FUCKING YOUNG!

By Philippe Pourhashemi

Portrait shot on 35mm by Louise Reinke

MASTER CHEF
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 prepara-
tions 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 1980s. 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
needed. In the kitchen, I got to try 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 back to practice on my own
and did it slightly differently. I guess I didn’t
want to repeat myself either. I needed to
need 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 rein-
terpret 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 Sin-
gapore 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
I was a teenager when I started there.

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
city, 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
where to see a show, now they complain about
saturation and packed schedules. What do you
think has changed?

Etienne Russo Fashion is much more corpo-
rate now, and it becomes more challenging to
find cool locations for example, as everything
seems so bureaucratic and tedious. Before-
hand, people would take risks, because they
got a kick out of them. It was not as calculat-
ed 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 in-
fluence 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 confers who we are.