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# Producing meat demands giving the animal optimal conditions during its life. And absolute compassion in death'

## Dario Cecchini, the world's most famous butcher



By Robert Chalmers

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The first time I sensed the scale of what he might achieve in his career, I tell Dario Cecchini, was when I stepped into his shop, 20 years ago, and he handed me a fax he'd just received from Jack Nicholson.

The butcher laughs. "When that came," he says, "I assumed it was a joke." It wasn't.

The theory that if you do something supremely well, and with passionate commitment, then people will find you, wherever you are, has never been more brilliantly illustrated than at this butcher's in Panzano, a small hilltop village between Florence and Siena. You could see from the start that Cecchini [which rhymes with zucchini] was unusual.

First there was the shop, where you might hear anything from Joni Mitchell to Rossini and receive a generous allocation of free wine. Dario himself is a man whose instincts appear to contradict every law of butchery, not least in his obsessive concern with

animal welfare, and fervent desire to serve the needs of his community rather than pursue raw profit.

That said, the man who has supplied meat to Elton John, Sting and Prince Charles and has been described by publications including *Die Welt* and *The New York Times* as "the world's most famous butcher" now owns three unpretentious restaurants in the village - or is it more?

"I have no ambition to open endless restaurants," says Cecchini, 59. We're speaking in a crypt-like space below his shop which dates back to the C15th. His family have been butchers for 250 years. Dario was at Pisa University, studying to be a vet, when his father Tullio died suddenly, obliging his son to abandon his course and take over the business.

"I'd always dreamed of helping animals. I wanted to heal animals that belonged to the poorer labourers. I never aimed to get rich taking care of lap dogs."

Producing meat, Cecchini says, "demands giving the optimal conditions to an animal during its life. And absolute compassion in death. At my restaurants you sit with strangers. You meet, talk and share the table. What I do is not some bourgeois affectation. It's almost tribal."

My wife is from Panzano and her family's house is still in the village. Rarely silent on matters of culture, Dario has always had a tendency to lay down his cleaver and recite

Dante. He speaks little English; his wife Kimberly, from San Francisco, assists the many foreigners who make a pilgrimage to their door.

Long before he was lauded by Jamie Oliver, or had become the central figure in *Heat*, the somewhat mean-spirited best-seller by Bill Buford, Cecchini maintained a large property where he sheltered disadvantaged locals: some alcoholic, some homeless, some alarmingly deranged. There's a central part of his nature which has always struck me as - no other word will do - saint-like.

"Every one of us," he tells me, "is troubled by fragility, pride and ambition. I'm far calmer than I used to be. Two months ago, the surgeons removed a tumour from my prostate. I had severe internal bleeding; they thought I would die. The pain was indescribable. Now I'm fully recovered I realise the experience was - this may sound odd - a beautiful journey: one which certainly involved agony, but was also an affirmation of life. Kim was at my bedside for 16 days. I asked her to think of that period as our honeymoon. We never really had a proper one".

“**What I do is not some bourgeois affectation. It's almost tribal**”

His recovery, he says, "has been like a rebirth".

While Cecchini was in hospital, the LA crime reporter Michael Krikorian, unaware of the Italian's condition, circulated a hoax on social media. "He announced that my close friend [distinguished American chef] Mario Batali and I had decided to open a restaurant called The Meat Palace but, since he's in Greenwich Village and I'm in Panzano, we'd located it at a halfway point: somewhere called the Ilha das Flores, in the Azores, in the middle of the Atlantic. I was hanging between life and death. I began getting emails from all over the world, asking when we were opening."

At which point, he says: "I started to dream - in hospital you have plenty of time to dream - about opening a restaurant there. I looked up the Ilha das Flores on the web. I immediately wanted to go. The main town has about 1,000 inhabitants. The place is covered in hydrangeas. It's stunning." "Much chance of passing trade?"

"Well - from here at Panzano, door to door, I think it's about 23 hours," he says.

"Hang on; you're not seriously considering ..."

"Oh, I am," says Cecchini. "Look it up. The island has beautiful mountains. It has three volcanoes and a hundred waterfalls. And the great thing is" - this next phrase might serve as his professional motto, if not his epitaph - "nothing is impossible".

ALBERTO CONTI/EVINE

