

Diet Detective Interview with Maverick Health Restaurateur Emmanuel Verstraeten



September 5, 2013 | by Charles Platkin, PhD

Emmanuel Verstraeten is not the first person to create a healthy menu for a restaurant, but as the founder & CEO of SPE Certified and the Rouge Tomato Group, he has broken new ground in the restaurant world. In 2001, he opened his first restaurant, Rouge Tomato, in Brussels, Belgium, bringing together under one roof the divergent worlds of nutrition and fine dining. Rouge Tomato New York followed in 2008, and now Verstraeten is reaching new heights with the creation in 2011 of SPE Certified, the certification and consulting arm of the unique culinary philosophy underlying both restaurants. His mission is to effect positive change in the food-service industry. I reached out to Emmanuel via email to do this interview.

Diet Detective: Emmanuel, thanks for the opportunity to interview you. My first question is about the creation of SPE – what is it, what does it stand for and why did you create it?

Emmanuel: SPE stands for Sanitas Per Escam, which is Latin for “Health Through Food.” When I created SPE Certified my objective was to make a positive change in the food industry by creating a universal, easily recognizable and trusted certification for healthy, delicious and sustainable food – no matter where in the world or what you eat. The core SPE philosophy can be applied as seamlessly to a food cart as to a Michelin star restaurant – and we’ve done both! Bottom line, SPE is to food what LEED is to green buildings, or FSC-certified is to forestry products.

Diet Detective: You also created a fantastic restaurant called Rouge Tomato. It’s a true healthy restaurant. What gave you the idea to create this restaurant – what was the inspiration? Were you worried that the concept wouldn’t work?

Emmanuel: In 2001 my intention was to create a restaurant that would combine great food, taste and health. I brought together a chef and a dietitian – very much an odd couple at the time! – and opened the first SPE restaurant in Brussels, named Rouge Tomato. The dishes were created by applying the latest in nutrition science to our food and closely following the principles of the Mediterranean food model, and we tested these guidelines in the kitchen, using our customers as a continuous focus group. To ensure that we were using the latest and most relevant science possible, we formed a Belgian scientific committee of renowned nutrition experts.

Based on the very positive feedback during those early years, I opened Rouge Tomato New York in 2008, which was awarded one Michelin star within months of opening.

Although both restaurants were a big success, I did wonder whether this new approach would resonate, or be considered too avant-garde and an “outlier” -- especially in 2001, when nutrition was far from being a hot topic!

Diet Detective: Tell us about your overall food philosophy. What have you learned in the last 10 years that you would like to pass along to us?

Emmanuel: My overall philosophy is simple: clean food using fresh, seasonal ingredients that just taste great. No additives. Simple cooking methods. This was my vision when I created Rouge Tomate 12 years ago.

I've learned over the last 10 years how much of what we eat is the result of the labor of love of so many people – from the amazing farmers and producers who make sure that we have the best ingredients possible to work with, to our cooks and chefs who create new dishes daily for our enjoyment.

Diet Detective: You involve both chefs and nutritionists in your cooking process. What inspired you to do that?

Emmanuel: Well, I was convinced that fine dining didn't have to be unhealthy, nor did healthy and nutritious food have to be tasteless and boring! I, therefore, brought together representatives from these two divergent worlds, namely a chef and a dietitian, to explore the possibilities. My vision: an out-of-home dining experience that was truly delicious, healthy and sustainable (and not drowning in pools of butter and cream).

Diet Detective: What are some of the SPE guidelines?

Emmanuel: Over the past 12 years we have combined cutting-edge research with international health standards into a 90-page charter of practical guidelines, applicable to a wide variety of cuisines. This charter forms the basis of our culinary and nutritional certification and consulting programs. In essence, SPE Certified strives to:

- Promote the consumption of fruits and vegetables
- Promote the consumption of high-quality fats and reduce saturated fat
- Ensure nutrient density in a dish
- Limit processed ingredients
- Preserve and enhance food's intrinsic nutritional properties

Diet Detective: How would you define healthy cooking and healthy food in general?

Emmanuel: Without a doubt, I would say quality over quantity. At SPE, dishes are composed of high-quality, nutrient-dense ingredients selected to provide the whole grains, fruits and vegetables, quality proteins and healthy fats needed for

lasting satiety. Instead of serving oversized portions, SPE dishes are engineered to ensure maximum nutrient density and great taste so that you leave the table energized with a true feeling of well-being.

And above all, taste matters: Healthy cooking must taste delicious! It's not a surprise to me that the Food Information Council Foundation's 2012 Food & Health Survey showed that taste remains the No. 1 influence on food choices.

Diet Detective: There are many things you consider when creating a "healthy" restaurant; it's not only about the food (e.g., kitchen design, lighting, furniture, etc.). Can you explain?

Emmanuel: Absolutely! Design is a fundamental pillar of our Rouge Tomate restaurants, one that contributes to their warm spirit and energizing atmosphere. We wanted to create an urban retreat with a feeling of well-being, and have done so via four fundamental areas of design: nature, acoustics, materials and lighting. I am proud to say that our widespread use of eco-friendly materials and energy-efficient equipment, among other sustainable practices, has won us a rare three-star rating from the Green Restaurant Association.

