



The legacy of Molteni

An imaginary interview with
Monsieur Joseph Molteni

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**Good morning Monsieur Molteni.
We know very little about your life,
and yet we are very intrigued by it.**

Is it true that your parents were Italian?

Well, my last name gives it away (smiles). Yes, naturally, they were from Lombardy. They embarked on this journey, as did many others, in search of work and stability.

I heard a saying once that you are the most Italian of Italians and the most French of the French...So, where were you born?

I was born in Barzio, Valsassina, in the province of Lecco. I was still known as Giuseppe at the time... Then we moved here and I went by the name Joseph.

Do you remember anything at all about Italy?

Not much. I was still a kid... it was very cold and there was lots of snow... and not much work. So my father decided to come to France.

And you settled in Saint-Uze.

Yes, almost correct... we didn't actually live in the town, but in a house just outside the town center.

Was it a farm?

It was like a farmhouse with a barn next to it, and I remember all kinds of animals roaming around freely and undisturbed: geese, ducks, chickens... I guess it was very much like the farmhouses in the lower Po Valley that I saw many years later.

St-UZE (Drôme). - Place Cen



Childhood

“It has always been a dream of mine. A large kitchen with all kinds of scents, seeing dishes being created in front of me.”





Monsieur Joseph Motteri.

in Saint-Uze

Is that where you spent your childhood?

Yes, I had a great childhood. The kitchen was no doubt the focal point of the house, like a seaport where we spent most of our time when we weren't working in the fields or in the barn...

Can you tell us more about this room?

There was a large wood-burning kitchen range in the middle, which was my mother's kingdom. This is where she had the last say in everything. It's where my great passion began: I enjoyed being around her and I would marvel at her ability to transform, mix, and create.

It has always been a dream of mine. A large kitchen with all kinds of scents, seeing dishes being created in front of me.

Did you eat Italian food?

My mother was as Italian as they come, but she also knew how to put together traditional French dishes. I think she swapped recipes with a handful of friends.

Back then there was a very clear distinction between everyday cooking and the cuisine of great masters and chefs.

The apprenticeship

So this is why you founded your atelier, to recreate that ambience...

Perhaps... Childhood is the most important part of our life that leaves an indelible mark (or is a dream?) for many of us.

And you knew what you were doing from the get-go?

No, no... I started working at a young age, being dependent on family was not an option. World War I had just come to an end, there were signs everywhere, in people and things. Those were not good times. But then we were hit by another disaster: the terrible Spanish flu epidemic. We all lost someone dear to us.

So you started doing other jobs?

Yes, I worked as a bricklayer at first. My father also used to split his time between the fields and construction. Then I became a foundry technician: 'smelter' was what they would call us.

I was fascinated by this craft, and it was like magic at first. Transforming metals, shaping them and learning secrets to accomplish what we had in mind. A craft that requires strength as well as brains.

This apprenticeship was useful to you...

Yes, I learned many things about metals, how they are combined, how they 'harden', the importance of good technique, but also the importance of creativity to some extent. You see, I didn't have time to study, but I always observed a great deal and learned 'in the field'.

I used to ask and inquire, I always had questions to ask my workmates, the foreman, everyone.

As I think about it now, I may have been a pain in the neck, but I'm grateful to everyone for putting up with me...

Maybe it's because I was so young...

But you learned quickly...

Well, we weren't all dumb, you know. My mother came from a respectable family of merchants and even professors. My father is the reason she left at an early age. She followed him. I sometimes think she had some regrets, but that didn't last long... She had brought with her some leather-bound books from Italy...



Anyway, in those days you had to start working hard right away, you left your family early and then, if you wanted to be a little independent, you had to roll up your sleeves and work up a sweat more than everyone else... There was no time for school or fun...

I'm not sure we really believe that..

Joseph smiles...

Only on Sundays... We occasionally went all the way to Saint Vallier, we walked there of course. There was like an impromptu dance hall. We used to dance on a kind of wooden platform jutting out over the Rhone. We would get carried away dancing and risk ending up in the water. And somebody actually fell into it... It was a great place for us to get together, to get over the shyness we had elsewhere: in church or on the street.

So that is where you met...

Yes. She was richer than all of us, always elegant... I liked her straight away, but I thought she wasn't interested in me. Just think that I pretended I couldn't speak French at first, I spoke a little Italian. She looked at

me in astonishment and smiled at the way I moved. I called her Maddalena and not Madeleine: a little game between us that we kept even for in the years after.

