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FUCKING YOUNG!
The Food Issue

By Philippe Pourhashemi
Portrait shot on 35mm by Louise Reinke

THE CHEF RUSCO

MASTER CHEF



You may not know that the mastermind behind some of the world's most memorable -and spectacular- fashion shows is Belgian Etienne Russo, whose event company Villa Eugénie has been at the top of its game for more than 25 years. Having worked with the likes of Kim Jones, Dries Van Noten, Alber Elbaz -and many others- Russo understands the power of performance and the kind of emotional charge designers need to convey through the medium of the fashion show. He surely helps them turn their visions into reality and the beauty of his work lies in the creation of such transient and ephemeral moments, which mark our collective memory in return. As he argues himself, putting all the right ingredients together and hoping for a little miracle is part of the job, whereby magic -and chance- play such an important part.



It is therefore no surprise that Russo's background is in cooking and restaurants. He still talks fondly about his years in the kitchen and the kind of discipline he learned working at different places. A great restaurant relies on passion, timing, quality, and astounding teamwork, which in a way prepared Russo for his bright future. With no connections in fashion, and modest background, it seemed very unlikely that he would manage to enter the fashion industry, but a series of defining encounters opened up the gates. It's obvious that Russo loves fashion. He has great respect for designers and knows the inner workings of the industry inside out, making him an inspiring and engaging figure. Despite our current context defined by fear and disease -as well as the growing virtualization of our world- Russo still believes in the fashion show as a privileged moment and creative art form, blending ritualistic rules and the experience of talent with displays of power the industry revels in.

In this exclusive interview, we retraced

Russo's unusual journey and evoked some of the highlights of his career, while sharing his positive -and encouraging- vision for our future.

What did you do before getting into fashion and launching your own event company?

Etienne Russo I was trained at the Namur hotel school in Belgium. I don't know if you're aware of this, but when it comes to high-level cuisine, the discipline is tougher than what you experience at the army. The hierarchy is very established and it takes years and a lot of patience to get to a certain level. Before being able to do something new, you have to prove that you know how to do what's required of you. I started peeling potatoes and did nothing but this for the entire day.

Doesn't get more Belgian than that, I guess...

Etienne Russo Exactly. Of course, there are several ways to peel potatoes and you need to know what you are doing. The potato needs to look nice once this is done, and it takes time to master the right techniques. Then I

moved away from potatoes to onions, parsley, and anything cold. I was working on preparations within the kitchen and eventually moved to the warm part, making sauces for instance.

Why did you quit at some point?

Etienne Russo I was a teenager when I started and the world was changing in the late 1960s. Then disco music came along and my friends were going out every Saturday night while I was stuck in the kitchen during weekends. It ended up being frustrating after a while and I decided to quit. The parties at that time were completely different from what we see today and it was hard to resist.

What did you enjoy about cooking?

Etienne Russo The discipline was something I loved. In the kitchen, I got to learn some of the principles I still rely on today, such as rigor, precision, and timing. It was a strict environment with many rules, but what you learned there was precious in the end. I also made sure I never cooked the same recipes twice, so whenever I learned something new and returned home, I practiced on my own and did it slightly differently. I guess I didn't want to repeat myself either. I needed to know what the foundation was to twist it and find alternatives.

Would you say you had rebellious tendencies?

Etienne Russo It was a tough environment, and when I was home with my parents, there was a part of me that wanted to let go and be more adventurous. I always wanted to reinterpret the things I had learned. It's the same with cocktails when you're at the bar: the more you know how to make them properly, the more tempted you are to be spontaneous and try out new recipes. It's funny because that's also what I do in my work today: it's about putting elements together and creating combinations.

It's like cooking then.

Etienne Russo Fundamentally, the work hasn't changed. The discipline and attention to detail are still there, as well as the need for precision. Sometimes you combine things that shouldn't work in the first place, but you end up with something great and unexpected.

How did you transition from the kitchen to nightclubs?

