

## JEFFERSON RUEDA: THE MASTER OF PORK



**Jefferson Rueda is a Brazilian chef and the owner of A Casa do Porco, a restaurant known for its pork dishes and the philosophy of “nose to tail eating”**

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Jefferson Rueda (42) was born in San José del Rio Pardo, in the interior of the São Paulo state, in 1977. As a child, he was fascinated with food and has spent two years working as a butcher in his hometown.

At 17, he trained as an international chef at SENAC under an agreement with the Culinary Institute of America. In 2004 he visited the most famous Spanish restaurants and then worked as a chef at several restaurants in São Paulo. Rueda made his name at Italian restaurant Pomodoro, before moving on to Attimo, which entered [Latin America's 50 Best Restaurants](#) at no.32 in 2013.

He lived his greatest dream by opening A Casa do Porco in the centre of São Paulo in 2015. It is a place where he brings together all his experience and passions: pork, fire and butchery. Today he focuses on pork, studying, researching, creating and mapping the entire production chain to present a genuine Brazilian conceptual cuisine with pork as the main protagonist. The restaurant has become a space where 42-year

old Jefferson can create and live his dream of serving high quality cuisine at affordable prices. In 2018, he opened two additional eateries, Hot Pork and Sorveteria do Centro. We talked to Jefferson Rueda at the San Sebastian Gastronomika 2019 congress where he presented his fascination with pork.

**By Velimir Cindric**











**Jefferson, let us know how does a butcher become a chef?**

That was probably at first the other way around. Before I became a butcher, I was a cook at my family home. My parents worked all day long, so I was in charge of the kitchen. I was seven years old then and that lasted until I was thirteen.

**All right. How did you become a butcher then?**

Once my father told me to go to the butcher's and buy *picanha*, which is a cut of beef called *sirloin cap* in the United States or the rump cap in the UK. In Brazil it is the most prized cut of beef. I went to the butcher's and the guy there sold me a totally different cut. So, my father went mad when I brought it home. But this made me study all the parts of animals and how to recognize different cuts, just not to be fooled again.

**What kind of family do you come from?**

My father worked in the factory and my mother was in trading business. I was born in a small place surrounded by nature, so I grew up with rivers, meadows, cows... My parents were very involved in local social work, very engaged in the community. The family is of Italian origin, so there was always a lot of food around and lots of family gatherings. We slaughtered pigs together, made *charcuterie* and such things. You know the picture – a big family around the table.

**Jefferson is hardly an Italian name?**

(laughter) Wait, it gets even better. My brother's name is Washington (laughter). Our father was fascinated with American presidents and he was very proud of our names.

**What was the food of your childhood?**

I remember the food my grandmother cooked as a volunteer for the old people's home and the lunches she cooked for other families to sustain her own. I went with her to watch her cooking and these are my first memories of food.

**As a young cook you have visited the famous Spanish restaurants. What were your impressions?**

I saw many different, new things. You know, in Brazil of that time nobody understood what the Spanish culinary revolution was about. So I have decided to go there and do a 40-day-tour of the most important Spanish restaurants. I went to Madrid, Barcelona, San Sebastián... and I finished my tour doing a stage at El Celler de Can Roca. I have spent all my savings on that trip. During these 40 days I was getting heavier and heavier, but had less and less money (laughter).

**Which was your basic idea for A Casa do Porco?**

You know, São Paulo is huge and at that time I was working at a restaurant in the far end of town, waking up early and coming back home late at night. I literally did not live with my family. My wife is from the centre of São Paulo, so my plan was to have a restaurant there. A restaurant that I had in my mind was inspired by tradition and by the popular cuisine. By opening A Casa do Porco I tried to reach everyone with good food based on pork and low prices.

**Why pork?**

You know, pigs were always part of my life. I remembered the yearly ritual of slaughtering the pigs, making hams, sausages... and before becoming a chef I worked as a butcher. So I was always interested in the culinary possibilities of that animal. I realized that pork had a great potential and decided to open the restaurant based on it as a main ingredient.

**Are small, specialised local farmers important to you?**



They are crucial for my work and it is important for me to know them personally. You know, I always worked with huge pigs, not the small ones and was always conscious of sustainability and ethics in production. I always made sure to buy pigs that have lived at least one year and two months, on open spaces, animals that had a good life. It is very important for the quality of the final product.

**Were you determined to use all parts of the pig from the very start?**

Yes. My philosophy was nose to tail eating, which means using the animal with no waist at all, although at the time I did not know about Fergus Henderson, his London restaurant St. John or his book "Nose To Tail Eating". I knew well the characteristics of each cut of a pig and how to use them. I simply use all parts of the animal. On the other hand, pork meat is not very important in the Brazil and people think that it is not very useful in cooking. There is simply no culture of pork meat. So, totally different from Europe and Asia. I wanted to change that with my restaurant. I wanted to raise awareness of the pork value, the value of the animal itself.













**You have shocked people with your pork tartare. Where has that come from?**

It was just an idea. I consider myself a revolutionary and I want to shock people. In 2015, during the great economy crisis, people told me that I was mad for opening a restaurant at that time. But, I have decided to go ahead and break rules. It was the same when I thought about pork tartare, people said that you couldn't eat raw pork. But, I was sure we could. You just have to meet very strict sanitary conditions and make sure that the meat is exceptionally fresh. And I was right. Then I made raw pork sushi and many desserts with pork meat.

**Why pork sushi?**

Why not. I am fascinated with Japanese cuisine. After the big earthquake in Japan, the import of eels was stopped and I wondered how to replace them. And then I thought of the pig jowls which have similar texture and paired with *tucupi*, a yellow sauce extracted from wild manioc root, you get a taste similar to eel's. Japanese guests were surprised, but liked it very much. Some Japanese chefs have even copied it. I just want to shock, provoke people with my dishes.

**You serve high quality cuisine at affordable prices. Is that concept important to you?**

Oh, yes. A Casa do Porco is a very democratic restaurant.... and a very relaxed one. Besides the dishes, these are the main reasons why we have 17.000 customers per month.

**Is there really so many people in São Paulo and Brazil that want to be shocked?**

Yes. Brazilians are very adventurous people.

**What do restaurant guides and lists mean to you personally?**



All awards and recognitions are welcome, but what I value the most is to have a great product to work with, mostly pigs that lived a happy life, and to celebrate them with dishes that people enjoy eating. And, of course, to see a long line of people around a block, waiting three hours just to eat at our restaurant. We have that every day.

**Thanks, Jefferson. I can't wait to get in that line.**

Oh, you are more than welcome!