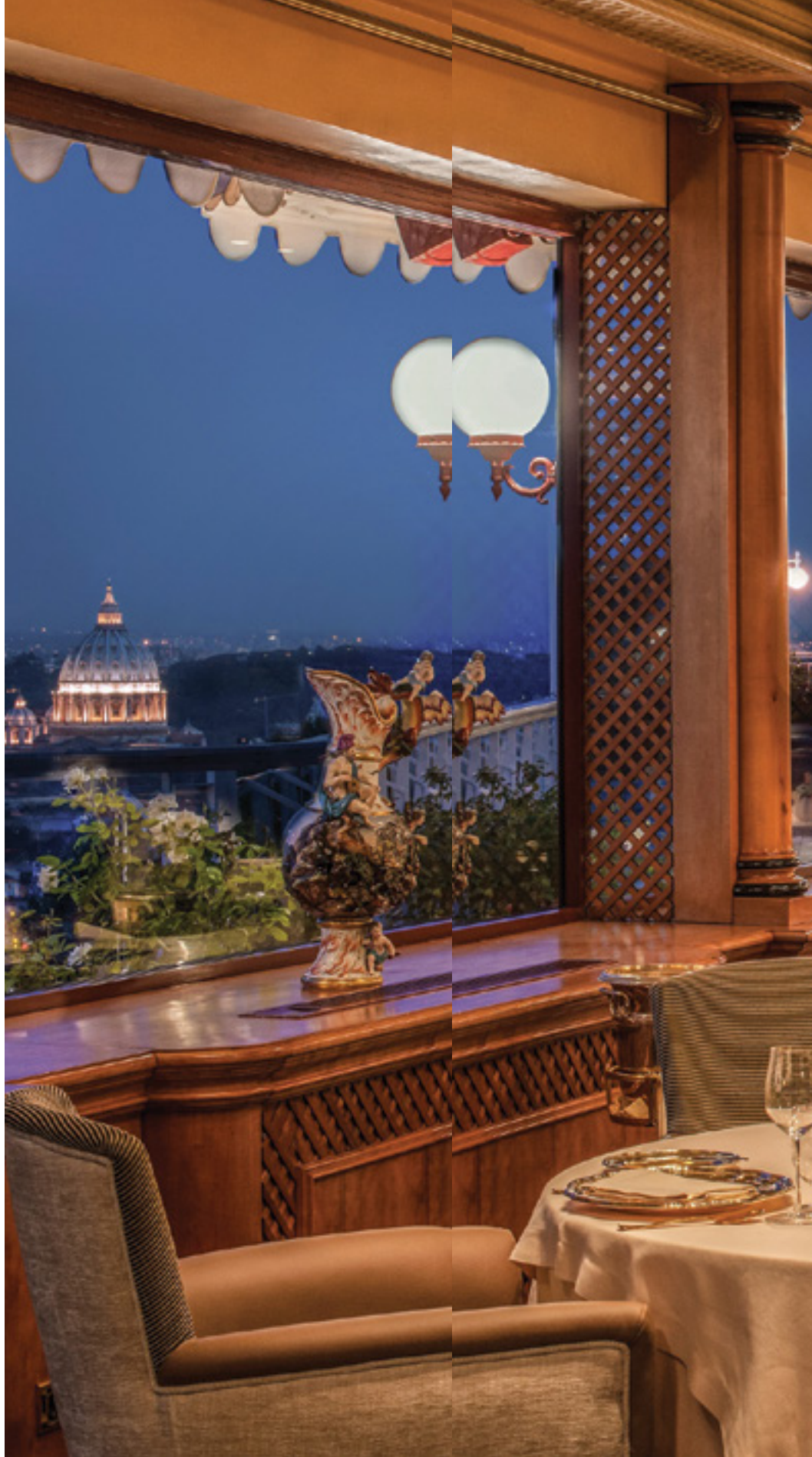
windows looking over the Eternal City, and that was my decision made."

Of course, it wasn't just the view that drew Beck to Italy. His wife and business partner (who, he tells me, does all the cooking at home) is Sicilian, and his food unashamedly Italian in both flavour and spirit. "It's the colours of the place," he effuses. "They change so extremely from the morning to the evening, it's just incredible. The colours and then the architecture, and the landscapes."

Colour plays a huge part in the La Pergola experience – from the molten glow of Beck's bubbling chocolatey Sole dessert to the naturally aqua-blue tea that, when poured over a delicate assortment of shellfish and herbs, brings his exquisite Mare dish to life. It's unsurprising his first creative calling was that of a painter (an idea quickly vetoed by his practical father). "I don't have time for it now, unfortunately," Beck laments, adjusting his purple and orange Marc by Marc Jacobs glasses as he pulls up an image on his iPad of him at work on a giant canvas – which, he mentions casually, now hangs in a Roman gallery.

He reaches for the iPad more than once during our time together, eager for me to see and better understand (if not taste) his most iconic creations, all of which were inspired by the natural world. Flitting between Google Images and his own Instagram feed, he explains of Sole, "I searched for the sun on the internet and said, okay, what can I do with this? The black around it, the light in the middle... The powder is freeze-dried carrots, and under that is a passion-fruit gel, and under that, to make it curvy, a chocolate cream and saffron sauce." The list of supporting ingredients goes on: "Vanilla cream and fried capers and a chocolate olive-oil biscuit..."

"After this," he continues, "I wasn't thinking of doing another dish inspired by nature but then I was in Kyoto, in a ryokan, having my breakfast in front of the water garden and there was this peace – nobody was talking, the birds were singing, it was just gorgeous – and so when I came back to Rome I started developing Giardino di Agua." As he picks up the iPad again, I think I'm getting the hang of this show-and-tell routine and venture, "So you had



that image in your mind?" He swiftly counters, "No, I had the *emotion* in my mind. Food has to be communicative." For Beck, the emotional is very much entwined with the physical. He's spent years studying the effects of food on the human body and is as concerned with the wellbeing of his diners as the taste of his three-Michelin-star dishes.

How does he want people to feel after a meal at La Pergola? "Happy," he answers, categorically. "And you can only make them feel happy if they're not tired. When I started nobody believed you could make high-quality food thinking about health; everybody said cooking has to be heavy, difficult to digest. But people sit in your restaurant for two or three hours and they have to talk, they have to laugh – and if they're not able to do this, you've failed." With a business portfolio as burgeoning as his trophy cabinet, Beck is about as far from failure as you could imagine. But, he shrugs, "If your work is your passion, then it's not really work."

For such an innovator this philosophy is nothing new, but what sets him apart, Beck is certain, is his respect for what came before. "If I make a very modern dish, it has to come from somewhere – it comes from experience, and that experience is based on traditions. It's like a skyscraper," he gestures to the city spiralling up around us, "if I build very deep foundations, I can put a lot of floss on the top. If I don't, one day it will collapse."

That's the thing about Heinz Beck. The man is a genius, but he knows exactly how to relate his genius to the real world. And it's this complete lack of pretension, this focus on the true essence of things, that makes his food so, well, good. "I always say, there are only two dishes," he smiles. "A well-made dish or a badly made dish, so it doesn't matter if the dish has a lot of cooking techniques or not; it's important that it tastes good." Mission accomplished.