The Solari Report

November 24, 2016

Solari Food Series - Charcutier, Salumiere, Wurstmeister with Francois Vecchio

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Harry Blazer: I'm here with Francois Vecchio in Montana, in my home. Francois has come to visit, and it's a wonderful opportunity to also have this conversation.

Francois, first I want to ask you this: Your name is Francois Paul Armand Vecchio. Is that correct?

Francois Vecchio: Yes. That is a complicated name eh. It's very difficult for an American to pronounce (laughter).

Harry Blazer: What I see here is there is some French, some Italian there - at least that much. Tell me a little bit about yourself, your background, and how you grew up and the whole schemer.

Francois Vecchio: It looks like it's Italian and French, right? I was born in Geneva where the culture is French. From my dad's side, hence the paternal name, we came from Piemonte. But it so happened that if you go a little bit back, Savoy, Piemonte, and Geneva were actually the land of one tribe. You know, when Caesar conquered Gaul, there was there the Allobroges that was the Celt tribe and true conquest of the Romans. Then invasion of the Burgundians after the Romans. The Celtic were the original identity of the people – even the language – because in Savoy they were speaking with a French dialect, and in Piemonte they also spoke with a French dialect.

Harry Blazer: Piemonte, Italy?

Francois Vecchio: Yes, Piemonte, Italy became Italy only 175 years ago with

Garibaldi and the whole thing when they determined to put what was the Duke of Piemonte Sardinia as the King of Italy. So that region was a land by itself. The names are different, but the roots are from those people who lived in the mountains.

In my case, I still have a very strong I would say farmer fiber – so much so that as a young man my ambition was to become an agricultural engineer. It didn't happen because the family was into the meat business and had been in the meat business already for two generations. It was a successful business – quite a good size.

The names are different, but the roots are from those people who lived in the mountains.

The father decided that I would become a butcher. In those days it was quite acceptable that the parent determined what you do in life. So as a good kid, I followed direction.

First I had some schooling at a commercial school. It's like in America with the high school and college, more or less.

Harry Blazer: It's called a trade school here. You went to a trade school for butchering?

Francois Vecchio: No, no. It was different. Up to twelve years. You have done six years of what we call primary schooling where everybody goes. Then you had three years of higher school or high school. In our case, it was a college including Latin. It was a classic college. So I did three years of classic study, if you want, and after that I had three years of commercial school. It's a kind of low-grade business school. After that I had an apprenticeship.

During the apprenticeship I started to manifest my independence of character in the sense that instead of just following the pattern, I did a lot of travelling. During my apprenticeship it was easy because the master who had authority on me as an apprentice was my dad. So it supplied some flexibility.

I would say that I was pretty good in the trade; I ended up apprenticeship with

the maximum rating after three years. The apprenticeship was very complex because you learn to slaughter, you learn to butcher, you learn to break the animal, you learn to make sausage, and that part of learning I did at home in our business. But very quickly I went to different positions throughout Switzerland. I even took stints in Italy with a cousin who was not really in the meat business; he was in the seed business. But I improved my culture of Italian.

I went for a period of time to France, close to Paris, in the estate of the President of the Republic, which is called Rambouillet an old medieval castle with an extensive property. There is on the side an agricultural school. That is where I caught up in my passion of agriculture, and I did in three months école de berger accéléré – a fast shepherd teaching – because we were very extensively involved in fattening sheep. We had besides the meat business quite extensive agricultural property.

Harry Blazer: You were born and educated and did your apprenticeship in Switzerland?

Francois Vecchio: I did the apprenticeship in Switzerland, but as I was telling you, I took an opportunity during the three-years of the apprenticeship to go for three months in the school in Rambouillet where I cultivated my passion for agriculture. I was close to Paris, so when school was off on weekends I was in the city of Paris buying books on agriculture. I bought everything I could find.

Harry Blazer: Your family's business was in Switzerland?

Francois Vecchio: In Geneva.

Harry Blazer: And you were born in Geneva?

Francois Vecchio: I was born there, so I was an "un Genevois" but the business was covering more than Geneva; it was shipping meat all over Switzerland. We were specialized in feeding lambs that we were buying from the mountain farmers. Up in the valley of the Alps the farmers have ewes. They send ewes up on the highest pasture in summer, and in the fall they

gather the ewes and the lambs and sell the lambs because they just have enough hay to keep the ewes over the winter.

Our job was to go to all these valley markets, buy the lambs – something like several thousand per year. We were handling anywhere from 10,000-15,000 lambs. It was big. We had different farms in the low land with something like 500-600 acres of cultivated land producing forage and wheat. Above, on the Jura Mountain above Geneva we had a land of five mountains, which means five parcels of ranch, each big enough to hold a flock of 500 heads with the shepherd and his dog with a little hut to shelter him.

We were in that business. In Paris I cultivated it a little bit. Being in Paris, I even found access to a butcher shop, and I worked for three months à "La Porte de Versailles". I learned the craft of the Parisian butcher, which were very refined because the Parisian butchers are able to sell a whole carcass as steak. You know the French don't eat hamburger – or at the time they did not. So the craft was to de-seam everything, remove all the sinew and membrane, and you become basically a surgeon because you know every muscle, every connection and you refine that. So I had that teaching.

I also went to work at a wholesale butcher at "La Villette", which was the slaughterhouse in Paris. It had a big meat market. There was a big wholesaler there doing mostly food service. Very high quality, high volume food service. In particular they were one of the suppliers of La Compagnie Transatlantique who was operating "Le Normandie". I participated in one presentation selecting and exposing the meats, which the chef of the Normandie would come and point and accept.

Then, because probably I had worked well, the boss, Monsieur Bani (from the company Lalauze) sent me to Le Havre with the team to load the boat. It was quite an adventure for a young kid.

So even as an apprentice, I had a lot of very interesting experiences. The biggest one was at the end of the apprenticeship, bugging my dad, who ended up giving me $1,000. With $1,000 I managed to go to America and spend three months in America – coast to coast – travelling by bus, hitchhiking, delivering a car from Chicago to Portland to travel, and spending months in western

Colorado to work on the sheep ranch and making friends there. There I really got a very good initiation of America at the time.

So after that apprenticeship accomplished, we got to function into the family business. The trick in one of the reason the way my wife evolved (came about) is that the will of the father to get me into the business was compounded by a similar will of my two uncles – because the previous generation in the business were three brothers Vecchio. Each one had pushed into the business an heir. So we were set in business as one-third continuing what had been successful in the previous generation. But it so happened that my two cousins were very good guys. I love them and their family, but business-wise they were morally "takers", and I was the "creator".

So after that apprenticeship accomplished, we got to function into the family business.

So starting in 1962, I agitated the family and the three cousins took over the business, but at one-third each. It turned out that I was the one who expanded the business. When we started we had the meat operation, which was meat wholesale, about 25 or 30 employees in the slaughterhouse and in the packinghouse. We had about 20 people on the farm. The people were cultivating, but also there was a team of a dozen Italian shepherds. They were the old traditional guys who lived outside under a very thick wool cap/hat, stick, and live with 500 sheep year-round. In winter they would eat the leftovers in the field of the farmers. In the summer they would go up to the range. They were very, very interesting characters.

I was very close to the chief of the shepherds. I even spent two weeks myself up on the ranch as a shepherd. I did it.

Harry Blazer: What were the sheep eating then? They were eating grass and then basically agricultural forage?

Francois Vecchio: It was extensive in finishing. For instance, the lamb that we bought from the valley in the Alps, usually in September or October.

Harry Blazer: They were 100% grass-fed?

Francois Vecchio: They had been with the mother, completely independent at 2,500 meters eating the finest mountain blooms above the range where the cattle could go. The sheep were sent higher up like the wild antelopes or whatever used to live in the Alps.

So these animals were fairly light and lean. So we were making a selection, and those in better shape would go in barns in the farm. The other ones were put into flocks and sent outside with a shepherd all winter. We had snow, but not too much. After the wheat and after the alfalfa and whatever was grown on the land, the farmer didn't mind that during the winter an independent shepherd would cruise through and eat whatever was there.

So those animals would not get fat, but would survive and then would be ready to go up to the range in the summer to feed and fatten.

Those who were put in barns were eating the hay that we had grown and stored. We were also producing some silage – corn silage – and something very special and unique. I never saw it anywhere else. You have to understand that the city of Geneva is shaded by a lot of horse chestnut trees. Those horse chestnuts mature in September, just when school begins again.

We had a trade where the kids were going to the horse chestnuts, collecting the big chestnuts, and they brought them the first day when school was off to our place where we paid 10 cents per kilo of the chestnut. So we were collecting tons of chestnut that we were storing and semi-grounding (partially grinding). We were running them through a root-cutter, a machine that is meant to dice and chop beets. So the chestnut, which looked similar to the fruit of the buckeye tree. Are you aware of buckeyes? They have nuts this big. (The **buckeye tree** (Aesculus glabra) is a relative of the chestnut and the horse chestnut. The nut is the same rich, mellow warm-brown color as a chestnut, but it is less readily edible, due to its high tannic acid content. Native Americans roasted the nut and peeled away the shell to make a food called "hetuck." The nut can also be cooked, beaten into a paste and used as a supplement to treat arthritis. The buckeye nut is produced by the Ohio buckeye tree, namesake of the Ohio State Buckeyes. The nut is named for its appearance, which is similar to that of the eye of a deer.)

Francois Vecchio: The sheep got used to it. We were also giving them acorns that the kids were bringing, and we were fattening lambs with that mixture. They were no longer lambs; they were what the British call hoggets. They were all basically one year of age. We were shipping those animals throughout Switzerland because we were one of the very few who were doing that business in Switzerland.

From that basic position that we had in the 1960's, we grew the business. In the end of the 1960's and the early 1970's after having acquired the business for ourselves, one consultant who had given us a hand for the transition called me and introduced me to a French group from the sugar industry along with the Rothschild Bank. They created a corporation with the idea of building a major meat group in France.

The 1960's were a period where everything was possible. You had an idea and you were implementing that idea in the boom years.

So for three or four years, besides my activity with my cousin managing the meat business, I became a consultant for that French group who bought a salami company in Saint Symphorien, near Lyon, a slaughterhouse in Normandy, a meat grinding in the west of France, and a sausage plant in the east. I mean, they had regrouped (consolidated) six or seven companies and were launching a large group.

I was advising them with the intent – because I was speaking German and I was Swiss and I spoke Italian – and exploring the potential of regrouping companies outside of France also.

Harry Blazer: You speak French, Italian, German, and you speak a Swiss dialect, too?

Francois Vecchio: Schwytzerdutch.

Harry Blazer: So you speak four languages plus English.

Francois Vecchio: Plus English, and I can manage in Spanish also because it is so close to Italian and French. Having that Latin base, you have access to a wide-open vocabulary. It helps a lot.

