

## **Q&A WITH MAURO COLAGRECO, VICE PRESIDENT, CHEFS FOOD FOR CHANGE 2024: PLANT THE FUTURE**

### **Why is this topic such a compelling proposition for Relais & Châteaux?**

Maintaining the status quo of what we all eat and drink isn't sustainable – environmentally as well as in terms of our health. Our network of outstanding chefs across 580 properties holds 376 Michelin stars, including 40 green stars, and have the power to change the culinary narrative. They can demonstrate how plant-rich menus can rival the flavor, complexity and satisfaction of animal-centric cuisine and address the climate emergency. Our collective consumption of animals, dairy, fish and seafood continues to increase, especially in Europe and North America, and the fact intensive farming damages ecosystems and requires far more resources than cultivating plants. Feeding the world has to become regenerative by switching now to more plant-rich diets, the way many of our ancestors ate before industrialized agriculture and factory-farmed animals. The scale of our Association suggests we can make a meaningful impact, directly in our own restaurants – and hopefully inspire chefs and the general public globally.

### **How does this year's theme relate to previous Food for Change campaigns?**

If you look back at our most recent campaigns – on wine, cheese and fermented food in 2023, regenerative agriculture in 2022, our nominations to the Ark of Taste in 2021 – there is a common thread, and that's protecting and preserving biodiversity. It is a very important role for me as a UNESCO goodwill ambassador for biodiversity. From an agricultural perspective, preserving biodiversity means enhancing the natural fertility of soil, improving the nutritious content of the food we grow, and making ecosystems resilient to climate change. From a chef's perspective, biodiversity and seasonality go hand in hand – it's about embracing different ingredients throughout the year, evolving our menus as we go. If we are to encourage people to eat more plant-rich diets, then we have to show them that they're not sacrificing anything in terms of flavor or satisfaction. And that means we need to be fully prepared to expand our repertoire of creative, innovative cuisine, to challenge ourselves every day to go or remain local and support our committed suppliers with the goal to encourage new initiatives and get better produce.

**What are the main challenges involved in achieving the goals of the campaign?**

We're facing centuries of culturally embedded belief that only meat can provide all the amino acids and proteins needed, when in fact legumes and pulses are protein rich when eaten in variety and with the right accompaniments. So, the main challenges are overcoming expectations around what fine dining – from the perspectives of both chefs and their guests – and the expectation that gastronomy is built around animal products. This is about getting out of your comfort zone to reinvent traditional dishes, to correct misconceptions around what plant-forward means versus veganism and raise awareness around the benefits of sustainably produced produce against the costs of those that come from factory farmed products. It is about educating the general public to savor flavors that protect the climate.

Changing our behavior is hard, and adopting a new mindset doesn't happen overnight. But I genuinely think people will like discovering this new way of eating – of eating lighter, more nutritionally, of feeling full without feeling stuffed.

**Are you asking properties to eliminate all animal-based products? Is this a vegetarian or vegan campaign?**

Not at all!

This isn't about shifting to vegetarianism or veganism. We aren't asking properties to eliminate animal-based products. Instead, each property can look at Slow Food's nine principles and adapt them to their dishes or menus. One chef might reduce the proportion of meat in a particular dish to better highlight the vegetables on the plate. Another may replace a main meat dish in a tasting menu with a vegetable-forward recipe. For example, at my restaurant we make an incredible artichoke, Comté and truffle tart—it needs no less than thirty artichokes and a lot of love—and time to craft it. A third way is to invent a new dish using ingredients that may not be familiar within a restaurant's local culinary culture, such as pulses or fermented foods. By making them popular, by making them iconic, they can create long-term cultural impact. This is how the culinary heritage of most dishes started; tomatoes were not indigenous to Italy, and yet are now almost completely associated with Italy.

**Is it enough for a restaurant to adopt 'Plant the future' in order to call themselves sustainable?**

Adopting a plant-rich menu is an important step. But it's also just one part of the equation. When you look at Slow Food's nine principles, it's certainly about actively making a change in terms of your ingredients, but also involves adapting what you ask of your suppliers – do they follow agro-ecological principles, do they equally respect worker and animal rights? – rejecting ultra-processed foods, and going waste-free or, as we have done in my restaurant, plastic free. Communicating what you are doing is also super important ; we are playing a role in shaping a global transition that is turning dining conventions on its head, so educating the public is part of that too.

**The campaign is called 'Plant the future', but does it involve planting anything?**

Most Relais & Châteaux properties already grow something that they use in their kitchens. In fact, among our 580 properties, 327 have kitchen gardens or even farms. But this initiative is not intended to inspire them to physically cultivate more plants – though, of course, we don't discourage that! This is more about cultivating a mindset – transitioning towards more plant-forward cuisine, all with the intention of inventing the cuisines of tomorrow.