

She's the One

In a tiny restaurant in a tiny village
in a tiny country, there lives a giant talent:
Ana Roš, the World's Best Female Chef

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Given her story, it's ludicrous that Ana Roš should be the World's Best Female Chef, as crowned earlier this year by the World's 50 Best Restaurants organization. She's self-taught—no culinary school, no apprenticeships. She only reluctantly became a chef, when she was 30 and pregnant, out of desperation to keep her husband's family inn afloat. Before that, she had never cooked, had no interest in cooking, or even showed an aptitude for cooking. Her family was so against the idea of her in a kitchen that they nearly disowned her. (It's still a sensitive subject; if you meet her mother, please don't call Roš a cook. She is a *chef*.) And lastly, she is from Slovenia, and no one knows where that is, let alone thinks, Oh, Slovenian food is so great. It isn't.

Roš's restaurant, Hiša Franko, is not an easy place to find. Three towering limestone mountains form a triangle in a valley inside the Julian Alps of Slovenia, and in the center of the triangle, between two rivers, is a green hill, and at the bottom of this hill is Hiša Franko. You'll need a car to get there, and it's dangerous to drive—especially the closer you get.

It's not so much the hairpin switchbacks on the pencil-thin roads or that the roads are so very dark at night. The trouble is the kaleidoscope of amazing scenes passing through the windows. This is a place of outstanding beauty, the kind that makes you want to stay but also the kind that may make you feel as if you're hallucinating. The rivers glow an impossible bright emerald, the mountains are deep purple

Ana Roš foraging in the forest near Hiša Franko

and gray and dominate the sky, fairy-tale castles pop up out of nowhere in forested promontories, and the people—diving into the water off bridges, cycling near-vertical climbs, and driving vintage Volkswagen campers—are all good-looking and preposterously healthy.

Hiša Franko is Roš and her husband Valter Kramer's home, and it's also their livelihood: Roš is the chef and Kramer the keeper of the wine and cheese caves. Above the dining room are 10 rooms for overnight guests, and across the courtyard is another building for their kitchen staff, young people who come from all parts to peel carrots and make broths for Roš. Also under the roof are Roš and Kramer's two teenage children, Kramer's parents, and Princ, the black Cavalier King Charles Spaniel (plus two families of rainbow trout in the stream out back).

This heaving hive awakens at early hours, and as the day passes, a subtle alchemy takes hold of the chaos. Already, on the warm July morning of my visit, Roš and Kramer are out on the front patio putting out fires. There are many pressing concerns, and the bosses are weary. Visits to cheese mongers and dairy farmers need to happen, as do consultations with fishermen about the catch of the day, with farmers about vegetables, and with shepherds about goats—special goats from Drežnica. And what about the green walnuts? They might have been ready yesterday, which means not today, which is a shame. Mushrooms, too, are unavailable, Roš discovers after a call with her forager. "Up until 10 days ago, we had a great mushroom period—



Clockwise from top left:
Roš foraging with her
daughter; sheep in the
Slovenian countryside;
Hiša Franko's cheese cellar

porcini, chanterelles—because of the waxing moon,” she says, her white-blond hair loose and wavy, contrasting beautifully against her tanned skin. “Now, we must wait until the 25th, when the moon changes, and more rain is to come.”

In the back of the house are gardens tended by Kramer’s parents. In biodynamic fashion, certain flowers are planted next to the vegetables and herbs, creating a symbiotic ecosystem in which each one helps and protects the other. “It’s a beautiful story if you listen to it,” Roš says. “The whole world is taking this as a trend now, but for us this has always been so. Slovenes have always had gardens, have always been foraging, watching and listening to nature.”

The clichés “farm-to-table” or “seasonal menu” fall flat at Hiša Franko, where Roš takes a “zero kilometer” approach to sourcing. When you are as enamored of the spontaneous, fluctuating rhythms of nature and as obsessed with delivering the freshest and most surprising flavors available at that very moment as Roš is, senses must always be alert. Fall asleep at the wheel for just a second and you miss that the deep orange hue of the Tolmin cheese is trying to tell you that the cows were grazing on June wildflowers flush with carotene. Suddenly, the idea of a season—that is, a period of three months—starts to feel antiquated, or, like, forever.

In the morning whirl, friends of 10, 20, 30 years stop by to say hello. An American couple, having just been told there are no reservations available—for the next three months—lingers and lookie-loos before summoning the courage to say, “Are you Ana?” They’ve seen her on *Chef’s Table* on Netflix. Though clearly juggling, she chats amiably and offers them coffee, which she goes and makes herself. Daughter Eva Clara, 14, walks by, and Roš’s tone shifts gears from warm and patient to neutral and patient as they iron out their differences of opinion on what constitutes a messy room. “Teenagers are terrible, and the abuse is total, but it will pass,” she says as the girl skulks away.