So I did a lot of consulting with this group. They took me even to Brazil and Argentina at the time to locate some source of meat. I took the business with the manager of the group on a so-called 'study tour' of America (as if I knew America at that time). I had a memory of a trip of 10 or 15 years before, but I was speaking English. So I contacted a number of companies, and we visited different companies and came back.

In 1972 something very tragic happened on a vacation. An accident happened to one of my two kids, and he eventually passed. It was not in a simple way; he was in a coma and survived for two or three weeks in a hospital in Marseilles. The whole thing had happened in Corsica.

It was a major shock in my life, and the whole story ended in divorce. But in the meantime and during that same period, I had built a rapport with a manufacturer and producer of salami, mortadella and ham in Ticino, the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, who was consuming a lot of lean meat that we were preparing especially for him. It was cow meat, which had boosted our business in Geneva because we had the sales for the rounds to produce for local consumption and shipping to the manufacturers of Bündnerfleisch. It's dry-cured meat and the ancestor of what the Italians turn into bresaola.

We had, of course, sales of the loin for the restaurants of Geneva who made steaks and tenderloin. You have to understand, because that is a different perspective from America, with the dual breed that we have in Switzerland – milk and meat.

Small farmers take good care of their animals. They don't just send them on the ranch and collect the calf like a rancher in the West. So they make good hay and second cut hay. They keep their animals individually and even give a name to every animal like a pet.

So you have a kind of cow – replacing strictly dairy cows – which comes between five and seven years of age, which have been coddled all their lives. That is an excellent type of beef if you handle it right, meaning slaughter without adding water. You know, the old-fashioned slaughter where you let the carcass get its rigor mortis evaporating naturally, unlike what we do in America now where you hose to let the meat absorb whatever water you can for

obvious purpose.

So you had 24 hours of resting and then those carcasses were put in the fridge. The forequarters were usually butchered and processed right away for consumption, but the hindquarters would always hang for a couple of weeks at least. Then the round would be cut and shipped to wherever it needed to go. The loin would age at least another two or three weeks. So you had meat, which would shrink from evaporated water and enzymatically mature. So you had super taste, super tenderness, a kind of meat that is hard to find today. And it was mature meat!

We were also, of course, slaughtering young animals, usually heifers.

Harry Blazer: What is interesting here is that the animal was looked at in terms of three major components related to time. So there was some stuff that you used pretty quickly, there was other stuff that you dry-aged for a couple of weeks and then used, and then there was other stuff that you dry-aged for up to four weeks and then used.

Francois Vecchio: Yes, corresponding to the use. In the forequarter you have meat that usually requires a long cooking time. So there is steam reduction of the collagen into gelatin to make it tender. It is braised or ragout or whatever.

Harry Blazer: And that is the stuff that you would use right away.

Francois Vecchio: A lot of that meat, which was the particularity of our business, was boned and hand-trimmed to make blocks of frozen lean meat in which the major sinew had been removed. That was used by the friend in Italy to make his salami. The salami were made including a fraction of beef. It was not only pure pork, but it was pork and beef.

This fellow, Silvio Rapelli had a passion for fast cars. He ran a Ferrari, and he blew himself at 250 kilometers an hour on an Italian autostrada. There was an accident, and – poof! It was the end of his life. His company at the time had more than 300 employees, and one particularity was that they were mostly Italian because the plant was on the Swiss border. Those Italians came in the morning over the border, went back home for lunch, came back in the afternoon because the distance was within five miles. You had all kinds of

villages across the border, and they were highly trained, traditional Italian salami makers.

So that plant had the advantage of abundant very high-quality manpower, and had become the number one plant in Switzerland for that trade. It was big. Silvio Rapelli dead. His manager, who knew me, had evaluated my character, etc.; afraid that they might be taken over by the big Swiss retailers because you had a monopolistic situation with at least two retailers in Switzerland – Coop and Migros; asked me to take over the business. So ambitious as I was with financial resources in the family, we did the deal.

Harry Blazer: At that time in Switzerland, the retailers were owning manufacturers?

Francois Vecchio: The retailers were not as a corporation manufacturers, but they controlled manufacturing corporations.

Harry Blazer: They would own them?

Francois Vecchio: Yes, they owned them. Migros had built already two or three meat plants, but they were not making salami because it was so specialized. The Ticino position was very strong.

The Swiss German doesn't have the particular genius for salami. They make fantastic wurst - that is part of their culture.

Coop had in Basel the biggest meat group called Bell. They had integrated a lot. There were relatively few independents.

That was in 1973. Silvio died in late 1972, and in 1973 I jumped into a company with 400 employees. I was coming from managing 50 people, and I suddenly had that responsibility. My knowledge was mostly academic from apprenticeship. Culturally I was okay; I could speak Italian. But it was quite a time in my life.

Harry Blazer: How old were you at that time?

Francois Vecchio: I was 35. A tender greenhorn. First year things went well.

Second year, production deteriorated because I didn't control the 400 employees. When you change bosses, you have some evolution. I managed the readjustment and I put the company on a growth, and profitability turned out to be one of the best companies in Switzerland, and I gained respect of the buyers for Migros and Cooperative. You had to keep them at hand because they were constantly clashing, but I was able to work with both, and they were 80% of the market.

So I had enough weight and authority to get respected and get the price that we deserved. One of the reasons I succeeded was that instead of getting into the business to milk it to make money out of it, I had a major concern of refining and improving quality, and people sensed that and gave me trust. That was how it succeeded.

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But, being divorced and having to move constantly from Geneva to Ticino to Zurich to discuss markets, and also having those friends from my former activity as a consultant, I was travelling a lot. That's where I expanded my hobby as a private pilot into getting a plane, qualifying for an IFR (instrument flight rules i.e. learning how to fly using instruments vs. visual cues) and flying the Alps between Geneva and Lugano in any weather, and it's not always very good.

It was a very demanding life. It was very exciting and very rewarding, but very demanding. I integrated the whole family group into a holding company, which I didn't control. My two cousins had the control, and they were coherent because their aim was to "milk the cow". I had the authority in managing, creating, expanding.

At some point we had more than 700 employees because we had also taken over the finest retail butcher shop in Geneva. We had gone into pasta and different diversification. I had girlfriends right and left and my own plane, travelling sometimes on vacation to Corsica or Sardinia. It was a good life, but

it was – to me – frustrating. I was missing something.

I was not happy. I was constantly having that feeling that I was dragging my two cousins, and one of my escapes was to go visit with my sister in California. She lived close to San Diego. Unlike the boy who was sent to apprenticeship as a butcher, the daughters (I had two sisters) went to university to get a degree, and they were both well-educated ladies.

One was a biochemist who followed a professor who had a sabbatical in Stanford, so she moved to Stanford for one year. From there she decided to change direction and went to San Diego when they created the UCSD. She did medicine, turned out as a pediatrician and settled in Rancho Santa Fe. So my escape in the 1970's was to fly to San Diego, borrow a car, and go disappear in Baja. I would be alone at the beach. It was at the time when Baja was still undeveloped, and it was the perfect paradise for a guy from Switzerland.

At my sister's there was a young Japanese-American who was finishing studies of psychology at UCSD. She was a friend of my sister. They were engaged in a group that was doing some spiritual work with a Swiss guy who I had known in Switzerland before. I got hooked by Chris (that lady friend of my sisters).

I tried to bring her to Switzerland to the good life, and she was not interested. I said, "Heck, I've done what I could do in Switzerland. I've set the family. I've accomplished what the father wanted. I have a holding. There is a board managing the whole thing. Everybody is happy, and it makes money. I will start a new life. I will go to America."

The idea turned out that I would expand in America, in line with what we had acquired as far as skill at Rapelli in Switzerland making salami, mortadella, etc. I got into the business in Fresno launching high quality salami on the West Coast.

Harry Blazer: Under the Rapelli name?

Francois Vecchio: Under the name Rapelli of California. That was in 1981 when I started. We created the first line of product with three local partners, but most of the money and skill came from me. In 1982 there was a nasty recession. The product, which had been introduced in the supermarkets, was eliminated because the retailers were reducing inventory. So we were born dead.

I refinanced a second time. I realized that making just one chub, one product was not going to cut it. So I went into a whole line of meat product – traditional Italian meat product – and instead of supermarkets, I went after the specialized distributor. I struggled there for eight years during which a lot happened.

Number one, I got the brand out. I got the network of the distributors. Working through the distributor at the time was very costly, so I had a hard time getting the net margin. We were still losing money, but we were growing at 30% per year.

We had established the quality, the market, the respect, and acceptance was coming. But seeing the red numbers, seeing the fact that I was pooling resources from the holding in Switzerland, my two cousins decided to cut me. "No more money. You were crazy enough to go to America. You abandoned us. Manage."

It was very tough circumstances. After that, they sold all their properties and liquidated the corporation and went to play golf.

Harry Blazer: Did you get a third of that like you were supposed to when they liquidated?

Francois Vecchio: Yes, but I had sunk it in the Italian venture, in the Rapelli of California, and it didn't jive. Plus, the deal was staggered in time. The money didn't come all at once. I was without enough resources.

Creating a salami or prosciutto business is probably one of the worst financial ventures because it costs a lot of money upfront in equipment and satisfying the condition of the USDA. It's costly building and costly equipment. You have to finance inventory for two months or three months.

Harry Blazer: That's while it's aging and curing.

Francois Vecchio: The distributors are people who pay you when they get the money, so you add one month of financing. When you grow, funding inventory eats whatever cash flow you can create. So you never perk up – at least not fast.

So I took an Italian partner, an old friend of mine from Europe. In the deal, I made a major mistake. I accepted to lose the majority against a contract that was giving me total management. Of course, the contract was not respected, and I was squeezed out of the business because that guy, instead of following what I had created, wanted for the sake of numbers to go into cheaper product and get back into the supermarkets because that was where the market was and where the money was, forgetting that it was completely owned by Columbus, Gallo, and all of the powerful Italian salami makers in San Francisco.

So the guy got into heavy loss, and I could not follow him keeping the financing, so he squeezed me out. So all I had invested in the company was basically stolen.

Harry Blazer: What year was that?

Francois Vecchio: That was 1991 when they kicked me out. I had one year. I was suing them for the contract that I had with them. I ended up having one year of income. I had no right to work because I could not compete with them. It was one of the first times I went to Alaska as a tourist. It was a good time for one year.

1992 was a sabbatical year. In 1993 I started again with Columbus. Columbus had observed what I'd done. It's really funny because I had worked in the family situation, and Columbus was the exact same family situation. Three cousins owned the business. It was in the interest of the sisters, but they had the vision. So they sensed what I represented and they gave me a free hand and support. So with Columbus, boom!

So the company I knew was making only an Italian dry, which was just good enough to put in between provolone and mortadella or cheese in an Italian sandwich, typical of San Francisco. The product was very tangy, spicy, and not very good. So I improved that into a sliceable, edible salami. We relaunched all the specialty that I had created in Fresno because the customer of Rapelli of California were dismayed by the quality which had plunged because of the new owner who bought crappy meat to keep the product.

