

S.PELLEGRINO SAPORI TICINO

## **Tobias Funke Shines on Top of Monte Generoso**





"All aboard and masks on, please," the conductor calls. Not many six-course dinners start with a forty minute climb up a 130-year-old funicular route to the top of a 1600m mountain. But this is *S.Pellegrino Saponi Ticino* and tonight is all about 'haute cuisine,' quite literally.

It's a Sunday night in Ticino, Switzerland, and we're here for one of the dinners that form the annual haute cuisine dinner series, where dozens of Michelin starred chefs, both local and international pop up at various incredible locations around the canton of Ticino. Tonight stars Swiss chef **Tobias Funke** at *Al Fiore Di Pietra* restaurant.

The amiable chatter of 75 intrepid diners fills the funicular's two packed carriages as it labours up the historic incline. A rainbow en route serves as a good omen for the evening, before it's time to disembark. Heavy coats are flung on as the temperature plummets, and an unexpected hail storm drives us towards the welcome drinks.



Photo: Courtesy of Saponi Ticino/ Tobias Funke and Angelo Caironi

We've arrived at the peak and the *Fiore di Pietra del Monte Generoso*, an impressive 'stone flower' landmark building, with time to *soak up* 360-degree panoramic views across the turquoise lake Lugano and towards the Alps. Tonight's one-off guest chef **Tobias Funke** from two-Michelin-star *Restaurant zur Fernsicht* is hosted by resident chef **Angelo Caironi**. He's already been hard at work since early this morning, leaving nothing to chance for his first appearance in this 14-year-old haute cuisine dinner series.

In fact, the 38-year-old-Swiss chef arrived complete with a four-vehicle convoy loaded with so many ingredients and so much kit, an extra funicular had to be laid on to get it all to the top in time. Back home in Heiden, some 300 km away, Funke's empire of a small twenty-cover gourmet restaurant, a casual Alpine eatery and a fondue lodge, feel a long way away. But tonight's alpine challenge comes easily to him, and he's cool, calm and collected. He's at home in the kitchen.



*Photo: Courtesy of Saponi Ticino*

Funke's gourmet *Incantare* restaurant is known for having the 'oldest menu' in Switzerland. It is a project that he embarked on a decade ago, spending hours pouring over ancient cookbooks in some of Switzerland's oldest libraries, where he absorbed 600-year-old recipes and ingredients into his cooking. He learned to use pigs ear to add crunch to salads, and how to make tongue roulade and Swiss lake prawns. He mastered the art of making an intense farro risotto, as well as ox heart, grilled and thinly sliced, and served with pea butter.

However, when pushed to describe his cuisine or culinary influences, Funke is impossible to pigeonhole. "The basis is French, but we are very modern. We have ingredients from Asia, Italy, France and Switzerland and it's a mix of all," he explains. A closer look at tonight's menu reveals ten-year-old Limousin beef from a local butcher as well as Asian ingredients like sake and miso. "What's most important is we want to understand the story behind the ingredient rather than bio or fair trade. For me it's more important to visit the supplier, dive to find oysters in Norway, or go to the cacao start-up in Ghana. We look around the world for what is the best."



*Photo: Courtesy of Tobias Funke*

Funke also works closely with local farmers in Switzerland or "crazy people", as he calls them, who grow produce especially for him. Like the Swiss-grown 'barba di frata' that stars in tonight's umami-packed vegetarian 'funghi barbecue dish' or the Swiss-grown tomatillos, which usually come from Spain.



As menu unfolds throughout the night, every dish showcases his bold combinations, from the carabinero shrimp with cucumber, green curry and basil (pictured above) to the wild blackberrys picked from the woods, starring in the sugar-free dessert with smoked buckwheat, buttermilk and yuzu (pictured below). The pops of flavour shine through as he dips in and out of Swiss traditions with alpine and Asian accents.



*Photo: Courtesy of Saponi Ticino*

"We taste new products and ingredients every day. My inspiration is from all the products and all the cooks," says Funke. He works in close collaboration with his team to develop the dishes on the set menu. "I expect motivation, perfectionism and soul. If someone doesn't feel like it when they come in, I tell them to go home. I need people at their best. The most important thing is to have a full house every day with a lot of cool guests and good staff and everyone who comes to work that loves it. It's not a one man job, it's a team" he continues.

At the end of the night he stands shoulder-to-shoulder with his team to enjoy a round of applause, and the energy in the room reaches a crescendo before the evening closes. Funke enjoys a moment of calm in the spotlight before he and his team de-camp, ready for the descent.

As midnight approaches, we're gently ushered back to our carriage as the funicular's rear trailer is loaded ready for its return to the twinkling lights in the valley below. Funke says he'll have to be up at 7am again to get back to his restaurant. But he's not worried: "I've got two weeks' holiday coming up. I'm getting married on Saturday," he says, grinning.



*Photo: Courtesy of Sapori Ticino*

<https://www.finedininglovers.com/article/tobias-funke-sapori-ticino>