

Slowly, but purposefully the classic Bristol moves along the driveway that is overshadowed by large beeches. The tyres crunch over the fine gravel. The car stops in front of the stairs, although you cannot really see it braking. Two men get out. With a jaunty spring they take the twelve stairs upwards and ring the doorbell. The large glass door opens after a minute or two.

# Dining in Heaven



“Gentlemen, a very good morning. How may I be of service to you?” says Jaap de Boer, project developer and brand-new owner of the grand rural estate.

“We are advocates, and you will come with us,” the tallest of the two visitors answers.

“O my God, nothing serious I hope?”

“Please don’t do that again” says the man, rubbing his ears.

“What?”

“Using His name like that. Never Mind. Can you come with us?”

“Okay, okay, where are we going then?”

“Dining in Heaven!”

“Heaven? But isn’t that going to cost a lot of money?”

Now both men rub their ears. “It’s got nothing to do with money,” they say irritably. That helps. Jaap makes himself ready to join them. He turns round and calls over his shoulder:

“Else-Marijke? I will be out for a while, okay?”

“Where are you going?”

“Dining in Heaven!”

“Not La Garage again is it?”

But the three men have already left. Paffff.

We see the Bristol again on an empty country road, somewhere between Cremona and Mantova, say sixty kilometres north of Parma in Italy. If not for the fact that the advocates know they have to be at a house which is covered with ivy from the roof to the doorstep, the trio probably would otherwise have driven past Dal Pescatore, the three-star restaurant of Nadia and Antonio Santini. Now the Bristol turns elegantly into the car park. Dal Pescatore is located on the edge of a national park, next to the Oglio, now a river of little importance, but two generations ago an important transport route. In those days the grandfather of Antonio was both a fisherman and ferry owner. When the long bridge to Padena was finally built, he started up a trattoria with fish and wine in order to make up for his loss of income. His son Giovanni married the farmer’s daughter Bruna and lifted the eating-place, gastronomically speaking, to a higher level. Thanks to Bruna, chicken, pasta, goose, duck, pork and horsemeat were now served. Business went well: the trattoria was jam-packed five days a week. In those days eighty guests could be served.

As Antonio and Nadia took over the restaurant in the Eighties they were both thrilled at the prospect of making a top restaurant out of it. They met each other during their political sciences studies, and visited all major kitchens in Europe in their cream white Citroën Diane, as a hobby. Nadia was already a studied food expert. By means of politics she wanted to commit herself to the health of the Italians by improving food. Soon they realised that politics bargains too much in order to get quick results, and they therefore decided to put things in practice themselves in Dal Pescatore. In 2006 their restaurant was listed among the great gastronomic pilgrimages such as El Bulli, Bocuse, L’Arpège, Moulin de Mougins

and The French Laundry, where guests from all around the globe have themselves treated to very exclusive dishes and wines. In Italy there are four restaurants with three Michelin stars, and Dal Pescatore has been one of them since 1996. Even more impressive is probably the first place in the Classeditori, a guide that composes lists based on six large guides such as Michelin, De Agosthini, Veronelli and Espresso. In 2002 Nadia's kitchen scored the highest, with fifty-eight of the sixty points to be scored.

As humble as the environment is, and with no large signs or indicators that should lead the guest to Dal Pescatore, all the more salutary is the ambiance once one has entered the place. Jaap de Boer has dined in all great restaurants of the world and could therefore be called a connoisseur, a gastronomist. His favourite is Paul Bocuse: "because that man honours the tradition and serves his guests with a vast plate of food". Jaap rubs his hands contentedly as he sees the thousands of cookery books on the bookshelves of the classically decorated lounge. Comfortable armchairs in soft yellow, a large green-leather couch and the elderly sheepdog at the fireplace quickly render the guest with a feeling of coming home. The 29 year old maître Mourad Salami, born in Tangiers, welcomes the gentlemen. One of the waiters brings three flutes and a delicious cold Francha Corta of Ca del Bosco 2001 to the small table. Then there is peace and quiet.



The enjoyment has only just begun when, after a few minutes, a small plate is presented with Parmesan cheese shavings. Antonio Santini introduces himself. He resembles the older brother of Benny Hill. The same way of peering over his glasses, as well as the announcement in his eyes that they are also going to have fun. Antonio has an energetic appearance: "I was born in '53. In that year the complete Italian wine harvest failed, since they put all their energy in me." He scores approving laughter and meanwhile samples a basket of blackberries that his 75-year old father carries in. "We will make sherbet of that. For each kilo of blackberries - one bottle of Moscato. Delicious."

A few moments later Nadia is suddenly standing there. She greets the Dutch visitors warmly and welcomes them with a radiant smile. Her looks are more those of a young woman in her late thirties than of someone of 48. She wears a simple tight jacket, an apron, and below that red-painted toenails in plain sandals. She looks at the gentlemen in a penetrating way. "The eyes are the windows to the soul. I always look my suppliers in the eyes as well, in order to find out whether they will supply me with the very best," she explains in a friendly tone. She takes the visitors to the kitchen and introduces them to her mother-in-law, of whom she says in French that she is the actual boss in the kitchen. Five cooks are busy with the mise en place. Nadia talks a lot with her hands which she regularly puts on the arms of one of the visitors in an imploring way. She bares her soul by having the men taste the champagne sherbet. Hardly recovered from the culinary shock, Nadia takes Jaap (do we see a small aureole above his head?) to one of the working tables. She pours some olive oil into a small bowl with freshly chopped parsley. Some garlic is added, as well as two squeezes of lemon, and finally a bit of salt and pepper. She turns around to a pan with poached pork ribs. She takes out a small piece of the meat, spreads the parsley sauce on it and pops a piece into Jaap's mouth. "That simple, that delicious. How on earth is that possible?" he exclaims after he has eaten it. And again the small aureole is there.

