



# FIRE WALKS FOREVER BY MY SIDE

BY DORINA PALOMBI AND MICHELE MASSARO  
PHOTOS BY CHRISTIAN BAZZO

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Michele Massaro, the flamboyant knifemaker favored by star chefs, is reputed for his one-layer carbon steel kitchen knives made in the tradition of Maniago, the Italian hub of cutlery and knife-making forges. Crafted in centuries old Antica Forgia and designed in the fashion of Japanese Gyuto, his works are trademarked with black vertical hammer marks. The willow tree behind the forge supplies the wood for the handles while some are sourced on his fishing and hiking expeditions in the neighboring mountains. This is the story of his transition within the world of art and design to the anvil and steel.*

The wings envelope his back and chest, the long feathers of the tail wrap around his biceps, as if to wrap the body in a primordial gesture from which it is barely impossible to get free. This is the tattoo of a phoenix underneath Michele Massaro's clothes, and this is a story of rebirth, a story that tells of fire, metal, embers, and a distant past, though still unchanged. Death as a surveyor, rebirth as a blacksmith. Death of forgetfulness, rebirth of a centuries-old history.

Let's go back to 2015: Michele Massaro buys an old forge in Maniago, in the Friuli region, and gives life to Antica Forgia Lenarduzzi. He has never thought of becoming a blacksmith, even though he lives in the land of cutlers. But sometimes it happens that life decides for you, not always in the best way, and you must be able to adjust its course as best as you can, just like a phoenix rising from the ashes.

That forge was one of the first where, in the fifteenth century, the weapons for the Republic of Venice were forged. Nicolò, the Earl of Maniago, had asked the Water Magistrate for permission to build a water channel that would feed,

and still feeds, the forge itself. Water for moving machines, fire for melting and forging steel. Today, that craftsmanship is still alive in almost identical gestures and time seems to stand still behind the closed door of the batafer.

It focuses on the play of lights and shadows that surround objects and machinery. It is marked by the ticking of the belt that moves the machines and is defined in their maintenance since ancient times. It is the rhythm of a work dating back six centuries, when fatigue used to mark people's days and there was always something to do: clean the grids, fix the sewer, remove the leaves so as not to block the water flow, put oil on the bearings. And today it is just like in the past, nothing has changed. This is not a kind of job suitable for our modern times, it is something that has to do with care, something more focused on the journey rather than on the destination, characterized by a kind of extended time typical of a simple life. Just like the one lived by Michele Massaro and made up of everyday things that most people are not able to enjoy today.

"It is very hard for me to protect my permission to use the water channel.



I need it for my working activity, it is the beating engine of the entire forge and I often have to face some people who have no respect for it and change its course to irrigate their garden or throw in garbage, thus risking water overflowing with consequent damage to my work. In this difficult situation, it goes without saying, institutions don't give me any support and I even have to face their reluctance to protect me. This involves double work for myself and sometimes I feel frustrated to live in modern times with such widespread carelessness."

And the centrality of the moment, a very important concept in Japanese culture, has been added by the blacksmith to the traditional Maniaghese gestures, equally codified as the Japanese ones. If technique is the starting point, the road has been traced from scratch, taking only what deserved to be brought into modern times and leaving the superfluous behind.

As already told, gestures are the legacy of blacksmiths in the town, and they taught Massaro the perfect way to forge a knife; specialization came later, when he began to dedicate himself to kitchen knives and to learn from the best national and international chefs. The goal was to reach a specific level, to give such a pure shape to the knife so that it could work almost as an autonomous tool: being practical and manageable everyday. There was only one way: by listening, watching the movements, learning the exact way in which a kitchen knife is used by those professionals who know the method inside out.

"When I met Pier Giorgio Parini for the first time, in 2015, he was busy in working at "Osteria del Povero Diavolo"; then, I had the great chance to hold handcrafted Japanese knives, which cannot be found in Italy and which have nothing to do with the industrial production of our country. The O series



was born on that very day (each knife is numbered and accompanied by a certificate of authenticity) and I'm very proud to say that, together with the 1 series, it is handled by Pier Giorgio Parini's hands."

If the starting input was the gaze towards the rising sun and the meticulous Japanese knives, almost flawless in their functionality, the final product is entirely made in Maniago. The brute de forge on each knife is something that goes beyond the beautiful aesthetic contrast between the fineness of the sharp polished blade and the primordiality of raw steel. The mallet blows tell the story of this Friulian village, of past centuries, of dust on fingers, of the work punctuated only by the buckle ticking and moving the wheels of water-powered machines.

Another distinctive feature of this craft object is the blade groove where to

insert the finger, just before the handle. It is essential for a better grip and to perfectly balance the knife. This work requires such care and precision that no more than 6 or 7 knives are made per week and some projects even last one whole year before turning into a range of ad hoc tools. Rationality, cleanliness, simplicity characterize the journey that leads to a great final result: harmony.