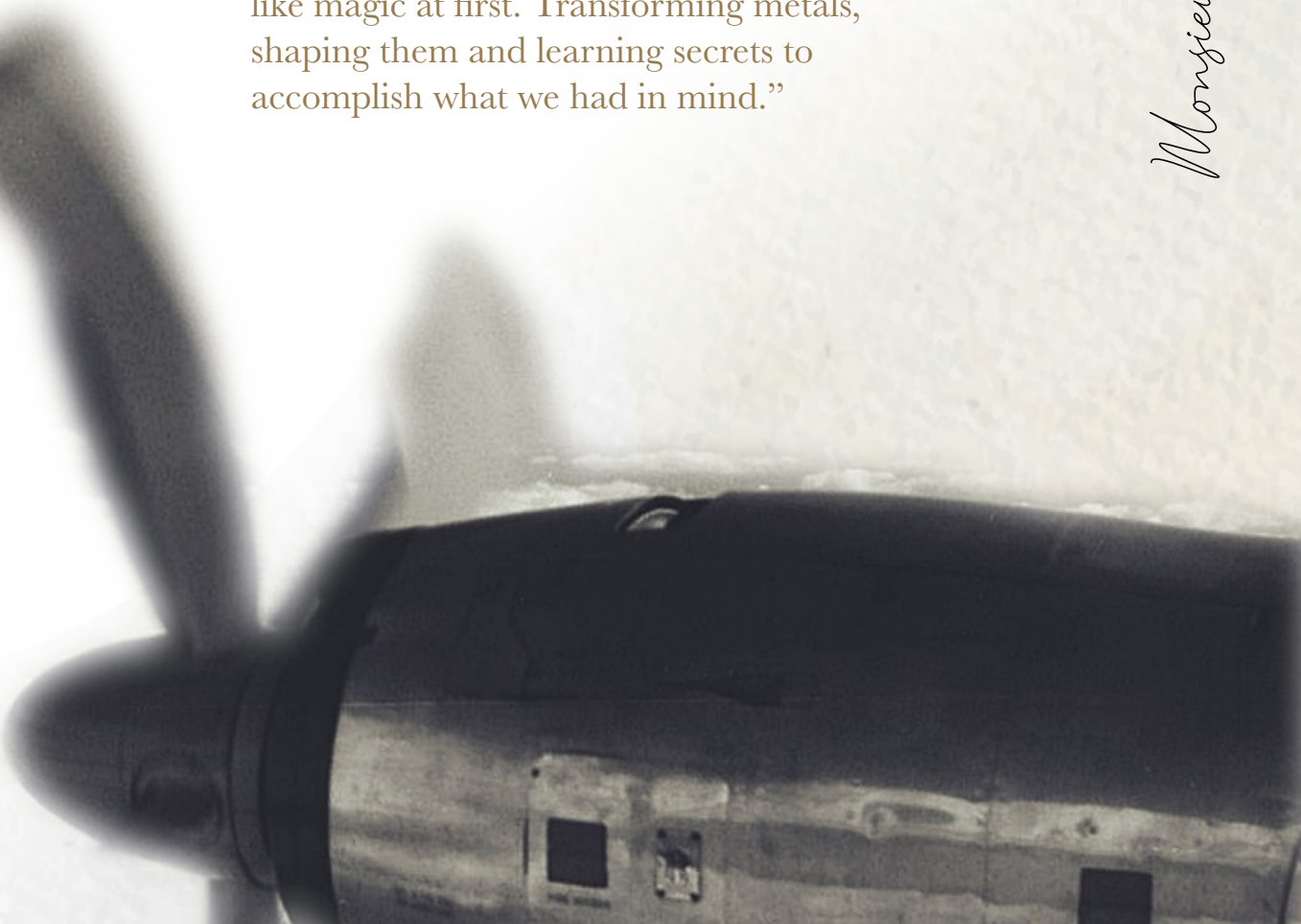
So that is when the turning point started...

Actually, marriage was the turning point. When I got married, I wanted to do something truly special: for me, for my wife, for all the people who used to tell me that I would go far.