So we had that market, which I had created, already waiting. From that, in ten years Columbus expanded from California into nationwide. They got a major

deal with Safeway. They got into Trader Joe's. They got into Costco, and business was so good that they sold to private investors who put a marketing manager in charge. They started to milk the cow also, and they kept me for a while. By that time I had escaped in Alaska.

The marketing manager wanted me to give my name to a line of fancy cheese that he wanted to launch. The contract was abusive. I was abandoning any right or any potential. I refused the contract, and he sent me two lines by email to tell me that I was cut out.

I had been instrumental in creating all that value. It was a success. It's pattern recurring in my life. I'm not enough focused on protecting my interest and in grabbing my share of the whole deal. I just create, push, launch, and then other guys smart enough take advantage of it.

Harry Blazer: So this is the exact same story of my other friends, Bill Niman from Niman Ranch, and also Mel Coleman. These geniuses – these dedicated guys – wanting to do the right thing; these entrepreneurs who establish great value - they get into a financial crunch. Other people come in, and they basically get control, get rid of these people, and then they grew the brand into something else.

Francois Vecchio: Do you know the symbolism of Moses? He can see the Promised Land but never get into it. (Laughter) The prophet!

It's the way the humans work. It's fine. During the last year of Columbus I also worked three or four years for Bill, helping them create products out of the part of the pork that they were not selling well and helping them with their hot dogs. It was the same thing.

Harry Blazer: Bill Niman was the one who introduced me to you.

Francois Vecchio: Bill got kicked out. New boss, bean counter, marketing, closing all the faucet to balance the books. The first thing he does, he kicks me out.

Harry Blazer: By the way, at Harry's Farmer's Market, my store, we carried Rapelli early on, and we also carried Columbus early on.

Francois Vecchio: I remember that. That was a long time ago.

With all of that, I had reached 65. I was living in Alaska. I was supposed to retire and fade away from the landscape. I was making a few salami for my own, and I went to the butcher shop in Palmer. Nate, the butcher when I was buying boston butt to make some sausage and asking him for casing, he figured that I had some potential knowledge or some potential resource for him.

We started working together. He started moving his butcher shop from hamburger and steaks into adding sausage and introducing charcuterie. His real money he was making it with butchering the moose and the caribou. So he had three months of hyperactivity where he was receiving the hunted carcass, turning it into freezer packages for the hunters. That was very rewarding, and he had that empty season – winter.

So we imagined organizing a seminar. I brought in a dozen chefs who were interested in charcuterie.

So we imagined to organize a seminar. I brought in a dozen chefs who were interested in charcuterie. Already it was starting to bubble up. The chefs wanted to make their own sausage. Over the year we did four of those (seminars) with six pigs, a dozen half-carcass. Basically it was a half-carcass for each guy. It was one week of work to turn that into 30 different products.

At the end of the week we had a mountain of 500 pounds of different products, not knowing too well where to go with that. So we organized a big dinner offering for peanuts a lot of meat to the locals. The first time we had the dinner we had more than 300 people who came. We did that in a public hall in Palmer. They each ate more than one pound of meat. They left with buckets full and bags. It was a riot!

Things went on. At some point I opened in Facebook a group to cater for the twelve chefs to keep in touch. The group still exists. It takes a lot of my time, but there are 5,000 people in that group today.

Harry Blazer: What is the name on Facebook?

Francois Vecchio: It's named Charcuterie Salumi Wurst.

Harry Blazer: Which by the way is the name of your book, right?

Francois Vecchio: Not quite. The book is for the individual charcutier – the salumiere and Wurstmeister – the one who makes. The book is to acquire the knowledge, the philosophy and the technique of the quality-oriented tradition.

Harry Blazer: What is charcuterie? What is salumiere? And what is Wurst?

Francois Vecchio: All of them are meat product based on the cultural tradition of the Germanic, the French and the Italian. To the Italian you can also add the Spanish tradition.

The character is thick. The Wurstmeister is really the master of emulsion. All the very good German Wurst are based on the technology of emulsifying the meat.

Harry Blazer: And what is that?

Francois Vecchio: It's comminuting the meat so fine that you change completely the texture. First you have to understand what is meat. That is another long story.

Once you sacrifice an animal, you discard the organs, which are specialized protein like liver, heart, kidney, tongue, etc. You end up with the carcass, which is bone, the skeleton, on which muscles are attached. It's the mechanical part of the body. The mechanical part is moved by muscle, and muscles are bundles of protein called myosin and actinin – so the motor. Those bundles of protein are wrapped into membranes called cytoplasm at their smallest level, which are made of collagen. The collagen eventually the cytoplasm is bound to membrane, and the membrane to sinew attached to bone. So you see the texture.

The noble protein is the red protein, the myosin and the actinin. They are not soluble. But when you add 1.5% of salt to them, they become soluble. Becoming soluble, they form a glue – a binder.

When you comminute you reduce the texture to a paste, that glue eventually forms an emulsion like the emulsion that everybody knows, mayonnaise. But the mayonnaise is the reverse emulsion of what we want in meat. Mayonnaise is oil in the matrix of the colloidal mixture, which is the new state of that material.

In meat and in sausage making, you want the myosin and the actinin becoming the base and protein a water base. So instead of an oil base colloidal mix mayonnaise, you have a water base colloidal mix red proteins.

Harry Blazer: You're saying colloidal, correct?

Francois Vecchio: Colloidal is when physically things get so small that they behave like a solution. They are not the real solution, but they behave like it. The characteristic of the protein base colloidal mix is that through heat you coagulate it –like you heat the egg white - it coagulates into the white substance of the egg, which is similarly the protein and water of the albumin of the egg is similar to the red colloidal mix of actinin and protein in water and salt.

Now it's not just pure myosin and actinin. You also include perforce, the cytoplasm, which is collagen. So the red protein solution coagulates with heat or coagulates with acidification. Sausages are cooked, and salami acidified fermented. So you have already two leading approaches to change the texture of the meat.

Collagen, which the art of the butcher is to eliminate as much as possible, or possibly add. Collagen is a different beast because collagen with heat and steam becomes gelatin. So when actinin and myosin coagulate they get firm, when collagen coagulates, you get gluey, gooey gelatin.

These are the two main components of the meat. So managing the proportion and managing the technology is at the core of the three different approaches. Germans emulsify and create the glue that will coagulate with heat during smoking, but include quite a bit of collagen, and even add some pork skin, which is basically pure collagen, to get juiciness in the sausage. So you have those three components which are balanced in the German sausage: the basic protein, the collagen for juiciness, and the fat, because the carcass contains also the padding of fat.

So you have those three elements processed in a certain way and emulsified so they become totally homogenous, usually treated with smoke.

You have all the German sausage; these are the Wurst. The German also make fermented Dauerwurst. They also make pickled sausage. You find everything, but always with that characteristic smoke and a very Germanic personality, which is generally recognized.

The French are the guys who are smart because they use the offal, and charcuterie is more about the cuisine, the cooking, the art of the chef in meat. So they make pâté, they make mousse, they make emulsion with liver, and they even have horrible sausage – horrible in the American mind, but delicious in the French mind. Sausages like the Andouille where you eat the guts of the animal as a sausage.

The French have a very different direction, and the French expand their meat product also in "patisserie de viande" - the combination of bread dough, a croûte (pie crust) and a Pâté en Croûte. They garnish things with aspic. Again, you find the collagen turned into gelatin flavor, so same ingredient but processed differently. The flavor range - the French like to add booze to their patisserie. You have flavor with Cognac, Armagnac -very good things. As I said, the charcutier is very close to the chef de cuisine because they overlap. The name charcutier relates to the fraternity of *chair cuite*, 'flesh cookers' that Philippe le Bel (13th/ 14th century King of France) gave to the charcutier of Paris because you had the butcher who would sell the raw meat and you had the charcutier who could sell the cooked meat. So the name is even clear.

The Italian and the Mediterranean people use the same ingredients, but they use them differently. Their glory is, of course, the prosciutto and the salami. Prosciutto is the simplest possible meat where you just add salt to meat to preserve it and let it age where the natural enzymatic process develops the texture and the flavor. But for that you have to have a very special type of animal that is mature, has a certain quality of meat, and you need a certain climate to sustain the process, and of course a lot of skill and attention.

In the salami, you do not emulsify or completely blend, but instead you manually segregate the meat to keep the best possible meat for the purpose, manually removing all the membrane and discarding as much of the collagen

tissue as you can to gain basically pure myosin and actinin. When I say it's 'pure' it's relative because you still have the cytoplasm, but you cannot remove that.

Harry Blazer: What we think of as the muscle.

Francois Vecchio: It's the muscle – the red muscle – and preferably the muscle of the shoulder which work more (performs more work in the animal) has more color and more fineness in the fiber. Then you select the very hard fat from the neck and the back where the history of the wild boar – the ancestor of our good pork – had built what the hunter knew as the 'shield' - because the front of the animal is toughened to resist the teeth when they fight or to run through the bramble. So it has to be tough. It is the same fat as elsewhere in the body, but wrapped into more collagen.

So here the cytoplasm that you have around the red meat becomes the wall of the cell that contains the fat, and that fat physically is very hard and paradoxically leaner than the plain fat because you have the collagen.

So you select that fat, which is usually coming right underneath the skin in the front of the animal, and you dice the whole thing in a balanced proportion - traditionally it was two-thirds lean and one-third fat. You add more than the 1.5% of trigger level of salt. You go to 2.5 because there you have to filter the microbial life – the salt acting as a screen – and you also have to force the water out of the protein because the protein of the meat contains 80% or more water, which is bound. It's part of the protein. So the salt will force that water to be released. Then you add a little bit of sugar to help the good bugs that you want to survive in the mix. You add a pinch of saltpeter (nitrate) which the bugs are going to reduce into nitrite and nitrous oxide and will actually cure the meat.

So you do manage or put together in the process of making the salami different technique. Number one, you have comminuted, created a certain media, added salt that will change the flora in favor of the anaerobic lactic fermenters, which will also reduce the nitrate that will chemically cure the meat, but in the process in the transition from nitrate to nitrous oxide, and eventually the nitrosomyoglobin – which is that red pigment which indicates visually the cure - the phase in the transition to nitrite reinforces the activity of the sodium chloride (salt) to filter the bacteria.

They practically act as an antibiotic if you will. It has a tendency to safely eliminate the botulism and reduce the activity and the virulence of a lot of potential pathogens that could be in the mix.

Harry Blazer: Today nitrates are looked at as something that is not favorable. Nitrosamines are looked at as something that is not good for your health.

Francois Vecchio: We will get back to that. To finish the description of the Italian or Mediterranean process, the characteristic is that you don't cook, so you don't pasteurize. If you make the analogy of the milk, the natural protein and the natural fat, which are the same components you have in milk, just in different proportion, are conditioned by the physical handling, the salt, the nitrate, the active fermentation forming lactic acid, and it is the lactic acid that will gel the matrix of soluble protein and change the texture.

