

Antonino Ciolino, "In-Flight Chef"

Francesca Pili (May 24, 2019)



The Vice-President of the Italian Chef Association of New York is a Haute Cuisine expert both on land and in the clouds. He was among the first to import real Italian food.

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Antonino Ciolino has been living in the United States for 30 years now and, though he is known as "Tony," he still maintains his Sicilian accent and typical Southern warmth.

At the age of 22, when he worked at the Great Palace in Venice, he met a journalist from the New York Post and love brought him to America. His career takes off at the top: he works for the Rockefeller Group and after 2 years becomes the chef of the entire complex. He stays there for eight years. The beginning, he tells us, was very hard. "There was no way of finding the products I was used to!"



Importing 100% Italian food

In 1988, things turned around: together with the historical President of the 'Gruppo Ristoratori Italiani' Tony May, he creates the association Flavour of Italy, which represents Italian products such as Illy Caffè, Colavita, Parmigiano Reggiano in New York. "The presentation was held at Pier 92, and from there Italian food began its prosperous journey in the US," Tony tells us.

According to the chef, even though Americans don't yet fully understand the importance that we Italians give to products, large strides have been made. This largely thanks to the spreading of information by numerous Italian chefs who have opened restaurants across Manhattan.

Tony recalls that one of the first mistakes was not protecting the originality of the products enough, a central aspect for the [Italian Chef Association of NY](#), [3] founded in 2013.

Promoting The Uniqueness of Each Region

The Association constantly organizes events and presentations for the promotion of 'Made in Italy,' but above all it also tries to make people aware of regional specialties, typical products, and of the Italian territory.

"There are many regional gems by medium and small businesses. Generally, in the US, people know popular products like Grana; we try to show the variety of cheeses, meats, flours that you can find across the boot."

"We have a dream," Tonino reveals, "to create a school in which to teach Italian cuisine, make exchanges, have Italian culinary students come here and send American students to Italy, give them the opportunity to evaluate career options."

Another project on which the Association is working alongside Massimo Bottura is the opening of what the chef of Osteria Francescana calls "refettori": collection centers for all the food waste coming from restaurants, where great chefs will design the dishes that will feed the homeless.

"It's part of the waste-free culture promoted by Bottura, and by us with him. Cooking is an expression of love, as Bottura said. And this project is a reflection of that."

If all this seems enough for one person, it isn't for Tony.

Haute Cuisine Amongst The Clouds

Chef Ciolino is part of LSG ([Lufthansa Sky Gourmet](#)) [Sky Chef Group](#) [4], for which he designs the First Class menus of the biggest airlines, such as Lufthansa, Alitalia, Emirates, etc.

The idea was born during a food show held at New York's Javits Center, where he met a French chef who worked for Lufthansa. "To me airplane food was something produced in a factory. I never thought there was someone designing the menus." Intrigued, Tony submitted an application. Ten years passed before he heard back...

He tells us, "A new world opened up to me." A new stimulating challenge: to begin with, he had to get a scientific formation to learn how to preserve flavors at high altitudes. "People don't think about this but at 30.000 feet our sense of taste changes. Keeping this peculiarity in mind, you also have to produce large quantities of food. Salt is the biggest problem," he explains. This job has brought him to travel a lot and encounter different culinary cultures.



Now you can get a taste of haute cuisine when you fly. The product-centric philosophy is taking over high altitude food as well. That's why chef Tony suggests young chefs take on such experiences. "It's a challenge. Being able to collaborate with chefs coming from such diverse backgrounds, and for companies with personalized guidelines, to use advanced machinery designed for cooking in unconventional conditions, while having the chance to travel, constitutes a great formative opportunity."

Having accumulated such a wide variety of experiences, Tony admits that he now wants to pass on the torch and we are certain that there is no better mentor for the future chefs of tomorrow.

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