

Introduction

I'M NEVER HUNGRY, but I can always eat. I finish what's on the plate — my own and my son Agmonn's, my own and my guests', my own and my clients'. I also clean out my wife's saucepans and use my fingers as spatulas to scrape food from my chef's stove. I pick from fridges at highway stops and from market stalls — I pick at everything I see. Nothing that is ingested and digested is a matter of indifference to me. Yet for all that, those who think I'm eating don't know me. I'm not eating, I never eat: I test.

I test, I taste, I gulp, I gobble, I bolt — and always, too fast. But this is not the act of a sensualist. I eat as an explorer. There are doctors who study the world through epidemics, shortages, heredity, fertility rates. There are musicians who pick up waves here, rhythms there, who hear the ensemble singing of human diversity wherever they go. Me, I think it's meals that make the world go round. If I eat, it's because I'm driven to eat in order to better understand. I'm never hungry, but I have an appetite on others' behalf. I have... the taste of others.

If I gave free rein to my megalomaniac tendencies, I would write “Eat me!” on my menus. If I were less modest, I’d write “Let’s taste each other!” Everything served in my restaurants is in my own image. The scrambled eggs served at brunch are like me — organic — produced by a great guy called Damien. The after-hours mojito is like me — fresh mint, fresh-squeezed lemon, sugar, Havana Club white rum, piled crushed ice, as I learned in Cuba. If you haven’t yet tasted my *confit de canard*, you won’t understand. I am a quiche, and not just any quiche: one with pastry made this morning, organic eggs, whole fresh milk and farmhouse bacon made by Thierry Schweitzer. In brief, the quiche lorraine ordered by forty customers a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. As that guy said: this is my body, this is my blood. It’s not my invention. No doubt it’s because I put so much of myself into everything I serve that I so firmly believe you can’t be wrong about people when you feed them.

I annoy some *confrères*. They pretend not to see the point of my fight for transparency in restaurants, cafés, pubs and canteens. For these people, giving clients information about what they’re eating is strictly the domain of civil servants in the regulatory authority on competition, fraud and consumer affairs. With 46 employees and a turnover of more than €5m in 2013, they try to accuse me of being a fat cat with nothing better to do. Yet the market economy, private enterprise, competition — that

has been my daily life since I served my first lemonade at the age of 16. I'm happy to learn any number of lessons, but not that one. That said, unlike some, I refuse to compromise and make choices that people would find unacceptable. Les Philosophes may not be listed as one of the best restaurants in the world — no more than my other four establishments, La Chaise au Plafond and La Belle Hortense, that I run myself, and the Petit Fer à Cheval and L'Etoile Manquante which are run by a manager. But my clients are not cheated on the goods. The dishes that they order and appreciate are the same ones that I like to eat myself. Even with the 12-euro *plat du jour*, they get good cooking, balanced and prepared with care. Genuinely home-made, no inferiority complex, no trickery. No superiority complex either, so no make-up, no fancy presentation. This sincerity, be it for a kebab or for truffled eggs, is the basis for the trust on which commerce is built.

To those malcontents shedding crocodile tears over lost trade, I suggest a revolutionary way forward: lay your cards on the table. It really is quite simple. In the dining-room, whole fresh ingredients, as far as possible from sustainable agriculture, without additives or preservatives, at a fair price. On the other side of the counter, a decent share of the profits between bosses, producers and employees.

This method goes back to my own experience as a small trader making his way in the café business. It's not a political manifesto but, served on a plate, it could well give the French their appetite back. Today they are sick of the cheating at all levels of society and some end up cheating, themselves, in an effort to get their own back. So let's start by sharing something to eat and let's have a drink to seal our confidence. The rest — growth, smiles, the desire to live and share together — will follow naturally. *A table!*