Once you get to that, you also have the dehydration, which is a very critical phase, where you remove basically 50% or more of the weight of the protein, which was water. The meat – salted, fermented, dehydrated – forms a medium in which the bacteria might still be present, mostly they are lacto-fermenter. You can have a few incidents of unwanted germs, but usually they are the microbial of a territory – which is often assimilated into the terroir, which you find in wine or cheese – which we perceive as a certain type of flavor, aroma, identity.

Whatever bacterial life is still present in the salami in the younger stage, before it gets so dry that it becomes sterile because germs cannot survive without water, at a certain stage - that is the big ignored aspect of salami - it's an enormous value. But this fact is not known.

Salami is some of the best probiotic that you can have in food because you have that input of bacteria moderated, damped, just at the perfect level to sustain your own microbiome, and incidentally boost your immune system.

So when you look at that and compare that knowledge to the official policy of our government through the USDA to feed Americans strictly sterile food and then see the results in the overall health of the population, you start scratching your head and say, 'Maybe we have lost something of high value."

So how do we bring it back?

Harry Blazer: So there are three major areas that you are talking about. First of all, the kind of animal that you've got. Second of all, the way that you raise them and what they are fed. Third is the way that you process it.

It seems like we've lost our way in all three domains.

Francois Vecchio: It's coming back, luckily.

Harry Blazer: But industrial agriculture has lost their way in all three domains.

Francois Vecchio: Yes. You can say as a civilization, America, which consumes at the rate of 90% industrial animals that are industrially-processed, mass-distributed, hidden in plastic, and totally dead when you eat them because they're way beyond any notion of freshness – fresh being one of the virtues of food - America is completely erring.

The advantage of that system is abundance. We have an abundance of stuff, but so much that we get sick on it.

The advantage of that system is abundance. We have an abundance of stuff, but so much that we get sick on it. The reaction exists already. You have people returning to the land and reviving ancient breeds, researching, and trying different ways of feeding animals. There is a big gap already because of the USDA, essentially too little and no more skill to slaughter. No more slaughterhouses. Hard to find a butchers of quality.

Then you have a lot of people, again, in restaurants and in private kitchens and more and more in small, local shops relaunching the tradition. But without a school to learn and without apprenticeships to form staff, everything has to go trial and error. But you feel true that manifestation - the beginning of a reaction to the abuse of the industrial.

Harry Blazer: And you have been instrumental in helping to cultivate and nurture that movement.

Francois Vecchio: Yes. After retiring in Alaska, I told you I educated a number of guys who themselves educated other people. The momentum through things – through ways of communicating like Facebook. The group that I manage that we mentioned is 5,000 people today. There are other groups who sum up something like 20,000 people exchanging, explicating and supporting the regrowth of that trade.

You also have a lot of books, which have been published.

Harry Blazer: But you have been one of the fathers, you might say, and one of the catalysts of this movement back to traditional.

Francois Vecchio: I keep seeding. I keep seeding. I keep seeding. I have, created my joy. My time is to help support that movement.

Harry Blazer: We are going to take a little break, and then I want to talk about is what a good pig looks like compared to the commercial pig today for use in making great deli products. Then what the technique of butchering these animals looks like compared to modern day butchering.

Francois Vecchio: These are big issues, but you should not stop there. You could go into distributing, retailing, serving. Because what you will find is that to do it right you need skill. That is where the traditional system fundamentally diverges from the industrial. The industrial eliminates skill, mechanizing everything.

Harry Blazer: The way that I like to describe it is it's a place where science serves art, not art serving science. To a large extent, the efficiency people and the marketing people and the accounting people have taken control of what was an art form. Now we need to get art back into it much more.

Francois Vecchio: That is a nice way to put it. I agree.

Part II:
How to Make Salami

Harry Blazer: Walk me through the process. How do you make a salami?

Francois Vecchio: Do I know?

Harry Blazer: If anybody knows, you do.

Francois Vecchio: In principle it is very simple. You dig out of the pig clean, red muscle meat. You dig out of the same carcass hard near-skin fat. You comminute that. You can do it with a knife; you don't need any other instrument.

About two-thirds lean, one-third fat. You add a minimum of 2.5% salt to it, 0.5% sugar, 0.03% saltpeter (roughly 1% of the quantity of salt) – you add it as a pinch of saltpeter (potassium nitrate). I say 'potassium' for a specific reason, not sodium nitrate, which is what you have in the pink salt that the system wants to use.

You mix the whole thing with some crushed garlic, a dash of pepper, and a shot of strong, sweet wine. Then physically at a specific temperature because you have to avoid high temperature at that stage, you mix the whole thing so that the protein becomes sticky/tacky, and basically absorbs the particles of fat.

So you have created a kind of colloidal system, which is bound and glued together where the water/salt base protein absorbs the particles of fat and eventually emulsifies whatever fat oil is loose. In that mass, you have part of the microbiome, which has its root in the soil and which has followed you all the way. Because with all the sanitation you can imagine, there is no such thing as 'sterile' meat. Unlike milk, we don't pasteurize the meat. So that life is present.

In the modern world, because the plant needs to be arch-sanitized, you cannot rely on the microbiome of the plant to inoculate your meat, which was the reality in the old system, with specific bugs that will act on the mixture that you have here. You put that mixture in a container – a natural casing normally – but it could be an old nylon sock of your wife. It's a container to hold the mass which is permeable to air and water. You first give it the time to equalize – in

other words for the salt to enzymatically penetrate everywhere. It's the same for the nitrate and the sugar. The bugs start activating when you raise the temperature somewhat – not much – to 65 degrees. You do that with external air a little bit warmer into the mass.

Harry Blazer: Is that 65 degrees centigrade?

Francois Vecchio: No, Fahrenheit. So just a warm, comfortable temperature for the bugs to wake up. The good one (bugs) works at low temperature; the bad one tends to have to need higher temperatures. So it's the first way to "favorize" the good one.

The salt handicaps lots of bugs, but does not limit the lacto fermenter – the good bugs. They consume the sugar and turn it into lactic acid. The lactic acid coagulates the colloidal mixture and turns it into a gel. It's a type of reverse mayonnaise; it becomes a gel or a pudding.

At the same time, the bugs consume the extra oxygen of the saltpeter and turn it into nitrite. Saltpeter is a KNO_3 (nitrate), and it becomes KNO_2 (nitrite). Saltpeter is a common salt that we consume widely because it's the fertilizer on which the plant lives. We inoculate the salami at 300 parts per million of nitrate (.03%). Your salad is likely to have two to three times that level of nitrate. You have seen veggies with 1,000 parts per million of the nitrate. So we can perfectly deal with that nitrate. It's only when you have unbalance that you can form some nitrosamine in your intestine, or they can be formed when you smoke. There are different ways to do that, but in practice it's not an issue. (There is in fact huge variations in the amount of nitrates that can be found within different samples of the same vegetable. This suggests it is related to an environmental factor, specifically to agricultural practices and the amount of nitrate rich fertilizers that are used, in particular synthetic fertilizers. Using the typical "pink salt" recommended by USDA that contains a fair amount of Sodium Nitrite and a fast industrial fermentation, you end up with 50 to 75 ppm of nitrite in the finished product. Using Potassium Nitrate and the natural fermentation process, you end up with trace amounts of nitrites in the finished product.)

Then the nitrite is a much more active chemical, which specifically kills the botulism. The botulism is eliminated. It used to be a factor with sausage.

Sausage with no nitrates that was kept humid and warm for too long could generate botulism. The salami that acidifies already prevents it because the acid eliminates the capacity of the botulus to produce the toxin.

So you have that reduction into nitrite. The nitrite plays a role. The nitrite disappears because it continues to reduce into nitrous oxide, and the nitrous oxide combines with the myoglobin, which is designed by nature to combine with oxygen and reject the CO_2. so it fixes the NO (nitrous oxide) thinking it's oxygen, and it becomes that bright, living muscle color which is going to stay and has been for millennium the signature of good cured meat – so much so that instinctively today people don't buy a green-looking salami. It's impossible to sell. They don't know why, but they don't buy it.

So how do they know? That is another theme of reflection, but let's slide on that.

So you have that curing – achieved by the red color. You have the formation of lactic acid. You have on top of that the release of water because the protein are chemically bound to twice their volume of water or three times their volume of water. The salt releases part of that water, and that is why that phase of the production of the salami is called 'dripping'.

The room in which you warm them is saturated with humidity. Those guys sweat the water like crazy. With the advantage that you reduce the water activity within the salami, you slow down and affect again that microbial life.

On top of it, because it's not the end of it, those same bugs – not all of them, but some– through their enzymatic activity, create natural antioxidants. So there is a self-preserving process going on. You know that microbes have been known to rot everything. In this case, the microbes protect their environment. Amazing, isn't it?

Then you continue the process with progressively less and less water. Eventually you will eliminate one-third of your total weight, but because your total weight contains one-third of fat – which basically contains no water – it means that the protein phase in your salami shrinks by 50%. So you concentrate your protein by 50%. What you have removed is water.

So the full nutrition value is there, and it makes it even richer. Because it is acidified and because during aging there is also a hydrolysis that happens where enzymes split the protein and split the fat and make them more digestible, and the split protein and the split fat are often times aromatic compounds. It could even go so far that when the system goes out of bounds, the aromatic becomes free ammonia – like an old cheese. The breakdown of protein leads there.

So the art is to keep the salami when it's reaching the state where the bacteria life is still present but reconditioned into favorable microbes for our own digestion. In other words, the salami is potentially the best probiotic you can eat – much more rich than yoghurt. Yoghurt is pasteurized, so you have only three or four bugs which are good for you, but it's just a few. In salami you have probably 15 or 20 different bugs, and probably a lot more, including possibly still one or two surviving pathogen which – during the process – most of them have lost their virulence so they are not able to really start a disease, but they are active enough to make your immune system react.

If you are healthy, salami will never get you sick. I speak of experience. I've been eating raw paste, raw salami, young salami for all my life, and I cannot remember the salami triggering anything in me other than pleasure.

So at the stage where it's still alive – where it's still moist and young – you have already a lot of flavor. The salami is addictive in the sense that it is so pleasant to eat that with each slice you eat, you want a second slice.

Unfortunately, because of regulation and because of the absolute fear of bugs which rule USDA, salami in America cannot be brought to the consumer until it is so dry that everything in the salami is dead. So you are forced to eat a product, which is I would say stale. It has characteristics, it is edible, and usually it demands to have some bread and wine to mellow it and swallow it, but if you could eat salami two weeks before you get it in the store, you would be amazed.

It's like eating a delicate mozzarella compared to an aged provolone. Mozzarella you could eat large quantities, and it's still more or less active; it's going to do you enormous good. Your stomach is never going to be upset by that young thing, while the aged, dry, sharp aged meat or cheese can possibly make it hard to sleep because your stomach is grumbling.