Year after year - it's been barely seven since 2015 - collaborations have boasted numerous high-sounding new names, just like the formation of a football team before the World Cup: Pierangelini Sr and Jr, Colagreco, Crippa, Ducasse, Redzepi, Martinez, Ruggieri, Lo Priore, Corelli, Klugmann, Tassa, Cuttaia, Parini, Costardi, Tokuyoshi, Scarello, Pisani and Negrini, Baronetto, Cantafo, together with winemakers such as Gravner and distillers including Capovilla.

What's the next step now? How can an idea turn into a knife?



No pencil sketches, no hints or sketchy plans. The knife takes shape directly in Michele Massaro's mind, after understanding its intended use. The image becomes real in a three-dimensional way, precisely in that place where a craftsman is an artist, where every single detail is a note that comes out of Clapton's guitar and which, due to its own character, is different from Gilmour's: they seem the same note, they are the same note, but the character does make the difference. The same goes for a knife that is no longer such but becomes "Massaro's knife."

The secret lies all there, in the silence of mind that gives space to the gestures learned, obsessions aiming at perfection, delusions of simplicity and essentiality. And right from the mind come all those nuances that make us immediately recognize a knife forged by Michele Massaro, a true combination of polished blades and raw steel pieces. Then, hands move following a precise path traced by specific steps that must

be performed with great attention and care, in order to avoid any error that have nothing to do with imperfection. The former are due to carelessness, the latter to a pre-established will. These may seem just details that are not probably noticed by a distracted eye, but thanks to these details we can clearly and precisely get to know Michele Massaro's essence. Just like Clapton and Gilmour to a keen ear, it's a matter of recognizability.

Just like Dr Jeckyll and Mr Hyde, he lives two different lives, one almost the opposite of the other: he is the blacksmith wearing clothes stained with indelible grease and soot and he is meanwhile the man who wears a tuxedo very comfortably. He is a person without any compromise, who may seem full of arrogance due to great self-confidence, and he is the same person who welcomes you warmly in his forge and cooks food for you over high heat in the same corner where he melts steel to make it workable.



He does the same with the man he is today. He measures the sense of beauty, shapes aesthetic perception and, just like his Gourmeet knife, brings it to essence, simplicity, harmony. If we consider the knife designed for Mauro Colagreco, the work is constantly changing: resulting from minimization, today this knife has been further cleaned of frills, if we can call them. Its line, which was previously smooth and enveloping like a hilly landscape, has become as light as a dragonfly, even cleaner, further enhancing the contrast between the finely polished blade and the handle marked by the mallet blows. These choices have a specific will which is called cause and consequence.

"I often think of Gianni Cossetti's thought, his perception of foraging and the importance of native herbs and essences. He believed that the only way to safeguard and pass on a territory and its flavours was by bringing them into a recipe, making this research functional. I do the same with the handles of my

knives, which are coated with a specific wood that tells the territory, whether it is Friuli or Sicily."

The woods that will become the handles of some knives are the result of research that still talks about time, patience, respect and knowledge. The last two adjectives see Michele walking through the woods around Maniago, a land that he knows very well and which has often been the place of his free time and youth, which he used to spend hunting and fishing in the company of his grandfather. This place is part of himself and he has a deep sense of respect and responsibility towards it, like a modern Nick Adams.

From this sense of responsibility, resulting from the symbiosis between man and nature, comes the choice of the precise time when Massaro cuts the plants for his knives: it is based on the moon phases, a biodynamic calendar that leads him to prefer the waning moon or the winter period to know that

from that cut trunk sprouts will be born in spring. It is the courage of gestures, of kindness that closes the circle of life and allows its rebirth. Then comes instinct, reasoning and the best use of raw material in order not to ruin the path that led here. And right here, Michele Massaro is no longer an artist, he puts on his clothes as a craftsman and starts to perform methodical and cadenced gestures: he is again Hephaestus in his forge, again a friend of fire, which he has learned to handle without getting burned, without burning.

"The difference between an artist and a craftsman is a controversial debate, even in the current food and wine talks, but the craftsman is a performer who carefully repeats specific gestures, though never the same. Here lies the pleasure given by a handcrafted object: it may even be similar to another one, but it will never be the same due to human imperfection. Art, on the other hand, is all about thinking, the upstream reasoning, the story behind

something that can easily be performed subsequently by a third person."

By watching him working, confident and at ease in a very hostile place, cold in winter and hot in summer, we may believe that he has done this activity throughout his life, as if this had always been his dream. But that's not the case, he has been able to make the best of a bad situation, throwing himself without hesitation into the burning free, saving himself from the flames, dominating them like a phoenix.

So here he is to preserve that fire, to tame it as primitive men learned to do millions of years ago and to put it at the core of his life: and even today his knives come out of fire, over the same fire that he cooks food for himself and for the guests he welcomes in his forge, life moves around the fire and will then become a story to tell.

Here is the phoenix, finally reborn from the ashes.

