

## **What Oil do Chefs Want and Why?**

*Tony Percuoco*

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The following is a transcript of an interview with Tony Percuoco talking openly about cooking oils.

### **Tony what experience have you had in the restaurant business?**

I started training as a chef in 1974 at the Sydney Opera House – I attended East Sydney Technical College, and studied for a total of six years, completing courses in commercial cookery, trade waiting, hotel management. I also took a three- year part time course in psychology, and six month course microbiology. Other places of employment include the Sydney Hilton, Regent and Wentworth Hotels

### **What is your current business Tony?**

I own Fellini Restaurant on the Gold Coast and I have recently opened a small pasta manufacturing plant also on the Gold Coast, making and wholesaling a range of fresh and dry pastas.

### **Are you involved with other aspects of the restaurant industry?**

Yes, as well as restaurateur and chef, I am vice-chairman of Restaurant and Caterers Association on the Gold Coast, state secretary of Restaurant and Catering Queensland, national board member of Restaurant and Catering Australia, guest lecturer at the Gold Coast campus of Griffith University in the Department of Hotel.

### **Tony, who are chefs? Who makes up this professional group?**

To begin with, not all chefs are proprietors or managers of restaurants and vice versa. There is an enormous diversity and proportion - because the diversity of food catering produces all kinds and calibre of chef and also proprietor. Variations in or even lack of

knowledge, differences due to region causes inconsistency in business and training, and changing trends produce a broad mix of people in this profession.

**What training do chefs need and what training do they get?**

The level of training, we have in Australia I personally find very poor, or maybe too much is driven by textbooks and not enough in the actual practical work.

**Where and how do Australian chefs obtain their training? TAFE, University, On-job, Overseas?**

One of the biggest training providers is TAFE, and some hotels provide on the job training. Universities cater more for management in the hospitality industry or offer speciality courses dealing with various aspects of the industry. Some may train overseas, but if they return to Australia, are often confused at what the market requires in Australia.

**Is there any opportunity for chefs to retrain?**

Not many retrain, nor are many courses or opportunities offered for retraining. Anyway, trying to retrain a chef is like trying to teach an old dog a new trick, so there is a fair bit of resistance to retraining in the profession. Time or the hours spent working for chefs is unfortunately against retraining incentives.

**Well then, what proportion of chefs do you think upgrade regularly?**

Very few - they are mostly prima-donnas and most are set in their ways!

**Would you say that chefs are a well-organised professional group with strong representation?**

No, not at all! They are not well organised, but its only because of the large number of hours that they keep, and as such, their support and representation among Chef Associations is very poor.

**What properties and aesthetics of oils are important to you?**

The colour of the oil would probably be the most important thing that a chef would look at, with smell also being very important. A high flaming point would be something that I would consider.

**What influences your choice of oil? Is it objective, subjective, price-driven, biased, uninformed, driven by kitchen logistics, type of food and the flavours, texture etc required?**

Over and above everything else the vast majority of chefs will look at the cost of the raw product. There is a few of the hotels that would get a “kick-back” because of the sheer volume that they use, but of course, different types of cuisines would definitively have different preferences. A very small percentage of oils or different oils are used for specific needs, and even though regional Australia is “coming alive” and is slowly moving towards what the Europeans have been doing for quite a while, we still have not identified our regions and producers for being at the forefront of it.

But above all, I think that price and physical presentation of the product are most important

**Do chefs employ a range of oils suited to specific needs? Which oils are favoured and why?**

Usually, chefs choose a very small range of oils - the basic are cotton seed for frying, any vegetable oil for general purpose, olive oil for light cooking (some places would use this for salad dressing) and extra virgin olive for salads, or finishing an entrée or a main course with a drizzle around the plate.

**How does sunflower oil rate? Why?**

Out of about two dozen chefs I have spoken to, sunflower rated very poorly because nobody physically carries it or more importantly, has any idea of what to do with it.

**Do you have any personal experience with sunflower and other oils?**

I use a range of oils, (sunflower not being one of them) even when it comes to extra virgin olive oil, I can tell you the difference is quite vast. Lets take Australia, I found an extra virgin olive oil grown in the northern parts of Victoria that gives a taste of bananas and macadamia nuts, and then when you taste an extra virgin olive oil given from wild olive trees grown in the maclaren vale district of south Australia, you get this beautiful rich green robust, aromatic oil. In our restaurant we would use a different oil not for every dish but at least a small part of the menu, meat, fish, salad and pasta, would require a different oil to be used, to compliment the dish and not fight its natural taste.

**How important are health factors or are chefs as confused as consumers?**

Health is not a major part that plays in restaurants in general, how ever there is a small number of restaurants that are becoming more conscience of the health risk involved with heavy cooking, but generally confusion is just as common in the industry.

**How can we influence chef's choices? Do chefs really care? If no, why not? If yes, can they influence consumer preferences? Eg lifestyle, cooking programs, popular articles, cookbooks?**

Chefs do care up to a point, there is a small minority that are leaders rather than followers, cooking programs and cookbooks are for consumers rather than chefs.

**Raising awareness through literature, education programs etc – do you think that these work?**

Given the long hours and lifestyles that chefs keep, literature does not work; direct marketing awareness would be the most efficient and quickest way to market the product. That is, showing chefs what they can do with a particular oil and convincing them that the use of a different kind of oil is worthwhile.

**Then what form of media would reach chefs?**

Direct mail out with a sample of the product and examples of recipes and an endorsement from a few of their peers.

**It looks as though the chefs of today are a lost cause, so should we try to reach the chefs of the future through TAFE etc?**

Most definitely, TEACH THEM WHILE THEY ARE YOUNG with practical demonstration, giving a full knowledge of the product, how to use it and what to do with it etc.

**Well then do you think we could also reach the adults of tomorrow through the children of today?**

Yes and maybe one of the most important things for the future generations is health, because a healthy lifestyle (diet) is showing that we can not only live longer than our ancestors, but we can also live healthier lives. If we learn this at a young age, it can make all the difference to how we behave as adults.

**Well then Tony, what's your final message on oils?**

You can best promote your product to chefs by letting them understand the full benefits of the product. Perception is everything! Everyone believes that extra virgin olive oil is best from Italy yet this is the one country in the world that buys olive oil from other parts of the world then bottles the blended finish product, and we pay premium price for it, just because its Italian it does not make it FANTASTICO.

You have to give chefs a knowledge of the product; you have to convince them of the benefits - show them what to do with it or what it can do for the end result, otherwise we only know that sunflower oil lowers your cholesterol and that it may be good for frying.