Maître Mourad arrives to announce that the table is ready. The restaurant is decorated in a classical style, with a large press in the middle, two sizeable mirrors and a lot of unpretentious art on the walls. The six tables have been arranged majestically for dinner for fifteen guests. Outside on the patio another eight guests are expected on two tables, although the Italians find the 24 degrees of that evening rather chilly. They keep their jackets and pullovers on. The guests are dressed casually, easier than elsewhere. The contact between the guests mutually, as well as between the staff and the guests, is not formal, but also not familiar. The two advocates and Jaap de Boer are assigned to a table in a corner. There are permanently three or four hosts or hostesses nearby. Santini considers himself a happy man since the arrival of the PC with which he can modify the menu every day. He knows that Dal Pescatore is about his wife, but he monitors and maintains the originality of the menu. "Things that I didn't test and appreciate will not end up on the menu," he says decidedly, but God does hear him hum.

For Jaap de Boer and his company Nadia has composed a meal herself, therefore

they don't have to make a choice. The wine list, which resembles more of a large Bible, is for Jaap therefore the platform to show that he is a connoisseur. The choice of top wines from Piemonte, Lombardy and Tuscany is impressive. France is represented in abundance as well. Antonio Santini suggests commencing with the Magari 2000, a red wine from the Gaja House. Jaap has a bit of a fright, since he knows what that wine costs. What he does not know is that Macanda, the winemaker, bought himself a piece of land in Tuscany in which no one was interested. He carried out soil research and decided to plant the Magari there, an old variety from the Piemonte region. Nowadays a lot of fortune-hunting wine developers like Ferrari are attracted to the success and pay top prices for each square metre.

Then the Heavenly concert can start. First a terrine of tomato and aubergine, a little olive oil and a few basil leaves are presented to the table. The fresh flavour and aroma are overwhelming, but inside the mouth there is no exaggeration. The terrine tastes tranquil. It is followed by *culatello*, ham marinated in *Lambrusco*, the *saleur sacré*. The Italians say that the *culatello* is the absolute top-ham. Forbidden to be eaten with cutlery. Only with your hands. Jaap doesn't feel embarrassed at all anymore. He completely feels at home here. The ham is super-soft and we'll stop talking for a while about Jaap's small aureole.

Then a beautiful present arrives. On the plate lies an extraordinarily beautiful palette of caviar, salmon caviar, and a pate of pressed salmon and flounder with next to it eel with beet, angler and orange. "Our Jonnie Boer from *The Librije* can really cook well," says Jaap in between two bites, "but when he tastes this he will feel embarrassed as never before." A daring remark by Jaap - although he is right somehow. The balance of sour, sweet, fat and bitter is like a boat softly sailing in the wind. Whispering. Beautiful.

Still the discovery of Heaven has only just started. The next dish is the Mantova tortellini stuffed with amaretto biscuits, moutarde and Zucca (sweet pumpkin), and sprinkled with Parmesan cheese. Jaap doesn't fancy sweet pasta that much. A little haltingly he takes a bite of this traditional local dish that was already mentioned in the first Italian cookery book by Bartolomeo Scapi in 1540. After a few times chewing he rises slightly from his chair. The bewilderment is written on his face. He is tasting something he has never tasted before. One of the advocates softly presses him back down into his chair. "It'll be all right," he says pleasantly. How could he know that the risotto with *cèpes*, pears and green asparagus of grandma Santini would beat all and everything that he was ever served for risotto? After the first mouthful it can't go wrong. Jaap almost gets the giggles. "I have eaten everywhere," he says, "but this is so wonderful. Can I go to the kitchen to kiss Nadia? Can I?"

"No, no, no, Jaap. We don't do that in Heaven. We're not going to kiss everyone."

With her cooking Nadia - according to Paul Bocuse, the best female cook in France (!) - once in a while takes care of the exposure of *La Cuisine Française*, since it is all pretty straight-forward what she does. No humbug, only the taste tells the

story. Everything is fresh, everything is of top quality. Her assignment to surprise people is difficult though. It has to be done every day. She cannot make mistakes, since people come from far. Everything has to be in balance continuously. And Nadia Santini understands that art down to her fingertips. Even The Queen of the Dutch, Queen Beatrix, knows how to find the way to her kitchen. Out of gratitude for the wonderful food, she once came to the kitchen. Grandma Santini was reprimanded by her son Antonio after a long embrace with the monarch. "But she started it," grandma then said.

Nadia is so intensely busy with her assignment that sometimes she cannot let go of guests.

Jaap and his new friends are about to leave, everyone has been thanked extensively and the "arrivederci" sounds merrily everywhere. Then she seduces Jaap one more time into her kitchen and hands him a relic as a memory. Crystallised chocolate bonbon, just taken from the hot caramel. Jaap staggers to the car. When he sits down it appears as if he has seen the light, that serene does he look when one of the advocates asks: "Do you understand it now?" "Sure I do. But may I ask you something now? What kind of advocates are you really?"

"We, my dear man, are the devil's advocates."

The limousine drives through a massive pothole in the road and Cats awakes from dreamland...

"Gee Cats, you talk a lot when you sleep," says Caron, who is sitting next to him in the aircraft. They are on their way to Nadia Santini, of whom it is said that she is the best female cook on the face of this earth.