Under the trees, a biodynamic



winemaker performs triage on a bee drowning in a glass of pinot gris before placing him tenderly by a flowering bush. Phones ring and beep with new problems needing solutions, old questions needing answers. Roš meets with journalists and TV crews, giving each one presence, as if nothing else existed, living with the complexity of her talent and all it’s brought to them.

“Here, we have no out,” Kramer says, contemplating the chaos around them, in this, their home and workplace. “You must hide in the bathroom,” Roš deadpans. “This is what I do.”

“Working in a restaurant was for losers”

When she was old enough to make her own decisions, Roš hung up her skis and quit the Yugoslavian National Team. She was a champion—but a friendless, boyfriendless one, with no social life. She enrolled in a prestigious university in Trieste, and studied international science and diplomacy. A year before graduating, she went to dinner at Hiša Franko with her mom, waited on by Valter Kramer, son of the owners. Over wine they fell in love, and soon she was working shifts at the restaurant. Then she was offered

a cushy diplomatic post in Brussels. Her decision to forsake a career track moving toward mai tais and immunity in some exotic locale and stay with Kramer at the restaurant sent her parents into apoplectic shock (her mom still hasn’t fully recovered). “My family went into a crisis,” Roš says. “For them, working in a restaurant was for losers. It is hand work, not brain work.” In a move that would cause her mother a stroke, she holds out her hands. They are battered, rough with tiny cuts and a bit swollen. “These are working hands.”

Hiša Franko was well regarded in the area but was struggling. Two earthquakes, which devastated the locals’ ability to dine out, were followed by another unfortunate situation. At that time, Italians would cross the border—Hiša Franko is just three kilometers from Italy—and fill their tanks with cheap Slovenian gas, buy high-quality meat for less, and then use the difference on a nice dinner at Hiša Franko. Queues of Italians would wait for tables. Eventually, the Italian government put a stop to it by lowering the price of fuel, and overnight the Italians stopped coming. “I remember leaning on the wall watching outside and seeing only empty parking spots,” says Roš.

Over time, the couple gained some footing and started traveling. “We were going to famous, fancy restaurants, and

everything was completely different than we were used to,” says Kramer. “One day, a week before my birthday, as a present to me, she called El Bulli for a reservation. At the time, they were No. 1 in the world. The manager, Juli Soler, asks her, ‘Madame, where you are born? You are maybe ... from another world.’ And Ana says, ‘Yeah, I’m from another world, it’s called Slovenia.’ And Juli tells

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her, ‘You must know you must make the reservation one year before.’ And Ana laughs and says, ‘What? One year? You are crazy, not me.’ And she asks again for a birthday table, and he just says, ‘No, Madame. There is no chance.’ Three minutes later, he calls back. ‘Madame, tell me again where you come from? Slovenia? OK, we never have guests from Slovenia, and since you were so nice, maybe we can put one table more.’”

Meals like these had a profound effect

on them, making them think they could do something different with Hiša Franko. But the fancy suggestions they offered the cooks, were met with blank stares. “I’d come in and say, ‘Make me ravioli with pear in a sauce of Tolmin cheese,’” says Roš, “and they would ask, ‘How?’ and I didn’t know how. I could not show them. It was a big tragedy.”

One by one, the cooks began to leave. “It was chaotic, a real anarchy situation,” Roš says. Without a kitchen staff and facing empty tables, “Valter said, ‘Of course one needs to go to the kitchen.’ And I was three months pregnant, and it was summer, and I said, ‘OK, so I’ll do it.’ And I went into the kitchen, closed the door, and was like, ‘What did you do?’”

“I was 30 years old, quite late to start cooking, and I wasn’t a kid who kept trying to make beurre blanc over and over at culinary school,

so I never had the idea that there is only one way to make mayonnaise.” That first year, she had one child (and then another one 16 months later), but somehow she managed to hunker down in the kitchen, relying on her mother to show her the basics and experimenting on guests, with varying degrees of success.

She found a mentor and admirer in chef Josko Sirk of La Subida, just over the Italian border, the only Slovenian chef to have a Michelin star. (The guide

From top: Roš's husband, Valter Kramer, who serves as sommelier; Hiša Franko's bar



From left: Roš preparing dessert; Hiša Franko's homey interiors

does not cover Slovenia.) “At first, she copied,” Sirk says, “but soon she used her intelligence, wit, and determination to rework the techniques, and they became her personal expression. She is someone who will never give up.”

In 2010, while cooking at a fundraiser for a drug rehabilitation community in northern Italy, she caught the attention of food writer Andrea Petrini: “She was working with this fresh cheese, and I remember how she was speaking, about foraging in the mountains with her parents as a little girl and working with Slovenian traditions. She was so fresh, especially compared to what was going on in Europe—molecular gastronomy, high-tech equipment—and with all the critics, the establishment, talking about ‘la cuisine de l’auteur.’ Here she was, a self-taught girl with great ideas, just learning what to do in real time, day by day. She was the perfect outsider, working totally outside the rules.”

