

Cesare Casella. When Simplicity Wins

Letizia Airos Soria (July 02, 2009)



Quality Italian products as a way to overcome the crisis as well as enliven the palate. We met with one of the leading chefs in the United States. He talks to us as he slices prosciutto

Between a slice of prosciutto and a glass of prosecco, we chat effusively with the 'rosemary chef.' The chef who along with the Rosi family from Parma, the owners of Parmacotto, runs a local spot to eat, live, and experience Italy's atmosphere in New York: Salumeria Rosi. It's another successful venture for Cesare Casella.

We first observe him from afar. One cannot fail to notice his booth at the Fancy Food Show. Among the high quality products on display, prosciutto di Parma is irresistible, authentic and unmistakably Italian, but it also communicates passion. We have an excellent chef who slices our prosciutto:



Cesare Casella. His lively eyes, his warm manner, his ability to put anyone at ease, and his ways that embrace and prepare your palate with human warmth are exceptional.

He embodies the synthesis of true Italian hospitality connected to food. Cesare tirelessly slices prosciutto and arranges them on wooden cutting boards. Dozens and dozens of hands stretch over his counter, hands that cannot resist taking and tasting the product. It's entertaining just watching the expressions of those who sample it.

We ask the chef to comment on the Fancy Food Show. He immediately offers us a glass of prosecco and we ask him to continue, not wanting to interrupt his work. And so while we talk he continues to slice prosciutto, greet guests, and entertain people.

What does it mean for a chef to promote Italian products? How has your presence at the Fancy Food Show been going this year?

For me, Italian products are the basis for everything. This year seems to be going well, at least for us. Having a successful, quality product is fundamental. And I am sure that even in this recession, with the right price-quality ratio, one can still profit.

With Italian cuisine based on a few, select products focused on simplicity and quality, it can be said that during a crisis you can also save by choosing good, quality products. If you spend a little more you get so much more in return, in the end result. Not complicated recipes full of ingredients; you only need a few essential elements combined with art ...

Exactly. If you start with good quality ingredients, it's hard to go wrong. It's important to build on the standard of Italian quality. It must be said, though, that not all Italian products are good because it's obvious that there are products out there that are sub-par. We should listen to the advice from the experts.

In general, Italian products have been damaged by amateur producers who sent shoddy products to the U.S. thinking that the Americans can't tell the difference. But if these products don't sell in Italy they're not going to sell here. American consumers are very attentive to what they buy, they're informed, and if they aren't, they learn. You have to be careful. Those who take this seriously have no problems, but I think those who try to be shrewd will have problems.

In your opinion what's the key to your success as a chef? Do you think that it lies in your spontaneity and encouraging Italian simplicity?

I try to be myself and do what I like; if you do what you like, it's easier to convey sincerity. I believe that it's about being honest and being yourself. People trust me. I also believe that simplicity is the trump card with our products. We must simply be aware of having the best products and promoting them again and again.

Simplicity, but also elegance and style ...

Italian style is Italian style; it's unmistakable when it's there. In my opinion Italian style is one that manages to combine simplicity with taste. On the surface Salumeria seems to be a very simple place, but it comes from hard work and thorough research.



When I first shared this idea with Rosi family, the owners of Parmacotto, we wanted to create an Italian delicatessen in New York. We noticed that we agreed on many things and had many things in common, so we opened Salumeria together.

It had to be something special because the Rosi family has style. An architect who was appropriate to their style was difficult to find so we chose a set designer instead...

A set designer...excellent. An Oscar winner?

Yes, Dante Ferretti. We chose a set designer because he works for the public. It's based on art – both his knowledge and what the public expects.

We wanted to send a message. After all, Salumeria is not a store that you can find in the U.S., but when you walk in it feels like being in Italy. The entire interior was, in fact, made in Italy in six weeks and then transported to the United States. The 25 seats have been built into a very comfortable and elegant space with a photo mural of Italy that recalls the culinary traditions of each region. When they brought me the first set of plans, dark windows and a white Italy, I thought: this will be tremendous! And after so much work, I was drunk on happiness because it was so cool.

One thing I'm curious about, that I think many are as well. How long have you been wearing the rosemary? When was the first time?

For thirty years. When I was a chef, I wore it in the kitchen, in my pocket because I had a garden with several types of herbs ready. Now I have to wear it because hardly anyone recognizes me without it.

Recently, in Aspen, I asked to have two rosemary plants in the booth and two in the apartment where I was staying. It's not always easy to find it. They usually prepare packets with all my herbs for me. Yes, it's been thirty years that I've been wearing rosemary, always in my chef's jacket and in my tuxedo.

Salumeria Rosi

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