From top: The mountains in Austria, a piano, black coffee, Georges-Jacques Danton, running shoes, Johan Cruyff (in orange), Peter Falk as Columbo and the score when Man City beat Man Utd

The DEFINITE ARTICLE

We ask a celebrity a set of devilishly probing questions – and only accept THE definitive answer. This week it's TV chef Jean-Christophe Novelli

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The prized possession you value above all others... The gold St Christopher my father Jean gave me when I was nine for my first communion. I never take it off.

The unqualified regret you wish you could amend... Smoking. I started when I was 16 and was smoking 40 Gitanes a day when I gave up in 2001. I feel ashamed by it. I only gave up when I asked my daughter Christina what she wanted for Christmas and she said, 'For you to stop smoking.' I stopped the next day.

The way you would spend your fantasy 24 hours, with no travel restrictions... My professional life is a bombardment of noise and stress, so I'd drive to the mountains of Austria with my fiancée Michelle and our three-year-old son Jean-Frank. We'd have a packed lunch of sandwiches and ride bikes and walk. I'd also go to Cumbria to swim in the lakes. That water makes you feel alive.

The temptation you wish you could resist... Strong black coffee with no sugar. I have six to eight cups a day and I'm told it's bad for me, but any day that starts without coffee is ruined!

The book that holds an everlasting resonance... On Food And Cooking: The Science And Lore Of The Kitchen, by Harold McGee, has the core knowledge anyone needs to enjoy cooking.

The priority activity if you were the Invisible Man for a day... To have been in the changing room at Old Trafford after Man Utd were beaten 6-1 by Man City in October to see how Alex Ferguson *really* coped with that defeat!

The life of another with whom you would gladly trade places... Dutch footballer Johan Cruyff. I was a good striker when I was younger and I dreamed of being him.

The film you can watch time and time again... I've hardly seen any films as I've always worked so hard. But the TV series Columbo helps me switch off.

The person who has influenced you most... My mother Monique. She's 76 now, but had polio when she was four and has been disabled all her life. She's never complained or shown any weakness, and she's also an amazing cook, who inspired my love for food.

The figure from history for whom you'd most like to buy a pie and a pint... Georges-Jacques Danton, who was one of the architects of the French Revolution. What an achievement! I'd ask him how he made it happen.

The piece of wisdom you would pass on to a child... Learn how to give love and also how to embrace it.

The unlikely interest that engages your curiosity... Numbers. My father punished me by making me learn multiplication as a boy, but I ended up loving maths. To this day I'm brilliant at it.

The treasured item you lost and wish you could have again... My speed. Until I was 25 I was extremely fast and could have run in the 100m for France. I'm 50 now and age has slowed me down – but I'm still pretty quick.

The unending quest that drives you on... To please. I'm driven to make people happy with my cooking and teaching, but I'm very sensitive, which can be hard because you get hurt.

The poem that touches your soul... A few years ago Raymond Blanc gave me The Little Prince – a precious gift because Raymond is a hero of mine. I can appreciate the poetry of that story.

The misapprehension about yourself you wish you could erase... That I'm a flirt and a womaniser. It's crazy nonsense and it annoys me because I'm actually a loyal and honest person.

The event that altered the course of your life and character... Leaving France for England at 22. I had a one-way ticket, spoke no English and my parents were worried – but they knew I had to do it to make something of myself.

The crime you would commit knowing you could get away with it... Intercept the Olympic torch and run with it for a few miles. It would be a great honour.

The song that means most to you... My daughter Christina is a singer and is about to release her first single, Concrete Angel. I was incredibly moved when I first heard it and I keep watching her video on YouTube.

The happiest moment you will cherish forever... Meeting Michelle six years ago was a *coup de foudre* – love at first sight. I met her at Luton airport, of all places, on the way to Dublin.

The saddest time that shook your world... My best friend died from a heart attack in 2008, aged 41. I've never cried so much. It broke my heart he never lived to see my son Jean-Frank.

The unfulfilled ambition that continues to haunt you... To play the piano.

The philosophy that underpins your life... The only way to succeed is to push yourself to extreme limits. And you must aim to express – not impress.

The order of service at your funeral... I'll always be a Frenchman but I want to be buried in England. I'd like a respectful, happy service – that's not an excuse for people to get drunk!

The way you want to be remembered... As someone who was tender, tasty and value for money, who reached his best before his sell-by date!

The Plug... Jean-Christophe will be at Taste Of Christmas in partnership with AEG at London's ExCeL from 2-4 December. Visit www.tasteofchristmas.com. Details of his cookery school are at www.jeanchristophenovelli.com. ■

As told to Rob McGibbon

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