In those years there was a new air, for those who wanted to breathe it in. There was enthusiasm, a desire to leave the worst behind: those years already seemed very distant to us young people. We didn't want to look back on the past, even though there were always people with disabilities and destitutes among us, which served as a reminder of what war can do.

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Monsieur Joseph Motteni.



A legend was born

So, now to 1923.

Yes, I soon decided to set up my own business. I thought I had learned more than enough and could bring my own idea, my own company, to life. This is what they call it now, but back then I was thinking more of a workshop. I was 22 years old when I installed my first kitchen.

How was the workshop founded, as you call it?

My father-in-law immediately took a liking to me and helped me a lot. He had a property, a house with adjoining shed. I moved in there and set up Fourneaux Molteni. But it was not until 1937 that the company acquired a distinct identity.

You knew what you were doing.

Yes, I did. I almost instantly knew what my ideal kitchen should be like. And although they are very different now than they were back then, whenever I see a new one come out, I always think of my mother's kitchen. I'm sentimental, you know.

You also opened a foundry.

Oh yes, I used to consider it the beating heart of the business. That's where the difference was made. We didn't want to assemble parts, we wanted to do it all ourselves and have full control over production. I wanted the foundry to be outside of the factory. I used up all my savings to buy a sawmill outside of town and set up the foundry there. You see, with all those fumes and heat, it was best to keep it out of town. I did the same thing for the glazing factory too.

It was not such a common thing, in your days, to worry about the work environment...

I have always cared about the welfare of my workers. We all knew each other, called each other by name.

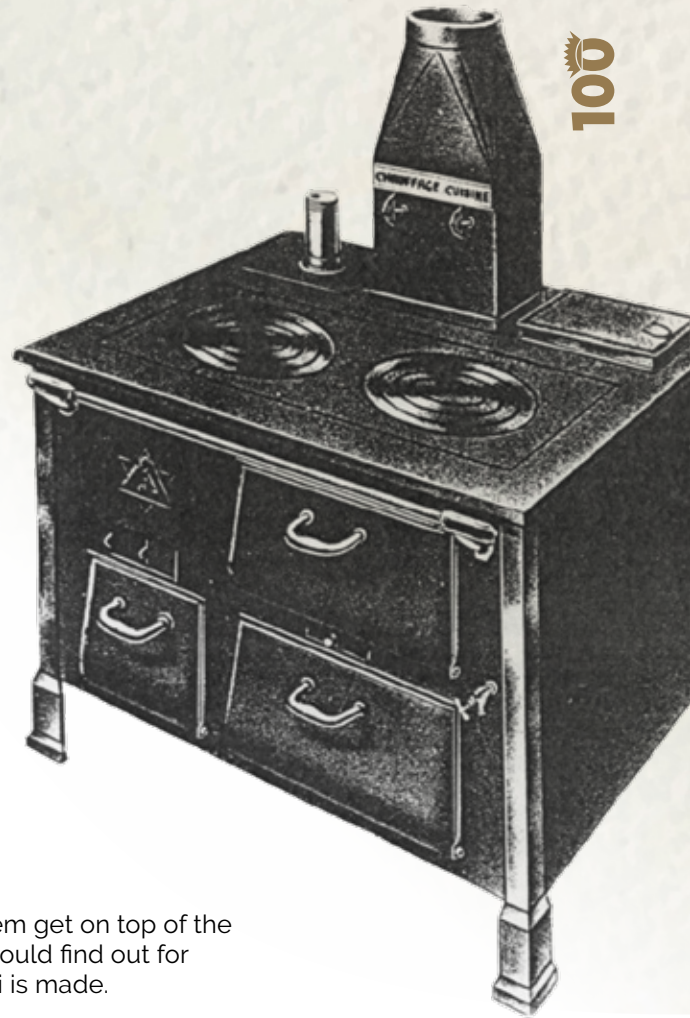


Let's go back to the foundry. You said it was the heart of the business.

Yes, it was. In order to have unique pieces, as I wanted them, which stood out from all others, we had to do all the machining in-house. Those who prefer not to "get their hands dirty" use ready-made pieces, but what you do, what you want to accomplish will never be fully yours.

Let me give you an example, our cooktop, which is what they call a French top elsewhere, is unique and virtually indestructible: as for the alloy for metal that would not deform over time or with the extreme heat generated, I came up with it myself by trying and trying again with my men down at the foundry. In those days, I was a little more... Robust, and in order to persuade customers, I used to surprise them by suddenly jumping on top of the solid top. Everyone was speechless. If you did that on any other kitchen, it would break.