Petrini launched her into the culinary stratosphere, inviting her to 2012’s Cook it Raw gathering in Poland, and then to his Grand Gelinaz! Shuffle, an event at which the world’s finest chefs (René Redzepi, Massimo Bottura, Magnus Nilsson) swap restaurants. “I was on the stage with people I so highly admired that I felt ashamed at times,” she remembers. “I was so green, in a deep learning process, as I was trying to understand how these people do things.”

Back at Hiša Franko, she wasn’t able to duplicate all the tricks she observed. But rather than be downtrodden, she was energized. Often these “mistakes” became her favorites. She was developing her own style.

“Nobody gives a f* about Slovenia!”**

For the Shuffle, Roš was sent to Rodolfo Guzmán’s restaurant in Santiago, Chile, Boragó, which is currently No. 42 on the World’s Best list. To play the game in the spirit intended, chefs must be fearless and try to know as little as possible about the situation they are entering. “She’s extremely intuitive,” says food writer Nicholas Gill, who documented her time at Boragó. “The ingredients must have

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been very surprising for her, but she knew if they would work before combining them. She’s very bold and daring with flavors—even very strong flavors that are difficult to work with unless on their own.” One of her dishes paired a wild boar tongue with oysters, another a deer heart with uni. “These are Chilean ingredients,” says Gill, “but I’ve never seen a Chilean cook even think of putting them together—and they were amazing!”

In Europe, Hiša Franko was enjoying an increasingly enthusiastic reception, including being reviewed in elite guides in Italy, since it’s so close to the border. “When she was first making a name for herself,” Petrini says, “it was like, ‘Ah, well, she is in Slovenia—and nobody gives a f*** about Slovenia!’ Really, no one knew where Slovenia was! So there was maybe a bit of jealousy after she started to be included in the big Italian guides—when she perhaps started to be seen as competition.”

Things really got crazy after her *Chef’s Table* episode debuted on Netflix in 2016. Within 48 hours, the little inn in the middle of nowhere was inundated with emails, and hungry visitors clicking around the Hiša Franko website nearly crashed the restaurant’s server.

The buzz and success the episode

generated led to an inevitable near-breakdown for Roš. “I am now under the microscope,” she says. “From a creative point, I was totally dead. Waking up wearily in the morning, taking care of the bread, peeling the carrots, making the broths, things that should be distributed to others. I didn’t want to see people. I didn’t want to do any more interviews. I could never leave the kitchen.” Things got even crazier in January when she was named the World’s Best Female Chef—a gender-specific title she has come to terms with. She says the fact that the award exists shows how difficult it is for a woman to succeed in this industry. “This is my personal explanation and it’s also the reason why I accepted it,” she says. “It’s an award for incredible women who were able to make it in this totally man’s world—a man’s world because the work is extremely difficult, one that

requires a psychological strength but also requires physical strength. So it’s really a big challenge. There will always be a gap between a man and a woman, but it is natural.”

“Come for the food”

On this warm summer evening at Hiša Franko, dinner is on the patio, enveloped by flowering trees and the sound of the stream rushing alongside. Roš appears, luminous in a white lace dress, her hair pulled back, a big smile on her face. She’s greeting and seating guests, serving dishes, answering the house phone—whatever’s needed—all with the natural ease of simply doing.

Menus allow for six, eight, or 11 courses, and wine pairings are chosen by Kramer from local

organic and biodynamic winemakers. A procession of plates, from amuse-bouches to a soulful dessert, follow, each delivered with honest-to-goodness vim and vigor from a youthful staff. It’s fun to be here; it’s an education to be here. Questions are welcomed, and their answers provided with the sincerity and generosity of the deeply invested.

The spirit mirrors the artful, intensely personal dishes adorned with a precise wildflower or herb by a minimalist hand quite certain of her message. Roš wants you to fall in love with the place that captured her heart, a place she chose to remain in when so many other options existed. Her menus are like maps, each taste pointing you to a very, very specific locale at a very, very specific time—one she herself experienced and can tell you about with stars in her eyes.

Some dishes show her trademark contrasts—a sardine with candied lemon and fennel or a squid with lamb sweetbreads, black garlic, and cave cheese. Some show her humor, like the “Drežnica rabbit that goes to Mexico City,” a local rabbit that’s somehow found its way into a molé. Then there’s her beloved ravioli—stuffed with tart and spicy fermented cottage cheese, bone marrow, lovage, prosciutto broth, and hazelnuts.

Flitting from Slovene to German, Italian, French, and English, Roš has an immense capacity to make herself available, to live with the complexity of her powerful talent—but take nothing for granted. “We are a countryside restaurant,” she says. “It’s so important

people have a chance to see a piece of our lives, to see a dog, meet our crazy children, or maybe have a drink with me and Valter. But you know, you should come for the food—the love of the food. I will show you.”

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