Etienne Russo I started modeling at the beginning of the 1980s and traveled to Asia extensively. I often worked in Tokyo and Singapore as a model, and it lasted for 3 years. When the Mirano Continental -which was going to become one of Europe's most iconic clubs- opened its doors in Brussels in 1981, I was asked to join the team, but remember declining because of a trip to Asia. The club opened in early March, and when I returned to Belgium in December, I started working there as a barman. When I got sick of doing that, I sat down with my boss who asked me if I could organize parties at the club. At the same time, he had founded a communication and event agency in Brussels, so there was a job for me to take. I knew nothing about that world.

I guess event companies were not as numerous and developed as they are now.

Etienne Russo There were some agencies, but they didn't do events as we understand them today, it was mostly about advertising and launches. I was given complete carte blanche to organize the kind of events I wanted to do, but drugs, religion, politics -and sex up to a certain extent- had to be excluded. At that time, anyone influential or important went out at night.

How would you describe Brussels at the time?

Etienne Russo People dressed up to go out on Saturday night and thought about their outfits the entire week. You had to prepare your look and nothing was improvised. The beautiful people were also the trendiest and it was all about image and looking your best. You rarely saw people in t-shirts and sneakers. At the club, you got to meet fascinating people, who were often creative and charismatic, like the French model Octavian, who was one of the first androgynous creatures I had ever met. He had long wavy hair up to his back and this amazing castrato voice. When I put my very first party together -devoted to the Opera- I asked him to come and perform live. He started singing with his back to the audience, and the moment he turned to face them, everyone was shocked that he was a man.

How long did you stay at the Mirano for?

Etienne Russo I started in 1981 and I left the club in 1994. I envisaged it like a creative lab and loved to do transgressive things with my team. We kept pushing boundaries and surprising ourselves.

How did you meet Dries Van Noten?

Etienne Russo I first met him in 1985. I actually modeled for him but worked a lot for Walter Van Beirendonck, who didn't have much of a budget at the time. I'd get paid in clothes for shoots.

Was there latex involved?

Etienne Russo Whatever he gave, I was pleased. I wore his stuff at the club, which was perfect. In 1986, we celebrated the 5th anniversary of the Mirano and there was an exhibition where you could see all the new fashion talent on display. They were the original Antwerp 6, except that the group had not been created yet. I spent a lot of time with them as a model and we traveled to London or Florence for industry events. I felt something going on there and wanted to be a part of it somehow.

So you were showing fashion in the club, too.

Etienne Russo Yes, we did shows and performances involving fashion. Very often, the designers had just come out of school and were fresh graduates. I kept talking to Dries about doing a show in the future, so the discussion was an ongoing one. Then one day, he told me he was going to do his first show in Paris and asked me if I wanted to take care of it.

When was that?

Etienne Russo He asked me at the end of

1990 and the first show took place in 1991.

The thing with Dries is that he knew the business well and his pricing was good. He was perhaps less niche than the other Belgian designers, but his success was commercial first, even before he got noticed by the press. Funnily, the journalists resented the fact that he had found success without their help and they were tough on him at the beginning. Dries and I have the same age, and many references in common, which probably explains why we have worked together for so long. He was the rational Belgian, I was the crazy Italian. We complemented each other.

In the 1990s, it felt like the press would go anywhere to see a show, now they complain about saturation and packed schedules. What do you think has changed?

Etienne Russo Fashion is much more corporate now, and it becomes more challenging to find cool locations for example, as everything seems so bureaucratic and tedious. Beforehand, people would take risks, because they got a kick out of them. It was not as calculated -and professional- as it is now. Everything needs to be Instagram friendly, too, which creates restrictions in terms of how to light a show for instance. All these things irritate me, for sure, but finding ways around them is exciting, too.

Who are the designers that you admire the most?

Etienne Russo In my opinion, among all the designers I have worked with, there are 2 that stand out: Alexander McQueen and Martin Margiela. Sadly, I never collaborated with Lee, but I worked with Martin for an entire decade.

How do you see the future of fashion shows?

Etienne Russo The fashion show will never die and I'll tell you why. As humans, we're social animals and like to show off. There's also this need to display your power and influence when you are sitting in the front row. What's the point of buying clothes if you're not dressed for an audience? Sure, we buy them for ourselves, too, but it's the gaze of the other that confirms who we are.

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Photo: Courtesy Of Villaeugenie