Diet Detective: How do you maintain great taste and still keep foods healthy? I was always told that fat equals flavor when it comes to cooking.

Emmanuel: I would have to disagree. Butter is almost too easy a "trick" to give taste and texture to a dish. But after three courses full of butter, taste buds tend to get saturated and consequently diners will have trouble identifying precisely what they are tasting. Fat often neutralizes the real flavor of food.

On the other hand, cooking without butter challenges the creativity of our chefs. They have to find ways to coax the real taste out of the beautiful ingredients they select. Herbs, spices and different textures are all used to ensure that every dish is an explosion of flavor!

Diet Detective: You recently partnered with UMass Amherst to revamp their menu. Realizing that school food in general is so important (i.e., feeding healthy food to young minds), do you plan to work with any other schools or school systems? Is that a goal of yours? How about schools in New York City, one of the largest servers of institutionalized food in the county?

Emmanuel: I created SPE with a real desire to effect positive change and help to change people's attitudes towards food. The end goal is to reach as many men, women and children as possible with SPE so as to have a real impact on attitudes and health across the country. Partnering with UMass was a watershed moment for us: What better place to start affecting behavior than at the university level, where students are developing habits (and brand preferences) that will last a lifetime? And because of the extremely positive results achieved at UMass, we

are not only expanding our presence there beginning in the fall semester 2013, but also are in advanced discussions with several other leading universities across the U.S.

As to New York City schools, I would love to have the opportunity to make a real change. I live here with my wife and daughter and, as any parent, I want to make sure that kids not only eat healthy but also enjoy doing so. We also need to make this type of food accessible to all children, not just in New York City.

Diet Detective: Tell me about the book *The Magic of Thinking Big*, by David Schwartz. How did it influence you?

Emmanuel: It is the only self-development book I have ever read! But it made a big impact on me years ago when I was a young entrepreneur. It permitted me to ask myself early on what I wanted my legacy to be for my children, and as the book states, to “think big.”

Diet Detective: What’s your favorite healthy ingredient?

Emmanuel: Tomatoes, of course!

Diet Detective: What was your breakfast this morning?

Emmanuel: This morning I had two toasted slices of whole-wheat bread; one accompanied by homemade currant and raspberry jam and the other with Belgian cheese. I also enjoyed one apple, one cup of black coffee and a fresh-squeezed lemon juice.

Diet Detective: What’s in your refrigerator and pantry right now?

Emmanuel: Lots of farm cheeses (I love cheese!), various cuts of ham, Greek yogurt, salmon and tons of fruits and vegetables (eggplant, red beets, cucumber, cauliflower, broccoli, zucchini, apples, banana, strawberries, raspberries, lemons, grapefruit, melon, tomatoes). I also have a big farm chicken, small fresh sardines, herrings, low-sodium V8 Juice and whole-wheat pasta, baby food for my daughter, jams, Belgian dark chocolate ... and, of course, some good bottles of wine!

Diet Detective: Your last meal would be?

Emmanuel: A chicken slowly roasted with candied lemons, olive oil, garlic and olives – prepared by my wife.

Diet Detective: Your favorite “junk food?”

Emmanuel: I've never had a sweet tooth, so I would have to say, without hesitation, a burger. We created the Rouge Tomate Cart in the Park to serve

healthier, sustainable burgers with homemade condiments, antibiotic-free meats, seasonal sides and whole-grain rolls. Delicious!

Diet Detective: Your worst summer job?

Emmanuel: I once had to sell electronic goods door-to-door that were of such poor quality nobody wanted to buy them; it was awful!

Diet Detective: What's your motto?

Emmanuel: "Quod isti, cur non et ego." Latin for "What other people achieved, why could I not achieve it too?"

Diet Detective: As a child you wanted to be?

Emmanuel: I wanted to be an architect.

Please provide ONLY one (1) to three (3) WORDS on each of the following

Diet Detective: Organic foods?

Emmanuel: Necessary but insufficient

Diet Detective: Locally grown foods?

Emmanuel: Community, fresh, seasonal

Diet Detective: Artificial sweeteners?

Emmanuel: Bad flavor, unnatural

Diet Detective: Sustainable food?

Emmanuel: Question of survival

Diet Detective: Food additives and preservatives?

Emmanuel: Processed food!

Diet Detective: Nutritional supplements?

Emmanuel: Unregulated, not necessary

Diet Detective: Genetically modified foods?

Emmanuel: Complex topic

Fact Sheet

Your Website: www.SPEcertified.com

Location (Where you live)? : New York City

Your current location ... right now: The garden of my house in Belgium

Your current job title: Founder and CEO, SPE Certified + Rouge Tomate Group

Education: Master's in Management and Finance

Hometown: Brussels

Favorite healthy food and living websites:

TheDailyGreen.com, edibleschoolyard.org,
growNYC.org, treehugger.com, slowfood.com

<http://www.dietdetective.com/interviews/diet-detective-interview-maverick-health-restaurateur-emmanuel-verstraeten>