

BEL COELHO: CHEF WITH A MISSION



BEL COELHO IS A CHEF OF EL CLANDESTINO AND A PRESENTER OF A TV SERIES RECETA DE VIAJE (TLC DISCOVERY)

29 November 2019

Bel Coelho discovered her vocation early. Coming from a gourmet family, her memory holds a strong connection with cuisine and flavour. Trained at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), she worked with several great chefs in some of the most important restaurants in the world, such as El Celler de Can Roca and Alex Atala's DOM, acquiring experience and a repertoire rich in classic and avant-garde techniques. As a presenter of the television programme, she has travelled to more than 35 Brazilian cities, furthering her research and exploring authentic Brazilian cuisine and all its recipes, characters, customs and stories from a different viewpoint. In her cosy restaurant,

unusually open only one or two weeks a month, Bel serves tasting menus created from her research on local products and Brazilian culture.

The chef has completed an important study on the Orixás, the gods of Candomblé, an Afro-descendant religion that greatly influenced and enriched Brazilian gastronomy, especially that of Bahia. She has also completed a project on the Brazilian biomes (Amazon, Atlantic Forest, Caatinga, Pantanal, Pampas and Cerrado) and their products. Today, 40-year-old Bel plays an important role in the fight for making quality, healthy food available to all Brazilians. She has fought against the country's excessive use of toxic agro-chemicals and supported peasants and traditional indigenous and quilombola peoples.

We met Bel Coelho at the San Sebastian Gastronomika 2019 congress where she held the most interesting presentation of her work.

By Velimir Cindric

Bel, you come from gourmet family. What are your earliest recollections of food?

My parents are of Portuguese origin, but my mother's ancestors are so long here in Brazil, that we are practically Brazilian. However, my earliest recollection of food is a Portuguese soup with cod fish and bread. I love it and still cook it for my family. But far as my profession is concerned, I am a black sheep in a family mostly involved in diplomacy, so a high class of society. They love good food, like to entertain guests, but they were not very happy that I have chosen to be a chef. My grandfather had a restaurant and my father did not see much of him as a child, so it was his main concern about my decision. But, we are OK now.

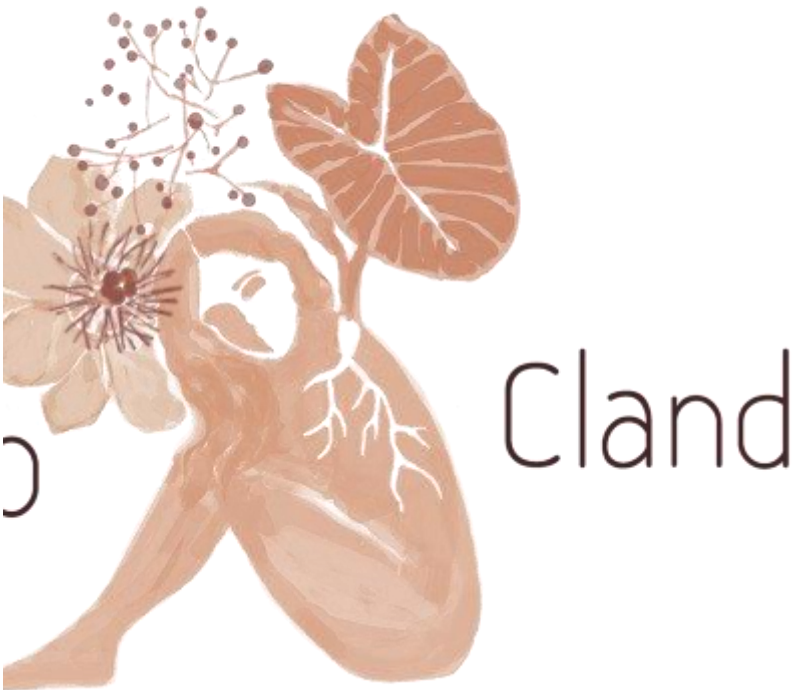
How did you decide to study at the CIA?

I liked cooking at home, read a lot about cooking and when I was 17, I have decided to become a chef. I have researched different schools, but my father told me to go and work in a few restaurants first, just to see if it was really something I liked. That worked, so I decided to go to CIA, because of the basic French techniques they teach there and because it is very American in the way of practicality, hands-on approach and learning how to run your own business.









