

NUTRITION FIRST

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a light-colored, textured chef's jacket, is focused on writing in a spiral notebook. She is holding a red marker in her right hand. In front of her is a stainless steel bowl filled with a light-colored, textured food item, possibly a salad or a garnish. The background is a blurred kitchen setting with various kitchen items and ingredients on the counter.

When Kristy Lambrou earned the position of a culinary nutritionist at the New York restaurant, Rouge Tomate - the first Michelin starred restaurant focused on health - her field of expertise was almost unknown. To date, Kristy is considered one of the 40 under 40 rising stars in her category, and the American Bon Appétit praises the new Michelin diet. Directly from New York, Kristy talks to us about her dreams that are gradually becoming a reality.





Kristy Lambrou is a second-generation Greek-American. She usually spent her childhood summers on the Greek island of Skyros, which her parents originate from, she speaks a little Greek but understands most of it, but most of all she feels nostalgic for her mother's "pastitsio". According to her, this interview posed as the reason for her to realize how much her roots have influenced her. When she first set out to study dietetics she did not expect to actually get very far. She earned her Master's degree in clinical dietetics at the New York University and began working at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center - one of the most specialized centers in the world for cancer research. In her mind,

however, she believed that dietetics was much more and in parallel with her research at the Sloan Kettering, she enrolled at the Culinary Arts program of the Institute of Culinary Education in New York, which brings to surface the elite of chefs; those who are the future on the American scene. In 2011 she was honored with the position of culinary nutritionist at the New York based restaurant Rouge Tomate, as the only certified culinary nutritionist in the US. Each day she is required to count calories, combine dishes and ingredients and organize (alongside Jeremy Bearman and James Distefano, the two chefs that who won the Michelin star), a unique kind of cuisine. This alternative cuisine is ethical, sustainable, new age, but mainly healthy, respecting the Latin motto *sanitas per escam* or otherwise, the Hippocratic theory, food is your therapy. All raw materials are seasonal, the cooking methods used are specific so as not to lose any vital vitamins and the food combinations are brought together strategically so as to have maximum impact on your health. In addition, Kristy also works as a consultant in hotels and restaurants that want to get the SPE certification. "Why can we certify that the raw material used is organic but not an entire restaurant?" she says. The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and the Epicurious, dedicated their pages to the new, high-caliber healthy gastronomy of Kristy Lambrou, where she was soon voted as one of the 40 Under 40 Rising Stars in 2014 by the U.S. magazine FSR. "Things are changing in respect to food and especially in the way we see it," she adds. And, as a matter of fact, Kristy Lambrou is proof that health and nutrition are leading the road ahead.



How did you start your career as a culinary nutritionist at restaurants? Are you the only one currently at a Michelin restaurant?

When I started my career as a Registered Dietitian (R.D.), I knew that getting a foundation in clinical nutrition was important but that my true passion was to work with food. I thought it would be an incredible thing to have expertise as a dietitian and a chef so I chose to enroll in culinary school to get formal training and become a culinary nutritionist. Rouge Tomate is the first Michelin starred restaurant focused on health and the only to have an R.D. on staff however there was an R.D. at the restaurant before I came on. But the concept of the restaurant from the beginning was to pair a chef and a dietitian together to demonstrate that great food could also be healthy.

Could you describe to us what a day at Rouge Tomate is like?

Every day is different however my primary role is to ensure that the dishes the chefs create are aligned with the guidelines of SPE or Sanitas per Escam, meaning Health Through Food in Latin. This represents our culinary philosophy and is also a set of criteria that has been developed by our team of chefs and dietitians over the past 10 years (www.specertified.com). We have a specific set of criteria for each type of

menu item (appetizer, entrée, dessert) to achieve an optimally balanced meal that maximizes the nutritional content of the meal and minimizes less desirable nutrients like saturated fat, sodium and added sugar. I do a comprehensive nutrition analysis of each dish where I am able to look at over twenty different nutrients in the dish. After reviewing a recipe, I give the chefs feedback and we collaborate on any modifications that need to be made to improve the nutritional profile of the dish. For example, in SPE dishes we like to balance sodium with potassium so I might suggest that the dish needs more potassium; when this happens I review a list of seasonal ingredients with the chef that are high in potassium and we discuss which ones may make sense to incorporate into the dish without compromising the integrity of the chef's vision for the dish from a culinary standpoint.

What is your philosophy when it comes to food? Has the Mediterranean school of cooking influenced you?

Yes, my personal philosophy is very much in line with the Mediterranean "school" of cooking and this is also the basis of the SPE philosophy. We focus on incorporating a lot of plant based ingredients into each dish and healthy fats common in the Mediterranean





eating pattern (i.e. seafood, olive oil, nuts, avocado, etc.) in place of saturated fats found in red meat, pork, butter, heavy cream, etc. We do believe there is a place for every ingredient but give preference to some ingredients over others to achieve the most nutrient dense dish.