However, not only strength was ensured, but also heat distribution due to a special blend of cast metals and different thicknesses at the center and at the ends.



But instead I would let them get on top of the open oven door, so they could find out for themselves how a Molteni is made.

Our solid top has always been out strength point. Not only sturdiness was guarantee, but also the heat distribution thanks to the special mixture of molten metals and differentiated thicknesses in the center and at the ends. Even the door oven was unmistakably Molteni. At that time, I was...a bit stouter. To charm a customer, I liked to impress him, to show him the oven capacity I used to open the door and jump on top. Everybody was so amazed.

In the beginning, kitchens were more "domestic"...

At first we wanted three things: heat, hot water, and cooking. Fire was the focal point of the house, as in ancient times: it heated up the whole house, providing hot water not only for food but also for washing, and was ideal for cooking. As unbelievable as it sounds, everything was wood-fired in those days. We then realized that more and more chefs were becoming interested in our creations.

"However, not only strength was ensured, but also heat distribution due to a special blend of cast metals and different thicknesses at the center and at the ends...."

Monsieur Joseph Molteni.



The legend continues

And this is what we believe is the second turning point...

Yes. I started talking to the chefs right away. Dialogue was key not only for them but also for us. We understood each other immediately. And I came to realize, more than ever before, what I was actually looking for: uniqueness. Working at the highest standards with those who work at the highest standards.

Domestic kitchens quickly changed.

Kitchens took a different shape, similar to the shape we see today. Chefs are hard to please, as am I. That is why we immediately got along. We instantly forged a lasting connection as we both always strived for perfection in details.

Is the Rolls Royce anecdote true?

Yes, (proudly) it's true. I don't know who started it, but at some point everyone was saying that Molteni kitchens are the Rolls Royce of kitchens. I was very pleased about that.

It certainly is a flattering comparison.

Dexterity was just as important then as it is now, but only a few people now pay – and used to pay – meticulous attention to every detail. I was never satisfied.

Fuel was...

Bear in mind that, in those days, coal and wood were still used. And then came gas, a major innovation. And everything fell into place. It was not until I found a partner that could guarantee absolute safety that I started using gas. And then electricity.



But kitchens were a pleasure, almost like a private pleasure, designed to please only the chef's eyes...

At some point, kitchens became visible. It was quite an event...Kitchens were often confined to narrow areas, below street level. They then became more prominent and could be seen and looked at.

And we were ready for it. (smiles) Our carefully crafted glazes, manually processed dozens of times, the cast bronze knobs, brasses for the finishes... Everything was made to be touched and looked at.

Did you know that all screws are manually inserted? And all the head cuts must be in exactly the same position, as I wanted them. Small details that may even go unnoticed, but which always bring me great satisfaction.

I think that the success of our stoves is exactly in this union: beautiful to see but at the same time mighty cooking machines, where respite and fatigue are unknown. Trustable and everlasting machines for years and years.

But is it true that every kitchen has a detail that makes it unique?

Chefs also have their quirks, you know. But don't go telling anyone. (looks around, wary) We all have demands, we all have our dislikes and small quirks.

But we are happy to grant everyone's wishes. Each kitchen is the realization of a dream. And it's kind of my dream too.

Let's talk about the island.

I'm worried you're trying to make me seem a little haughty...

Not at all, I'm just trying to get you to talk about your experience...

Well, yes. We were the first ever to introduce the kitchen island, where chefs can work all around the machine. It's amazing to look at, almost like ballet...

But I came up with this idea also by talking and exchanging ideas with chefs.

"...I don't know who started it, but at some point everyone was saying that Molteni kitchens are the Rolls Royce of kitchens. I was very pleased about that..."



I must now ask you about another anecdote. Is it true that you used to go incognito and try restaurants that had Molteni kitchens installed?

One of my guys must have told on me...Yes, I liked being a patron in order to get a look at, or rather experience first-hand what could be achieved with a Molteni...

Well, some dishes require the right tools!

You know, a good friend of mine, a very renowned chef, used to say that cooking is done at the market.

But I like to say that a great dish can only be made in a great kitchen!

Chapeau Monsieur Molteni! It was a pleasure to meet you.

Merci. Adieu.

Monsieur Joseph Molteni.



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