Cland



How important was your work at El Celler de Can Roca and DOM?

Each place I worked at was very important, considering creativity and new techniques. But, what really made my cooking style was when I had a chance to research the culture of my country. Thanks to a TV series that I did, I had the opportunity to visit all parts of Brazil, learn about Brazilian culture and gastronomy. That really changed my way of cooking.

Which was your basic idea for Clandestino?

The idea was to start a restaurant which is opened only one or two weeks a month and with tasting menus only. The rest of the time I do my research, travel and I also have two little kids, aged eight and five. That is really a lot. I just did not want to undergo to the traditional role of a chef and a competitive restaurant searching for its place in the restaurant guides and on the restaurant lists. I do not do any marketing, but I am in touch with many chefs and I am a part of the Slow Food movement. Basically I wanted more freedom. It means less money, but more free time. It's a luxury.

So, you still travel a lot?

Yes, I still visit indigenous communities and small producers as well. I travel to see and understand the local products. There's a great abundance still to be discovered.

The topic of local food, from smaller, specialised and personally known producers, is becoming more and more important. What are some of your local partners from whom you source ingredients?

There is, for instance, Curruputuba farm, the agro-ecological group Coperapas in Palhereiros, which is a part of São Paulo, and Santa Adelaide. A lot of things comes from the members of the Movimento sem Terra or Landless Workers' Movement.

Which products do you use from these special, smaller producers?

For instance, rice comes from MST too as well as many other ingredients like Baniwa Pepper from the indigenous Baniwa tribe, Honey of Yellow Uruçu from Tupinambas tribes of the state of Espírito Santo, fruits from Bello Farm, a producer of native Brazilian fruits, and many others. I use a large variety of products. Some of them are Tucupi or the juice of yucca, then seeds like cumaru, amburana, puxuri, babaçu... There are also native fruits like pitanga, jabuticaba, uvaia, grumixama and in the Amazon Biome, bacuri, cupuaçi, cassava flours, greens and so on.

Can you explain some of your typical dishes in which you use these products?

I make a kind of tortellini with fermented brazil nut, then Tucupi with mushrooms which tastes a bit fermented with a nice acidity to it. Indigenous people use this juice a lot. In that dish as well as in some of the other ones I use a special spice, a flower of a Jambu plant from Amazon which has a power to make your mouth numb. It makes a really weird sensation while eating. Then, let's see, Majuba fish fried in tapioca flour with something like a Japanese Tare sauce, but made with the fruit of juçara palm tree.

You have completed a study on the Orixás gods and made a complete tasting menu on this. Can you explain that concept?

Menu Orixás is made of dishes dedicated to the gods and goddesses of that religion. My sister is a member and she taught me about it. For these dishes I choose the ingredients according to what those gods and goddesses like as well as what complements their characters. There are 16 of them, so the menu has 16 courses. This menu is on offer for two weeks a year. But, I also have other tasting menus. Menu called Ecosystems I do once a year, then a vegan one with plants that we get from the sources I have mentioned. I also have one based only on fruits where each dish is created around one native fruit. Maybe the most interesting one is the menu with dishes containing unconventional edible plants, which are native, spontaneous and grow in the forest.

Is it hard to get those ingredients?

Sometimes. But, I search a lot. Now I have a good network of producers. The thing is that not even the Brazilians know those products. It always used to be the chains from Europe, which was very bad for the forest because it encouraged the deforestation. Now we are trying to change that. If you plant and use native plants, it is easier to have more sustainable agriculture. That is the core of my activism.









What is your political view regarding food production?

I cook a lot in poor communities. I exchange a lot with poor communities. I am a socialist, so I am very active politically that way. Brazilian forests produce 20% of oxygen in our world, but our President does not believe it. And now we face

deforestation, massive agro business in favor of the rich minority and supports of export. It is not about feeding people at all. In the last ten months, the government has approved more than 500 different pesticides which are totally prohibited in Europe. We are all poisoned in a chronic way, but the rural people in a very direct way.

In the end, what is your mission?

I am very active in the movement against deforestation in Amazon. My mission is to value food chains and make them stronger, to help the smaller producers, indigenous communities, people who actually produce food, but in synergy with the forest. They make agro-ecological food and they are the guardians of our forest and the life on Earth.

Thank you Bel!