Harry Blazer: When you look on the ingredient label of a lot of salamis, it has on there, "lactic acid and culture". So are they basically adding that to speed up the process?

Francois Vecchio: What I described is the traditional, natural, "life harmonious" process – if I can express it this way. But again science understanding the reduction, instead of putting the saltpeter in and giving it the time for bugs to do it, they put in nitrite, and what takes three or four days becomes instant. Instant is money. It was critical with bacon because bacon used to be cured with regular salt and saltpeter, and it took at least one week to cure. No added water. Now, you pump bacon with salt, water and nitrite, and bacon is done overnight. That is why your bacon in the pan first boils, to purge all that water, then eventually crisps. You have no more microbial life. If you abuse the nitrite, you get poisoned.

What I described is the traditional, natural, "life harmonious" process – if I can express it this way.

It happened when the chemical process was discovered and the industry started to use the shortcut. So there is an ancient scare that dates back to the 1950's when that was developed where the quantity of nitrite use was so high that you were poisoning people. So the USDA intervened and changed the rule and limited the quantity of nitrite that you can use. But it is still an unnatural process.
Worse than that, a procedure was started by Whole Foods, which based their business philosophy on a big word 'natural', and they decided that a number of ingredients were to be eliminated, amongst which was nitrate.

The problem is when you make cured charcuterie without nitrate, it doesn't cure, it doesn't take that red color which is critical, it doesn't develop a specific aroma, the protein are not modified by the chemistry of the whole thing, and you get products which are very blah, perishable and usually have to be loaded with spice to be consumable.

Whole Foods was notorious in the initial time for having a very sloppy charcuterie department because everything was greenish, pale and tasted bad.

Then somebody had a very bright idea, "Hey, but we can dehydrate the juice of celery," which contains at 99% liquid up to 1,000 parts per million of nitrate. So if you remove three-quarters of that water, your percentage of nitrate in the juice jumps up and becomes practically a natural nitrate. Celery juice can be labeled on the product as 'spice'.

So the game was started that way. I was involved with Whole Foods at the time because I demonstrated to them that the salami that I was making had basically no nitrate, no nitrite left in the finished product because, as I explained, it gets reduced and consumed (by the good bugs) but they said, "We don't care. You have it on the label."

So they were not concerned about the product health; they were playing games on words, and they had scared people about nitrate. So they had put themselves in a corner. They very quickly took on the celery juice added because it had no nitrate on the label. Initially nobody was controlling the quantity of nitrate added because 'celery juice' was going under the radar. It took the USDA about ten years to realize and start intervening.

Now you have, "No nitrates added except those naturally occurring in celery juice." That is what you find on the label of Whole Foods today.

So they had created a category that was helping them commercially but really bullshitting the customer contrary to their ethics, which was supposed to be natural and healthy.

Harry Blazer: So what does an optimal ingredient label for salami look like? What does it have on it?

Francois Vecchio: Pork, salt, and in order of magnitude: pork, salt, wine, sugar, garlic, if you want to mention it specially, black pepper, and saltpeter, but you cannot use the name "saltpeter" because it's not scientific. You have to put 'KNO_3' - potassium nitrate. A lot of people curb the potassium nitrate and go directly with the nitrite. I've made a zillion experiments, and even the sodium nitrate doesn't give as much flavor and roundness as the potassium.

My explanation – which is highly scientific – intuitive scientific one– is that the bugs love the potassium. That little bit of potassium changes the whole

balance. But it also takes enormous skill and attention because all along the process selection of quality meat and quality fat, control of temperature, mastering of the process of mixing – which is something simple, but if you overmix, you smear the paste and if you undermix, it doesn't cohere. The stuffing is delicate also, and then it's the resting and the fermenting. How do you kick the fermentation? How do you modulate it removing water? It demands a lot of finesse and capacity to feel what the product needs.

Even sight, even smell. When you have experience you look, you see it has cured, you smell - you start smelling the acidification, etc. - you know it's going right. You touch it and you know it needs air or it needs rest. Then I didn't mention it, but through the process you also grow molds on the surface. Again, Americans' sense of cleanness and aesthetics selected a white mold which has no taste. There is the old way with natural molds that are green, blueish, yellowish. They end up as a gray coat when they are mature and removed.

All of these molds also help with the transit of water. They buffer the pH drop into a more pleasant flavor level. If it's too tangy, it's not good. It sends enzymes in the meat to help hydrolyze and the allotment of flavor.

The number of factors that interplay is of the order of the chef d'orchestre – the master directing a symphony – where you have the horns, you have the strings, you have the wind instruments, and you have to play everything in harmony. That is where – and I insist on it in the book all along, and people get it – making salami is a school of mastery because you can rationalize it. You can write down the reason why, etc. Keeping it all in balance is where humans excel because you can actually play the symphony; you can direct the whole thing.

Harry Blazer: What is the range of age for good salami? It can be young up to somewhat older, right? What is the range?

Francois Vecchio: It very much depends on the size. Salami can be traditionally stuffed into pork middle, which is casing which has roughly one inch in diameter when green that will shrink to three-quarters of an inch or less dry (when mature). These are edible the second week. They are very good, according to what I was describing, after two weeks. The USDA wants three weeks before releasing it. At three weeks, they are still very good. But the

release at three weeks goes to the distributor in one week, stays at the distributor one or two weeks, goes to the store to fill the back-up in the back of the fridge for one more week, and you eat it in the store when it is four or five weeks old (often more). It is basically dead.

So when you get such a very dry, dead salami, I have a recipe for you. You put it under the faucet to soften the casing so that you can peal the casing because the dry casing is very difficult to remove. So you do that. Then you mop it dry, you put it into a Ziploc bag, pour a cup of wine in it, close your Ziploc, and forget it for one week in your fridge, and you revive it as something new and different - a wine-softened and flavored salami. It is very good. And you can do that with any old meat that becomes too hard to cut.

Harry Blazer: So a thicker salami you would eat later?

Francois Vecchio: For a thicker salami, you can go to the usual commercial caliber that we call in millimeters '75'. They are very popular. That is a salami that takes about a month to be released. Then you get into the very big casing like the beef bung, which can be 120 millimeters up to 150 millimeters. Those can mature and be released, I would say, in three months - but depending on the quality of the meat, the quality of the ingredients and the quality of the room where you hold them.

I've seen finocchiona or sopressata aged six months or more being absolutely delicious (because of the proper enzymatic action). It is like a bottle of wine. But it's not every salami that will age well. It's the same reason fundamentally, the composition; some do work very well.

Harry Blazer: So it seems like for the most part, we are eating salami that are a lot older than they should be when we're consuming them.

Francois Vecchio: The American system leads you to eat most of the salami which, are just wrapped in paper - you have many brands nowadays in every supermarket - I would say that 90% of them, unless you are lucky to get them just when they come out of the box – are stale.

Some people who are aware of that, produce the salami in a casing which is easy to peel, and when it gets right past the *muster point* for USDA for release,

they peal the casing, cut it into chubs, and vacuum pack it. By vacuum packing you stop the excess drying. You might retrigger, over time, an excess acidification. It depends on the hygiene of the processing. But then you have a product that you will find, like the sliced, vacuum-packed salami, much better in terms of physical structure, but then it has the defect that once it is stabilized that way, it is sold (prepackaged) with a barcode. So you put on it an expiration date that makes sure that the retailer never loses a piece. So there you are guaranteed to eat a texturally good salami, but it's stale as (I have) defined; the flavor has changed. It's not much better.

The very good salami is salami that is handled by the professional, presented at the right stage, and consumed within the right delay (timeframe).

Part 3: The Philosophy of Food

Harry Blazer: We are out on the porch with some river noise in the background. We have changed venue.

There is quite a big difference between the traditional artisan way (and the industrial way) of, first of all, the genetics of the animal, second of all how it is raised, and then thirdly how it is processed, and it goes on and on right through the whole supply chain.

So let's talk about the animal itself: The modern pig versus the traditional pig that you would want for the making of these fine delicatessen products.

Francois Vecchio: That can be a rather long story, or it could be a very short story.

Harry Blazer: Try both.

Francois Vecchio: Look where we are at your place. We are into nature – completely immersed. The sun is shining, and when you look at the distance and the mountains, you can even get the sense of something that I would call 'all-encompassing'. All-encompassingness of life. Anything you look at – the light, the air, the clouds, the mountains – are alive.

It's beyond us. We are part of it. Then as individuals, in our illusion of mastering that life, using the intelligence that we have got, we turn the whole illusory mastery of that life into the very limited goal – the absurd goal – of making money.

Can you feel that is where we go wrong? Making money is accumulating, owning...

Harry Blazer: Controlling.

Francois Vecchio: It's controlling through the process. When you look at life, you know that you are going to live this. What for?

So we construct a family dynasty, and we try to do everything. We were always taught that everything is transient. So fundamentally, the application of intelligence to make money out of animals is an illusion; it's a fundamental mistake. So you manipulate the genetics to turn the animal into more production, but not production of substance. What becomes important is production of bottom line and the balance sheet. That focus is always behind all the modern, industrial processes.

In the process, you ruin quality and you distance your life from that harmony with life, which is quality. What we do industrially is focus on the quantity – the numbers – so eventually we acquire some power and control.

Quality is something which is totally subjective; you cannot put it in numbers. In the case of pork, you have from the wild boar 10,000-15,000 years of selection evolution with a huge change, from what I read, in the 18th century when the Asian pork breeds were known by the travelers to the Far East. They brought back those fatty, plump pigs and changed the pork that was mostly still in the spirit of the wild hog a scavenger. They were running loose and they were just scavenging whatever they could to survive.

The best pigs were in an area where nature provided acorns and chestnuts in the fall and you could get some better pigs in the winter, on the farm in particular, where you would have that tradition of slaughtering the pig in the winter. You would do the curing, salting, or whatever you can so you could have a provision of meat lasting throughout the summer.

With the crossing with the Oriental breed, were generated most of the butcher hogs, they are the colored ones, but they are the ones that put on fat. Before it was very difficult to have a fat pig. I was not there; that was what I read.

So this ancient breed is obviously coming back. They offer a level of variety in terms of quality, but I would say that I'm not a fan of *breed* per se. You have fads in America. Everything turns into a fad. Thirty years ago, one fad that I can remember because I saw it was the fad for ostrich. Ostrich meat at that time was going to be the next turkey. Then it disappeared.

I make a parallel with that fad with the current fad for the Mangalitsa. Mangalitsa is a wooly pig originally from Hungary, which currently has a huge

audience. As a salumiere or as a charcutier, I don't care much for them because they put on too much fat and the fat is oily. The quality of meat apparently is good. I don't have a lot of experience with it. The little I was in touch with the Mangalitsa was a disaster for salami or products of that kind.

What I respect and what I see as the very important criteria – and it's true for pork, but it's also true for basically any butcher animal – is the care that you give the animal; it's the feed that you give the animal; it's the time you allow the animal to live and mature, which makes the quality. It's absolutely true in pork and again, in any other breed from the butcher's standpoint.