Do you have any memories of your Greek heritage? What are the first flavors you remember and some of your favorite dishes? Have they influenced your work? I have a lot of memories of my Greek roots, particularly related to food. One of my earliest memories connecting to food is from spending summers on the island of Skyros where my family is from. I remember as a little girl, waiting on the beach for my older brothers to come back from spearfishing to see the bounty of beautiful seafood they caught which I would then help them clean before simply grilling with olive oil and lemon for a late lunch or dinner. I was especially happy when they would catch octopus since at the time, it was unusual to find octopus on menus in the U.S. so I always

looked forward to an opportunity to eat that in Greece. I also have a lot of food memories cooking with my grandmother who had immigrated to Baltimore, MD as a teenager. She somehow managed to grow a thriving grapevine in a tiny patch of grass behind her town house in Baltimore, which she would use to make "dolmades". She would also always have "koulouria" in the house so I have many fond memories of helping her shape the buttery dough into perfect (well mine were usually imperfect!) twists. My two favorite dishes are "spanakopita" and "pastitsio". Whenever I crave comfort food, those are my go-to dishes. But in all of my cooking, my natural instinct is towards Mediterranean flavors because of all of the positive taste memories they trigger. It has influenced my work with regards to my values around food – I believe in the importance of taking the time to source great ingredients, prepare them from scratch and then devote time to sharing the meal with family and friends. I think all of these things are also essential to healthy eating.



What is the reaction of people who come to the restaurant? Do they care about the details behind the quality of the food, or are they just interested in a tasty meal? We have some people come in because they have heard of our concept and want to try a place that serves healthy delicious food and then others who come without knowing about our concept but have just heard it is a great restaurant. The important thing is that our guests return time and time again because they can get the satisfaction and enjoyment of a great dining experience in terms of food, service and ambience, and feel good after leaving - instead of feeling like they overindulged or sacrificed their health for taste.

How difficult is it to educate people to eat lightly? I think the most challenging part is to educate people on what it means to eat healthy food. There is so much information out there that people get overwhelmed. Often they may have their own perceptions or beliefs of what healthy food is; our approach is based on a consensus of evidence-based nutrition recommendations that have a strong body of science to support them, which unfortunately is not always the same as headlining nutrition news. We also try to get away from using phrases like 'low calorie' or 'low fat' and instead want people to focus on the kinds of ingredients they are cooking with and the combinations they make.

Do you use local ingredients? Is this considered the new sustainable or otherwise, ethical gastronomy? I hesitate to make a general statement such as this. There are many factors into sourcing sustainably depending on whether you are talking about produce, meat, poultry, wild-caught or farm-raised seafood. For us, sourcing nutritious ingredients seasonally and respon-



sibly with as little impact on the environment as possible is our most important priority.

What are your future plans? Maybe a TV show, a book, a new restaurant? In addition to my work at Rouge Tomate, I work for our sister company SPE Certified, a consulting and certification company; so as part of this work, I will continue to work with other clients to expand our efforts to increase the availability of healthy food across all levels of food service & hospitality. I also recently taught a culinary focused class for nutri-



tion students at NYU which I really enjoyed so I hope to continue pursuing similar opportunities in education.

Do you visit Greece and are you familiar with Greek cuisine? Do you serve any Greek dishes at Rouge Tomato?

Yes I grew up visiting Greece every year but haven't been able to go for the past few years. Luckily, I am going this summer, which I am really looking forward to! At Rouge Tomato, our chefs draw inspiration from all over the world but we certainly have some dishes that are inspired by Greek cuisine. We use olive oil in almost all of our dishes since we do not use any butter or cream in appetizers or entrees. Feta cheese, olives and oregano often make an appearance in dishes and we also serve octopus on the menu but prepare it in different ways based on seasonal ingredients. We also have a tomato watermelon panzanella on the menu every summer that has flavors and ingredients very similar to a traditional Greek salad.

FSR magazine positioned you as one of the 40 Under 40 Rising Stars in your category. How difficult is it being a Greek woman and succeeding in such a competitive environment?

I am very lucky to love what I do and work with talented people who share the same passion. It is much easier to succeed with this support! I also feel that while it is a competitive industry,

our philosophy and expertise is unique and differentiated enough to stand out and continue to be successful.

What is your favorite ingredient and your favorite dish after a tiring day at work?

I have so many different kinds of foods and ingredients but one of my favorite things to eat year-round are roasted vegetables - I particularly love roasted fennel, caramelized leeks, roasted broccoli with garlic and lemon zest, and when they are in season - roasted root vegetables with some apple and fresh thyme as well as roasted cherry tomatoes in the summer - I could go on and on! This along with any kind of fresh seafood simply prepared with olive oil, lemon, toasted garlic and maybe some fresh dill, oregano or thyme is something I could eat almost every day. Some staple ingredients I couldn't live without are olive oil, lemons, garlic, eggs, plain Greek yogurt, almonds, cinnamon, herbs & spices, sea salt, and mustard. I don't necessarily have one go-to meal but I have to say one of my favorite no fuss meals at the end of a long day is an omelet or frittata with seasonal vegetables and a simple salad with a Dijon or lemon vinaigrette, cucumber, salt & pepper and some fresh herbs such as dill, parsley, tarragon, or mint. And since this goes so well with both of those dishes, a piece of feta cheese on the side and some fresh fruit for dessert ■

