



Italian Culinary Academy. A Cultural Laboratory for Budding Chefs

Marina Melchionda (June 19, 2010)



On June 7 the Italian Trade Commission awarded each of 10 students of the Italian Culinary Academy with a \$5,000 scholarship. The school, founded in Soho by Mrs. Dorothy Hamilton and directed by Chef Cesare Casella, allows them to spend a long period of study and practice in Italy and become true, authentic Italian chefs

When young Americans want to learn more about Italian cuisine and become true, authentic Italian



chefs, where do they go? To the [Italian Culinary Academy](#) [2], of course!

Located in the heart of Soho, the institution was founded by Dorothy Cann Hamilton in 2006 and ever since then it has been directed by one of the most famous Italian chefs in New York, Cesare Casella owner of the restaurant [Salumeria Rosi](#) [3].

On June 7 at the headquarters of the [International Culinary Center](#) [4], that also hosts the [French Culinary Academy](#) [5], journalists, and operators in the food industry were welcomed for an evening Awards Ceremony organized by the [Italian Trade Commission](#) [6]: director Aniello Musella complimented the students of the school by awarding nine of them with a \$5,000 scholarship that could help them fulfill their dream to cook the best Italian food for their fellow Americans.

Aspiring Italian chefs come from all over the US and Canada to attend the program offered by the Academy. The reason is easy to guess: the institution offers them a once in a life time educational experience that includes a long visit and internship in Italy as well. The program starts with a period of study and apprenticeship in the Soho location with accomplished Chef-Instructors. A custom-designed Italian kitchen is their laboratory where they can learn to master the skills and recipes necessary to complete a repertoire of cuisine from every region of Italy.

Once the basics of Italian cuisine have been learned, the students off go to Parma, to the internationally famous [ALMA](#) [7], where they follow a 29-week-program that includes Italian language training and an internship in one of Italy's top restaurants where not only do they enhance their knowledge of Italian cuisine, but they also learn the "Italian way" to cook and serve food.

"When our students return from Italy they are sort of Italicized, they have learned so much of its culture and regional culinary traditions... In Italy food is culture and culture is food, you can't keep the two things apart. At the same time, today the Italian Culinary Academy is a cultural center in New York", Cesare Casella commented to us during the course of the evening.

Mrs. Hamilton is very proud of her school. It is the minor sister of the French Culinary Academy that was founded in 1998, after her first visit to Europe. "I had never tasted some of those dishes, in New York there was not such a wide number of ethnic restaurants. My trip to France made me understand that we had something important missing here: the food business, or better, the business of good food. We had great products here, but we did not know how to use them", she said when introducing her story to us.

Luckily for her students, she was invited by the directors of ALMA to go to Italy and visit the school. There she was served a dinner prepared by the students of the school and..."wow, if these people can cook like this after only 8 months of training it means that they do a good job.

It was then that she decided to found the Italian Culinary Academy and build a partnership with the school in Parma. "At that time Marcella Hazan was one of the teachers here at the French Institute and she told me that there was only one Italian chef working in the US that she would want to be the Director of the new Italian School. And that chef was Cesare Casella."

Cesare has proved himself to be a great mentor for the students at the Academy. After a cocktail hour with samples of Stuffed Olives Ascolana Style, Prosciutto Crudo, Octopus Soppressata, Vitello Tonnato (Chilled Veal in Tuna Sauce), and Caprese Salad, the dinner we were served in the dining room of the school featured dishes that were not only authentic Italian but also elegantly presented and garnished.

The first course, a generous helping of penne pasta with green beans and chunks of speck, was enriched by a very delicate cheese and heavy cream sauce and was paired with a Terlan Lagrain 2004. A Valle dell'Aceto Frappato 2009 accompanied the second course, Lombo di agnello con asparagi, patate e cipolline (Lamb Loin with potatoes, asparagus, and baby onions). Finally, the light taste of a Panna Cotta with ripe strawberries was enriched by a sip of Castello d'Ama Vin Santo 2004.

Mr. Simonluca Dettori, who represented the Italian Trade Commission at the dinner, complimented the students for the wonderful dining experience that they gave to us. "We have always promoted



upscale Italian cuisine in the United States and we are proud to help young American chefs who want to carry on this tradition of true culinary excellency. We believe that at the end of their courses at the Italian Culinary Academy, they will have learned the Italian way of cooking very well and also the importance of using authentic Italian products. From my point of view, beginning today, these students are not only chefs but ambassadors to the United States of the Italian life-style".

Among the students being given an award was [Torre Liebchen](#) [8], a young Italian-American coming from Kinnelon, NJ. He comes from a family of chefs and restaurant owners. His maternal grandfather, an Italian immigrant from Genova, owned restaurants in NYC for 38 years and his mom and dad used to own an Italian trattoria and a sports bar in New Jersey. "If you ask me from whom I got my passion for cooking I answer "from my grandma and grandpa", from my nonni. They taught me that food is a kind of religion that has the power to bring the whole family together. We sit around the same table, and taste gnocchi with pesto, or roasted lamb, or spaghetti with carbonara sauce and enjoy long hours together", he told us.

Torre has just graduated from college at Monmouth University and he appeared to be very excited about the opportunity the ITC is giving him to enter the Academy. "My family has suffered severe hardship in the last 3 years that made it difficult for me to complete my studies. But I made it, and I want to go on towards the fulfillment of my dream. I am grateful to all of those who will be generous enough to help me in this, and of course to the Italian Trade Commission".

Joseph Faiola, a former student of the Academy, was also there with us. He is about to open a new restaurant in Landisville, Pennsylvania, "Cafè Girasole", whose menu will essentially feature dishes from Rome and its province. From the conversation we had with him, we realized how much he has learned from his experience at the school with Chef Casella. "I will only use Italian products to cook for my customers whom I will treat as if they were part of my own family. You don't know how difficult it was to find authentic Prosciutto di Parma down where we are located. Importers and distributors suggested I buy a locally produced prosciutto that would cost me 6\$ per pound or so. But it was not the cost that I was concerned about, but the quality. I wanted the best, and I finally got it".

The enthusiasm we found in these students suggests to us that the future of Italian cuisine in America can be nothing but brilliant. This is also thanks to the Italian government that supports institutions such as the Italian Culinary Academy, and to Chef Casella and Mrs. Hamilton, who obviously believe in what they do.

We wish their students a brilliant career as Italian Chefs and, of course, as Ambassadors of Italian culture to the United States

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