But often the grass-fed beef is not even fully balanced because it lacks the layer of butter on the bread to be perfect.

This morning I was mentioning that in Switzerland there were very well-cared for cows. We had excellent beef which was six or seven years old, while here the creed is that you need to eat "feed-lot" cattle after one-year-old, ones raised the old-fashioned way on grass then feed at two years, and grass-fed beef after three years. But often the grass-fed beef is not even fully balanced because it lacks the layer of butter on the bread to be perfect. A little feed for a finish is doing good.

But we tend to stick to a concept to believe. So a brand – and for that matter, the name of a breed – in our mind is easier to grasp than to comprehend all the care and all of the complex life treatment of the animal which really makes quality.

The Italian culture is really focused on quality - qualità della vita. It's in the pulse of Italian to focus on quality. They don't care for government. 'Governo me ne frego'. You have that attitude. They care for love, they care for family, they care for good food, and based on that fundamental they developed in the common market the designation of origin (DOP). * And basically every group of traditional producers in a geographical area, get the protection for their product. The product gets defined in what they call 'disciplinare', which is the description for the product – which is not imposed by the government. It is sanctioned by the government, but it is imposed by the fraternity of producers who aim for a certain standard at a certain level of quality.

Those disciplinare, when it comes to meat products, all include how to breed and feed and keep the animals that eventually will become (that product). It also specifies how to slaughter and how to butcher. So it integrates the product from the farm to the production.

So there is an awareness that the quality of the animal is essential for the quality of the product. Italians, for most of their classic product such as prosciutto, coppa, salami, in all of the regions, specify maiale nazionale, the national pig, which could be in their case different breeds, but mostly the Large White. They specify an age of 10-15 months for a mature animal which has been fed the prescribed feed, mostly natural stuff. They eliminate all the hormones and all the chemical boosters of the modern science. But it is a mature animal. Maturity is a very important factor because over age the meat evolves and gets more concentrated, has more body and it yields a better product.

From my experience in Switzerland, we were slaughtering the standard Swiss pig. It was mostly either the Large White or the Landrace. They are mostly all-white pigs, so they had already been selected as more productive. They were overall better pigs than the many I've seen in the Midwest – in Iowa in particular – in the sense that they were fed barley and whey. Because the pigs were not industrially produced. They were a byproduct of the cheese industry.

In Switzerland the cheese industry was fragmental. Every valley, every village has a cheesemaker, and every cheesemaker besides the cheese plant has a pigsty with 20-50 pigs to use the whey. So barley and whey and the care at the level of 20-40 pigs, which is a small number of pigs, getting attention by an owner who cares for his pigs produces something very good.

In Iowa, having had the chance to work with Niman Ranch, I got to know Paul Willis and other people doing a similar approach. I met Kelly Biensen and different guys who reacted to the industrialization. They tended to revive specific breeds. Kelly Biensen was a kind of a 50/50 Berkshire, which is a very good pig. Paul Willis is not even that specific; he promotes the farmer's mix, which is basically everything of color – Berkshire, Hampshire, Duroc, Spotted pigs, whatever. You have what was important, to keep heterogenesis - the mixing of breeds - to get vitality, and doing it smart so that you get enough piglets so that the fertility is maintained, because it's a key for survival of the job.

Then the American style at the center is corn and soy. Pigs on the farm probably run and have more exercise by nature because they circulate as they move. So most of the pigs in a barn – the industrial pigs are in compacted, contained space – hardly move. They get I would say 'crazy' - because when you enter those industrial situations, all of the pigs get panicky and start screaming. You see them biting each other. Usually the smell is awful. The conditions are absolutely unnatural.

Instead, the approach of Niman Ranch and Paul Willis was to keep as natural of a situation as possible, letting the sow farrow by themselves, creating their nest. They just provide a hut but no containment. Then the sow educates their piglets naturally in the fields. They circulate and forage and root and play. You get animals which are much more peaceful. You could say friendly. They behave nearly like pet animals instead of the crazy, lunatic bunch that you have in the industry. Plus it smells good, and it's blooming amongst flowers. They eat bugs, they eat roots - they live.

The other ones, I can't even describe it; it's horrible.

So quality starts there. Those pigs who have more motion and that have a little bit more aged, yield a better product. So if I keep looking at America, the 'other white meat' which the industry produces is too young, too watery, and the obsession we had for a while against the fat has tended to get a pork which is too lean and unbalanced. It's inedible.

If you pump water into it and cook it, you get edible bacon and edible ham, but if you take a chop and put it in the pan, first you nearly boil it because it exudes water. When it starts cooking, it's turned into compact straw; it's very dry. It is not tasty.

People tell you, "Hey, it's lean. It's protein. It's nutritious. It's supposed to be better for you."

This is fiction. It's a construction of marketing. It's not reality. The reality is that pork chops with a layer of fat around it that is at least a quarter-inch, or even better with a half-inch, that is mature and not white, it's pink and possibly even red in the case of Berkshires. You have more color. You put it in a hot pan, it browns. It sizzles. It doesn't boil first. If you eat it still pink in the meat, it is

juicy and delicious.

So quality depends essentially on the care that you give to the life of the animal and that includes an emotional life for them. That's where I go maybe too far. But one experience that marked me was to realize, when I was a young butcher in Switzerland, that if you were getting an animal – a cow or a heifer – from a farmer who was talking to his animal in the barn and was gentle, keeping them very clean, keeping them happy, he was caring for the animal, versus the animal from a farmer who was kicking them with the fork when he was removing the manure in the stall and yelling all the time, one was good and the other one was less good.

Same country, the same breed, and probably the same feed because the source for the feed was next to each other, but that care aspect translates into sensory aspect. When you tasted that meat, you can feel the difference. There again, you can rationalize it, or you can experience it. So you have always in the human tendency to symbolize, to 'mentalize', to document and measure quantitatively, or you have life at work, which goes through the feeling, the intuition, the senses. That is what I have learned in this life. What counts is the real life. It's not the story that we build around it.

Quite a long story to talk about quality of pork, eh!

Harry Blazer: Fantastic! Let's talk about butchering. How is modern technique versus what you grew up learning, how is it different?

Francois Vecchio: For me it's exactly the same story. It's the same story. America today is industrialization to the max. It's a monopolistic structure where you get down for a continent for a population of hundreds of millions of people to three or four corporations deciding on how to breed, to keep, to slaughter, to butcher, to package, and to retail your meat and controlling a huge fraction – maybe 80% if not more – of what Americans eat.

Harry Blazer: And they're all basically using the same techniques, right?

Francois Vecchio: Yes. They are all doing the same thing. They reach a point where, yes, they compete, but they have allocated territories. They have histories of manipulating the market amongst themselves. They live practically in

cahoots with the distribution network, which is also highly concentrated if not monopolistic. USDA, which controls the hygiene of the product and is supposed to be protecting the public health as a function or a service of the Department of Agriculture. It so happens that the boss of the Department of Agriculture oftentimes comes from those big corporations. They are the ones who financed the election of the politicians. They have their lawyers and lobbyists in Washington to make sure that rules and regulations are in harmony with their own need, which they can resume while keeping Wall Street happy (they can continue to do business as usual, which is not in the best interest of the environment or the consumer, so they can maintain their bottom line). That's what we are.

So these have produced an abusive manipulation of the genetics of the pork. The pork handled at a very high volume in an entity that you can mechanize with the help of the feed industry to the max, and requiring very unskilled manpower to clean - turn the switch on, verify a few things. There is no or very little care for what you do. It's all done to be rationalized to be economical, to be super-productive. The baseline is productivity.

A slaughterhouse is the very same thing. If you visit a slaughterhouse in America, even today when we talk so much about immigration and foreign manpower, I visited many slaughterhouses in the Midwest, and it was all immigrant labor. It's the cheapest labor possible. De-skilled labor because everything is done high-speed, high frequency, high volume. The jobs are broken down into one motion or two motions (tasks). It's very simple so that you can hire any guy. When exhausted, you replace them. That's how you produce.

It generates a lot of spoilage because lack of skill implies less yield. The factor is speed. Speed and no skill. Typically the carcass of pork has been cut into five primal cuts, wrapped and gone to the trade. If there is further trimming, it's very brutal, generating a lot of (waste) trimmings, leaving a lot of meat for instance on the bone. But it's "okay" because those (waste) trimmings go into dog food or go to the feed manufacturer to make feed, which is then recycled if not in the same species then another. It goes from pork to chicken to whatever. That's how it functions at the slaughterhouse.

There is no skill and extreme complexity caused by USDA regulations. So for

two or three working on the line producing, you probably have one or two guys measuring, gauging, controlling, writing information on paper. That's how the job evolves.

No skill, no deep connection to the substance. Everything is geared to the bottom line. You find the same thing in the plants that process red meat, and you find the same thing in the plants that grind meat for hamburger. It's everywhere. Retail tends to be the same thing.

You used to have skilled people to care for meat products behind the counter. More and more things come in "plastified" and self-service, supposedly for convenience. Just Stuff! It has an impact on society because you have the people in control – the few in control; you have at the top the phenomenon of people who can maximize the value for Wall Street getting extreme over reward, and at the base you have an increase of people who get part-time jobs or even a full-time job but at minimum wage or hardly above. So you have a kind of "proletarization" (creation of a proletariat class) going with maximization (maximizing the benefits of the controllers).

To survive in the system and to have a common good life, you have to have the brain and the technicality, meaning that you have to go to university to get higher education and to be functioning at the control level or the decision level. You have that discrepancy, and nothing in the middle.

With tradition, the focus by necessity also has to include profit/income/survival, but the major accent is not the money for the sake of the money; it's to produce and valorize a skill, which implies an intimate relationship with the product. So you have the farmer who really cares for his animal and understands, shares the life of the soil. They have that kind of reaction of misery and distress when the market commands to put GMO and (synthetic) chemistry on the soil. They know it is wrong, but, "What else? I have to make a living."

Then you have the small guy who can participate in the revival of the ancient structure, which is incurred in the care and in the connection to nature in 'living with life'.

Harry Blazer: Nurturing and participating.

Francois Vecchio: Nurturing is a good term. You have that intimate connection with the function of life. So you respect the soil, you respect the animal. When the animal is mature and has been happy, you take the decision to sacrifice and slaughter. At the slaughterhouse you have people who respect the animal, take the time to handle them properly. And it so happens that the animals, which are happy, are easy to handle. The lunatics that come from the industry are very difficult to move around and to handle. And you have the necessity of a much higher level of skill.

It's the difference between the minimum wage or the lowest wage labor just moving around *stuff*, unable to care because of the volume and the speed and the noise of the environment, or the processing in a more nurturing and life-respecting situation.

Harry Blazer: More life-affirming.

