



Spanish Octopus & Chickpea Salad
from Rouge Tomate

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Crusading For Health

July 27th, 2012

A foreign missionary has landed on our shores. His name is Emmanuel Verstraeten and he's from Belgium. His goal is to convert us to healthier eating patterns.

He is the owner of Rouge Tomate, a one Michelin star restaurant opened on Manhattan's upper east side in 2008. He launched the mother ship in Brussels in 2001. Now he is announcing SPE Certified, a certification and consulting program designed to "provide healthy and sustainable dining options without compromising taste."

What do the letters SPE mean? Originally they stood for the Latin phrase, *sanitas per escam*, which translates to "health through food." But the more current marketing approach focuses on the sourcing, preparing, and enhancing of food.

In mid-July, he hosted a dinner to show off some dishes cooked the SPE way with a running commentary by some heavy hitters from Harvard.

SPE eliminates butter and cream from savory courses and minimizes their use in desserts, emphasizes fruits and vegetables, and promotes good fats while eliminating unhealthy fats.

Verstraeten has assembled a high-powered team including a marketing expert, a lawyer turned COO, a chef, and a nutritionist.

The dinner featured healthy versions of gazpacho, panna cotta, and a grass fed beef burger but the SPE version of pork fried rice which reduced the calories from 610 to 340, the fat from 20 grams to 8 grams, and the sodium from 1380 grams to 460 grams was the piece de resistance.

And how did they do this? They increased the vegetables, changed white rice to brown, reduced the amount of oil, selected a lean cut of pork, reduced sodium by adding tamari at the end and incorporating other nutrient dense seasonings such as garlic, ginger, and cilantro. It was delicious.

Verstraeten says he wants "to provide the consumer with a trusted symbol." Remember that healthy symbols, like the little red heart, on menu items have traditionally been the kiss of death. And yet the SPE team is confident their initiative will be successful. Vice President of Marketing Greg Deligdisch said that "10 years ago there was no chance but now this is part of the conversation."

David Eisenberg, associate professor in the department of nutrition at Harvard, lent credence to the sense of urgency noting that by 2030, one out of two Americans will be obese. He believes SPE shows

what is possible when fabulous chefs are brought together with scientists and doctors. “Most physicians know little about nutrition and less about food preparation,” Eisenberg said.

Why here? Verstraeten says the U.S. is much more open minded than Europe and the average American eats out five times a week as opposed to the average European who eats out about twice a month.

Besides he loves New York. “New York,” he says, “is about the future.”

Several restaurants in New York including Danji and Seasonal are currently certified.

COO Nil Sonmez explained that SPE “is starting with fine dining because chefs are taste makers.” But she believes there will be a trickle down effect. “We are also talking to hotel groups and cruise lines as well. They will have to start offering healthy options.”