Francois Vecchio: This individual usually gets more respect for himself. They are a different character. Socially they are a very different individual. True at the slaughterhouse, true when you butcher. Instead of cutting with a band saw, you use a knife so you need to have more skill. You need to have a complete knowledge of the anatomy. You need to have an awareness of the quality of the animal. Depending on what you connect to, you are going to work it one way or another way.

One animal is going to be used for meat consumption – fresh meat – and the other one is going to be exploited for sausage or curing. Depending on the nutrition and depending on the quality of the animal, it's going to be proper to make fresh sausage or rather to a make fermented and aged product. All these skills develop over a long time of attention of connection to the product - and make the life of the operator, the life of the individual. Balanced! Harmonious! It's not about going to the job just to get the paycheck; he is valorizing his mind. It's a very different life.

Societies that include these kinds of characters, I think, are more balanced, are more harmonious, and are more respectful and in tune with life than what the excessive industrialization has done to us today. The problem is that this killing of society has gone so far that we don't even realize that there is value in training quality professionals in the food business. We don't have any form of

schooling, any form of apprenticeship, or any systems supporting the formation of these kind of people.

It can be said to be obsolete and unproductive because it leads to a cost of the goods which is not competitive in the modern vision. It's not competitive if you don't include the aspect of quality.

Now put quality in the equation, and suddenly you can connect today with feeding America. I mean, if you look at the gross national profit, I think the percentage of it going to food is about 10%. It's one of the lowest in the world. Europeans easily spend 15-20%. The Italians spend 20% of gross national product on food. But we spend in America 20% on health while most of the other nations spend less in health.

So in America it's easy to pose the equation: More money on food, less in medical maintenance and in health maintenance. So if you put quality in the equation, you pay more for your food, you're healthier, you spend less for your maintenance, you are more balanced, probably happier, and more in tune with nature. More radiant!

When your only connection to food is calories put in - it's energy to maintain life - you eat hamburgers and you drink soda and soft drinks and you eat pizza, and you need an awful lot of hot spice to get excited. Or you eat less but better. You pay more per pound (but get more satisfaction, nutrition and joy from what you eat – and in turn can eat less). In practice, by reintroducing into the economy value for quality, paying the professional - the specialist more - you have a much better balanced economy at the end.

*DOP is short for Denominazione di Origine Protetta (literally "Protected Designation of Origin"). As the name suggests, this certification ensures that products are locally grown and packaged. And it makes a promise to the consumer: It's a guarantee that the food was made by local farmers and artisans, using traditional methods. In fact, by law, only DOP products like balsamic vinegar can carry the word "traditional" on their labels, because they adhere to local traditions.
Italian specialties get DOP recognition by following a strict set of guidelines: Every step, from production to packaging, is regulated. Of course, not all local Italian specialities are recognized as DOP. Even more confusing, though, you have to always look for the DOP label to ensure the product is DOP. For example, mozzarella di bufala (buffalo mozzarella) is a DOP product. But only certain brands carry the seal. Other types of mozzarella di bufala, therefore, aren't necessarily made in the traditional way, with the traditional ingredients; only the DOP varieties are.

Episode 4: Philosophy of Life

Harry Blazer: So we've come inside. What I would like to do is take a little bit of a detour for a minute because you have some very interesting philosophies about life. I want to ask you a couple of questions and see if I can get you to repeat some of the marvelous things that you've said.

You mentioned that all we can really do as human beings is play a note, and that that note may resonate and may harmonize with people, but that is the best that we can do.

Also, humanity is an experiment. When you take a look at it in terms of the much greater universe, there is life itself which is greater than humanity. Maybe you can expound on those two things a little bit.

Francois Vecchio: Yes. That is a simple task. Maybe to make a parallel with what we seem to understand, modern physics tries to explain the nature of the universe, and they come to the paradox that matter comes out of nothing. So they use the term 'energy' and 'field of energy'.

I like the word 'field' in that perspective because the 'field' in Latin contains everything. So this being said, when you come to humanity, all of the creation, all of the construct of humanity, the building of systems comes from 'inspiration'. The scientists who progress have inspiration. The great philosophers have vision.

You realize that contrary to what we think that we construct, A+B=C and we add blocks to the construction, which we probably are educated to think, or it is the way that lots of people perceive it, actually the real creative movement is the reverse. You have field impacting the substance and creating a reaction and taking forms, as a way of speaking.

If you look at what humanity is in the sense of humanity creating, progressing, inventing, developing, I see humanity as a sort of instrument expressing not very clearly and not very smartly a much larger field of energy – essentially the essence of life. That's the only way that I can describe it. It's a discussion that started with the first capacity to talk, and it continues today, and it is going to

very clearly and not very smartly a much larger field of energy – essentially the essence of life. That's the only way that I can describe it. It's a discussion that started with the first capacity to talk, and it continues today, and it is going to go on forever.

This life has shown me that what really goes forward, what really blooms, what really responds in the material world is not the fruit of reflection – and reflection is a reflection of what? I mean, it's self-reflection. It's the loop that we create in our brain adjusting what we know – those images and memories that we assemble one way and another way when we reflect. But what it is really creating is anchored and a sort of intuition connection that we all have with what I call the larger field – that ultimate level. It's where the animus is. In the human experience, you probably had that, too. We all have it – those instants and that awareness where we know before we can explain it. That tells you a lot. We are connected to something smarter and larger; we are not just perfectly connected. We expect *that* something to take material form because that's where we are; that's why we build our body.

As a body, we are transient. Life continues beyond us. It was there before us, and it will be there after us. We are just one element of the whole game. So when we egoistically want to be the master of the game, we get into a very, very disturbing illusion.

Harry Blazer: So part of that choice right now that I think we are facing is between what I'm calling 'the synthetic life' versus the 'non-synthetic life'.

You have on the front cover of *Forbes Magazine* the new CEO of Google saying that they are going to transform all devices, including us, including you. They are going to transform humans.

So there is this idea that basically we know better than this natural field, that all of mind is encompassed in brain, and basically between robotics, AI, and a few other disciplines, like genetics and so on, we will be able to transcend the limitations that humans have and go beyond what we could even imagine today.

What is your reaction to that?

Francois Vecchio: A long time ago, on the step that we were given fire,

imagine those semi-apes dealing with fire for good or for bad. They had full responsibility, and they had to bear the full consequence of what they were given. Then we were given the metals, we were given electricity, we were given electronics, and we are given artificial intelligence. It's the same game. It can destroy, or it can construct.

Everything that we have developed as humanity has become arms (armaments) or tools; it's our choice. So on what do you base the choice?

Big corporations are motivated by power, by the money - that instrument that becomes a goal that is symptomatic of our time. We struggle trying to reactivate craft – that had perfected balance/harmony without any science of the millennium in the past - and tried to reintegrate those into modern society to balance with the excess of industry, capital, etc.

Why do we do that? Because there is a difference of polarity in the big corporations which are essentially taking and exploiting resources, be it agricultural, mineral, human, or market. The whole game that you educate intentioned young men to handle in business school is to exploit and to take.

Harry Blazer: To harvest.

Francois Vecchio: Harvest. There is the other polarity – the one to create. to give, to construct, to build, which is an outgoing movement - that implies a notion of service. You can even connect it with love. Love is creating. Love life is creation. So if you handle a responsibility in humanity with that polarity and then expect a normal reward because you need to maintain and you need to live and you need to maintain life, it's not that it's a one-way thing that gives only and the other guy will take; it creates a balance, which the industry is not respecting. They unbalance the world. They create pollution, social disorder, crisis of some kind, because they disturb a natural balance.

If you work on a positive, creative polarity, you have a chance over time first to enrich morally human beings that will acquire craft in a positive way rather than going to make a paycheck at the end of the period when they are exploited by the system, you will have a chance to rebalance or give opportunity to the whole system to recreate a larger harmony. I think that is why or how I feel in the core. That is my reason for doing what I do.

It's the evidence of the need in the human corpus for now inputting on the positive polarity. There is too much of the negative.

Harry Blazer: So in a way you see the movement back to artisan foods as a way of reasserting that balance and also kind-of informing the human race about what that balance looks like?

Francois Vecchio: The essence of it is expressing quality and reacquainting our neighborhood or our society, particularly American quality and our American society to quality; because we are completely absorbed in erring on the quantity level – the material. I see it everywhere. Everything has to be a number. Everything has to be measureable. Everything has to be quantified. The ultimate is the return on capital that symbolizes the whole thing and is the pursuit of the big powers in this society.

When you reintroduce quality, you focus on interior - on subjective function.

When you reintroduce quality, you focus on interior - on subjective function. Quality in food and even in things, because equal quality to beauty, equal quality to harmony – these are the only things that you can apprehend sensorily, and sensorily in a very wide sense.

You can imply intuition, you can imply emotion, and you can imply all of the tools that we have as a human being. Quality cannot be defined other than as an abstraction by the computer.

Once you refocus the human on vision, sensitivity, smell, taste, feeling, you evaluate your food in function of how you relate to it and how it affects your body and how your body responds, you can get a totally different connection than when you drink or absorb something because you have been induced to believe in a brand and in the benefit you can expect from that brand, which is strictly a mental reflection. It's kind of a brain masturbation.

Harry Blazer: It's a fabrication.

Francois Vecchio: It's one way to exploit the human identity. When you empower the individual to define quality, you change the people, you change the market, and you have – as a group – the capacity to eventually influence the industry realistically because they will do market research when they see that certain products and certain systems gain market share, and they will react to it. They will have to retune a little bit. So that could be a process that could work if boosted long enough. We are such a tiny, nearly invisible minority today, so we act in principle.

But you put in the system a note, and that will eventually resonate and gain power if it is in tune with the larger field. At that point people say, "Aha!" You have that "Aha"! Suddenly you expand your awareness. For me, that is the way that things really work.

It could go through crisis, it could go through war, it could go through anything. As humanity we have the responsibility of how we use the resource that we are given. I don't think it's the resource that dominates us.

In a sense what you are saying is that artificial intelligence is going to change humanity and possibly enslave humanity. I mean, it's the theme of novels, movies, whatever. I don't think it's the way it works; it's our human reality to experiment and to choose an event to guide the system. The problem is that we don't do it very consciously. We are so caught in our reflection that oftentimes for the individual it takes a kick in the butt to realize how it really works. I certainly get my ration of kicks in the butt!

So these are my elucubrations. But you seem to tune in a little bit to it. You can share the feel of those dynamics which are actually bigger than what we are.

Harry Blazer: I asked you a question: As you look back on your life, would you have done anything differently? You gave me quite an interesting answer which ties in with everything that you've just been talking about.

Francois Vecchio: This question is typical of the way that we think because we believe or we all think or we hope, it's a big hope that drives us that we are masters and we can choose. We <u>are</u> choosing at the level of the ultimate field whether to connect or not. For me that is how it works. If you refuse, you can cultivate your life based on ideology, on credo, on fads, on appetites, on urges

of all kinds, and then have to experience in life what the consequences are because life brings consequence of whatever we decide.

So if I look back, it has been in many ways difficult. I went through a period where I was not a very happy camper. You can ask the "Why me?" question because you see other guys having a different destiny. But at the end, the maturity that you gain, the capacity to encompass, the capacity to understand – and it takes more than understanding – is an active capacity to harmonize.

I'm glad to be where I am! So how could I come to where I am in a different way? You can fantasize that you could have a larger share of this or that. It's irrelevant. It's transient.

I'm 80; I'll fade away. I'll pass over one of these days. Whenever. It's not that I have to hang on to anything here. I don't know how to explain it; it's just the way it is.

Harry Blazer: You've done a good job. So you feel that we're here to learn? Do you think that is one of the primary reasons why we are here?

Francois Vecchio: Humanity has never done anything other than that. We've built a society, we've built empires, we've built machines, we've been gaining powers on progressively more subtle aspects of the material world. For instance, today we have a mastery over electrons conveying information. For me it's a mystery. But from the fire to the clay pot to the metal to the gunpowder to where we are, you were creating. But every creation forces you to learn how to take responsibility and balance it. It's the way it works.

We don't achieve ultimate power; there is no society and no empire and no construction which has lasted forever.

Harry Blazer: One of the things that we have not quite learned yet is how to do these things and live our life without destroying.

Francois Vecchio: You have voices in the world who tell you - like a great spirit like Dalai Lama for instance has an audience. He is extremely respected. Still he fights with the Chinese authority who wants to control the land; they want the stuff. The reality is in the spirit of the whole thing. So why can't we

apply the spirit to resolve our material issues? It's because we're somewhat limited and we have to learn that.

I mean, there is always a potential for solution, for evolution.

Harry Blazer: So somebody would say that you are an advocate of a technology that harvests and that kills. I mean, basically you have to kill an animal to get what you need.

Francois Vecchio: That is such a basic fact of life which for me is a reality that you have to face – is that to support life, you have to be master of death. In other words, you kill everything that supports your life; all of the food was alive until we reaped it to consume it. Our salad doesn't cry, the potato doesn't complain, but you kill the plant – which is a living organism – to feed yourself. When it comes to animals, it gets a little bit more dramatic because the animal has more than just a vegetative life; it has sometimes an emotional presence, it has an identity. You can relate to an animal. Look at the relationship we have with our pets. It's a one world of animal.

They are protected by humanity. They have been selected and handled, so as humanity we took responsibility of those living beings to support our own life. So at least give them a respectful, happy life in harmony with life at whole. Don't do what you do in the factory of pigs or chickens, abusing life to then feed yourself because you absorb that nasty situation that you have created there.

Quality! We were talking about quality before. It starts there. Then it's not for nothing that for millennium, or at least for a lot of time it was the priest who was sacrificing the animal. It was considered a major event in life when you recognize that you kill to maintain life. You spill blood. I mean, you break an egg, and you kill the potential life in the animal. The animal is complete. So you need to deal with that mystery when you accept that. You realize that the whole thing is transient; it's a system that has been created that way. You are endowed with the power and the responsibility of managing it since we take the authority of handling it.

Harry Blazer: There is a saying that the road to hell is paved with the good intentions of progressives. So the progressives would make an argument that

would say that the synthetic folks have a way out. If we can basically construct our food from the basic elements – carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, phosphorus, and so on – which is one of the major goals for the food industry and these big corporations, then we can avoid having to kill anything because we can basically construct our food from the fundamental elements.

Francois Vecchio: Show me.

Harry Blazer: Oh, they will show you. But what would be your answer? That you could never match the vitality of natural food? What would be your answer to that?

For some people, that is the perfect solution: You never have to kill again. We can have synthetic food that can meet all of our nutritional requirements.

Francois Vecchio: What I see is on what I would call the natural way. The process implies the whole life because you don't grow a plant if you don't have microbial insects and worms making the dirt fertile. The plant itself harbors its own microbiome. The animal eats it the same way. So we are an integrated part of that whole game. What's the consequence on the whole level including the fact that all of that proceeds somehow from that field we were touching on before - That governs everything, including the physical from the first manifestation of matter, whatever it is that they name those particles which are in the process of creation.

Now humans, the demiurge, understand through science an aspect of the whole thing at the material level and can synthesize sugar out of oil or CO_2 and hydrogen, can possibly start synthesizing protein, but it gets several orders of magnitude more complex. At this stage you can think – because in thinking you can figure a way that we can do everything if we have the time and the resources, etc., we have no limitation - but duplicating what the field through nature produces to get something equivalent for humanity and creating a human that is totally self-sufficient, for me it is an aberration at the same level as when you say that artificial intelligence is going to take over and we'll be enslaved by the machine.

We can think that way. We can try our capacity of thinking and elaborating and dreaming. That is why we write novels and make movies, etc. It stimulates our

function. But that's why I said, "Show me."

For me, it is obvious at this stage - yeah maybe at some point. I mean, potentially anything is possible. There is no limit somewhere that says, "This is possible. This is not."

It's the part of the mystery to which we are connected.

Harry Blazer: But you seem to be implying that that methodology could never successfully replicate the natural process that is connected with the field.

Francois Vecchio: Practically, in this day and time, definitely no. But I said also that potentially everything is possible. I mean, we climb down from a tree to become humanity today. It took two or three million years. God knows what is going to be going on, plus *time* is also an elastic notion, but we won't go into that.

So in the current level of humanity, humanity has – in my view – to mature and deal to reach full harmony all-encompassing. Currently we are playing with our resource, and we are still at the kids level; we are not yet mature.

Harry Blazer: Tell me about how your approach to using an animal – kind of like the 'whole hog' approach, the 'whole animal' approach – is different than industrial agriculture and industrial processing of that animal. Can you contrast the two approaches?

Francois Vecchio: It leads us back to what I was saying about the responsibility toward the living animal. The industry raises in questionable conditions lots of animals, which have been modified to convert food more efficiently, to adjust to restricted mobility and space and so forth.

The industrial system implies to recycle within the whole chain, and that includes all animals – pork, beef, birds, everything – part of these animals. In other words, we abuse life in a compounded way because we kill to feed further animals that we kill, etc. We have that vision, and we humans take only a fraction of the system.

Harry Blazer: Give me a sense of how much gets put into this 'alternative

use'.

Francois Vecchio: Take a pig – a pig living as the unit. In slaughtering, you eliminate contents of the digestive system. You remove the organs. You remove the blood. You end up with a carcass, which is about 80% of the live weight.

From the 20% that you have removed, real waste is only the content of the intestine, which would be 5-10% because blood is high value. You can make excellent human food in forms of boudin and other forms. The casing can be used and partially eaten as the container for sausages, etc. The organs are all edible and have ways to be consumed. But our industrial system basically saves, at best, the liver, the heart, and even with the heart, most of those ingredients get recycled to feed. through industrial processing, birds and other animals.

Then from the carcass you remove the bones, and it's the same thing: The bones get calcinated for fertilizer or get ground into dog food or other things. They have a usage, but not human alimentation. There are alternatives for that function.

Bones are cooked for stock. Stock is the base of a lot of excellent cooking. So you can revalorize a lot of things. Very little of that is done (in industrial processing).

Then in the case of a pig, you have the tail and you have the feet and you have the snout and the ears. These can be excellent human food if treated properly and cooked properly. They all end up in the dog food or bird feed program (in industrial processing).

So out of the 20% waste, you have another 5-10% that way. The bones represent a good 20%, and you have the skin which is 10-15% of the whole weight of the animal. You can use some of the skin when you leave it around the prosciutto. You can use the skin when you turn it into an emulsion that you add to emulsified sausage to make them juicy. Again, in America, in industrial processing most of the skin goes wasted.

So if you sum, 20 + 25 + another 20, then you end up with 55 or 65, what we really eat as humans is 30-35% of the animal. In the old tradition where the value of the animal in the economy of the time was much higher because it was

survival in a living form, you would sacrifice the pig and basically consume everything except the content of the stomach and the intestines. You would consume everything.

So when I was doing the seminar with those chefs who wanted to learn charcuterie, the goal was to use basically all of the carcass, including – when we could save it – the blood. The problem is that you don't have a HACCP (plan for blood). The USDA doesn't let you take the blood. They consider that a dangerous food, which is crazy, and they dump it. The quantity of blood that goes into the sewer you can't believe.

So out of the carcass we were in one week processing under a different system, basically 35 different products.

Harry Blazer: And using 95% of the animal.

Francois Vecchio: Yes, and using close to 95% - or at least 90% - of the animal.

Now if you don't have that feed to refeed other animals, and if you don't create that kind of continuous movement, economically you have to create your meat out of what the vegetable realms give you. Currently we have completely distorted that. With ruminant-fed chemical urea, roughage, corn – which a cow has never eaten in their natural life – boosted with chemistry, we have completely twisted pork - industrial pork eats feed, which is mostly corn because it is the cheapest source of energy, some soy, but also all these recycled parts of animals. Nobody ever talks about that because it has a kind of unethical, very disturbing aspect.

Harry Blazer: So the bottom line is that if we use more of the animal, it's a lot less animals that you need to be killing.

Francois Vecchio: That is number one. Plus, if you are doing that, you educate people into following their sense, trusting their own sensitivity to recognize quality instead of following the input of merchandising. People are likely to eat better and less and have better health.

Currently it's obvious that America overeats and eats bad stuff because we are

dominated by the convenience, dominated by the branding and the publicity, and we don't even connect with what we eat.

Harry Blazer: It also seems that the food that we eat is probably nutritionally compromised on top of it, so we have to eat more of it.

Francois Vecchio: Maybe. There is a manifest unbalance in the system as it is feeding the people today. Recreating a different balance can only be done if you also input the required human skill. It just happens because (when) you decide to do it. You need a farmer that behaves differently, you need a butcher with a very different mind and different tools and a different rhythm of labor, you need a sausage maker with a totally different skill, different environment, different volume of production. (In this way) you create a change in the human balance.

Currently the industry is de-skilled. Those functions have disappeared. But those fundamental functions which reappear in a parallel world. You have vintners today, which didn't exist 50 years ago. You have cheesemakers today that didn't exist 30 years ago. You have bakers today that didn't exist 10-15 years ago. In the meat, we need to go through the same evolution. Put in the society more of those people with a rewarding skill – rewarding morally and materially with a sense of responsibility – because they are, as we said before, positively tuned. They are creators. They are agents of quality. They are agents of servicing the well-being of humanity in a way, consciously or not. If you produce quality, that is what you do.

So you change the balance of society which today is only industrial production and consumer. Then there is a class of lawyers to keep order, a class of doctors and nurses to fix the disaster. You see things changing - with an impact that value has to follow because the economy remains the economy; the dollars have to circulate. You have to pay for all of the service.

The value of food climbs high. The value of medicine, treatment, fancy stuff decreases. You have a shift in the balance of the circulation of the economy.

MODIFICATIONS

Transcripts are not always verbatim. Modifications are sometimes made to improve clarity, usefulness and readability, while staying true to the original intent

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