

Italian Cuisine: A Victim of Its Own Success?

Michele & Charles Scicolone (June 21, 2010)



"Chefs (in America) perform Italian cuisine as a drag queen performs a woman," stated journalist Stefano Milioni

On June 15, the Gruppo Ristoratori Italiani held a symposium at NYU's Casa Zerilli Marimo. The subject was "Italian Cuisine: A Victim of Its Own Success?" According to the program, the purpose of the symposium was to examine such issues as corporations that take advantage of the popularity of Italian cuisine and spread misunderstanding about it, the lack of familiarity among American chefs and consumers with Italian food products and traditions, and the usage of Italian sounding names to sell non-Italian products. The GRI contends that these and related issues undermine centuries-old traditions of Italian cuisine and culture.



[Stefano Milioni](#) [2], a culinary journalist and the author of several books on Italian wine and food, moderated the first session. He started off by saying that while the food in this country may look like Italian, it is not. "Chefs perform Italian cuisine as a drag queen performs a woman," he stated. Why? Because it is overdone, there are too many flavors, and too many ingredients. American chefs "exchange simplicity for banality. Italian cuisine is simple. What makes it complicated is the fear of the chef to not justify the check."

Food journalist [John Mariani](#) [3] was the next speaker. He stated that Italian cuisine can now be found everywhere, and pointed out to Milioni that Italian food in Italy has suffered, too. In his experience, many Italian chefs have given up and given in to please the tastes of the tourists. At one famous restaurant in Siena, Mariani learned that risotto was being made with Uncle Ben's Converted Rice and canned porcini because, in the words of the chef, that is what the British and American tourists prefer.

Tony May, the consummate Italian restaurateur who is currently the owner of [SD26](#) [4], said that while he does not have all the answers to this subject, he does have a lot of questions. In his opinion, American chefs do not understand Italian food, yet food critics here praise these same chefs for producing the best Italian food in this country!

One exception, Tony said, was Ruth Reichl, former New York Times restaurant critic, who wrote in her review of [Mario Batali](#) [5]'s Babbo some years ago that it was "a great American restaurant." She was correct, according to Tony, because in his opinion, the food at Babbo is an Americanized interpretation of Italian food.

On the subject of the regionality of Italian cuisine, Tony said that "regionality works against us. We can no longer keep up that romantic idea with the mamma and nonna in the kitchen" because you find that less often today in Italy.

May feels that nobody here really cares about authenticity. The attitude seems to be that if it tastes good, it's okay, but, he said, that is ignorance. In this country, nobody cares if you serve lard with sea urchin or bone marrow in a seafood pasta. But this is wrong, said May, it does make a difference, it is not the Italian way, and we have to fight for it. Defining what is authentic, however, is another problem. If you ask 10 cooks in Bologna for an authentic Ragu Bolognese recipe, you will get 12 answers, one of the panellists quipped, and everyone agreed.

Tony concluded by saying that he did not have the answers and that was why the GRI decided to host this seminar. Tony expressed his disappointment that the press and critics ignore the efforts of true Italian chefs who adhere to the philosophy of less is more when it comes to Italian food and further, referencing Milioni's statement, these same critics equate simplicity with banality.

TV personality and chef [Mike Colameco](#) [6] finds that cooking in general in this country is good. Chefs are better trained nowadays and there is greater access to good ingredients. He compared those chefs who cook Italian food with too many ingredients to musicians who think that if they play louder, that will make the music sound better. His concern was less about losing traditions, because he said, food naturally evolves and changes, but more about the difficulty of teaching consumers to recognize quality.

Michael Wilson, the editor of the American edition of [La Cucina Italiana](#) [7] magazine was optimistic. Americans can now access more and better Italian products and are starting to understand them, too. He feels that this is a good time for Italian chefs to come to America and further the knowledge of genuine Italian cooking in this country.

There were lots of comments from the audience and responses from the panel members, but in the end, we were left with more questions than answers. As Stefano Milioni said, "Italian cuisine is like a Ferrari -- everyone knows what it is but few can actually drive it."

"Does the Italian Restaurateur or the Consumer Need Another Seal of Authority?" was the topic of the



afternoon's session. With its hodgepodge of DOP's, DOC's, IGP's and so forth, few consumers both here and in Italy have any idea what it all means. Would having a similar designation of authenticity for a restaurant help the situation or cause further confusion?

Gianfranco Sorrentino, owner of [Il Gattopardo Restaurant](#) [8] in New York City, was the first to speak. He wants a seal that he could display in his restaurant to certify that he uses authentic products and honors Italian traditions and culture with his Italian or Italian-trained staff. This would help him to distinguish his restaurant from those of lesser quality with lower standards and products.

Giovanni Cocco, the General Director of the [Istituto Nazionale Ricerche Turistiche](#) [9] explained the Italian vision of certification and how it would be applied. Suffice it to say, it is a complicated procedure.

Paul Bartolotta, chef at [Bartolotta Ristorante di Mare](#) [10] in Las Vegas stated that he did not see the value in having sticker or sign on the door. He believes that the way to go is internal marketing, that is, giving his customers an authentic experience via his well trained staff, and top quality ingredients. He hires all Italian waiters and he asks them to be themselves and share their first hand knowledge of the food with his customers.

Massimo Bottura is the owner of [Osteria Francescana](#) [11] in Modena, which boasts two Michelin stars. Bottura was very emotional in his presentation, expressing his pride and love for genuine Italian products from his native Emilia Romagna, like Parmigiano-Reggiano and lambrusco wine. He believes in artisanal products and would like to see the focus placed on Italy producing better yet few products. He did not think that certification was necessary.

Thomas Gellert is the Vice President of Atalanta, an importing company, and a Principal of the Gellert Global Group of food companies. He, too, was against the idea of a seal of approval, feeling that it was more important for people to have trust in their food and how it is made. He questioned whether the regulations could be trusted.

Tony May, who was in the audience, made it clear that he favored certification.

The final session of the seminar was entitled "Educating Operators, Consumers and Institutions -- How do we go about doing it?" (Charles Scicolone alone covered this session.)

Tim Ryan, President of the [Culinary Institute of America](#) [12] was the moderator. He pointed out that there are more Mexican restaurants in the United States today than there are Italian eateries, indicating a shift in tastes that reflected our growing Latino population. Further, he said both Mexican and Chinese cuisines are even more misunderstood than Italian. He invited audience members and panelists to express themselves freely and "jump right in", which resulted in a lively discussion.

Ferdinand Metz, currently a consultant, a former chef and President Emeritus of the Culinary Institute, summarized the previous day's events. He felt that education is all-important because families do not eat together today and there is no passing down of culture. He also said that he thought Italian food should be codified in the same way that French cuisine was by Auguste Escoffier.

Cesare Casella, is the chef and owner of [Salumeria Rosi](#) [13] in Manhattan and is also the Dean of the [Italian Culinary Academy](#) [14] as well as the Project Manager at the [Center for Discovery](#) [15] with the DaVinci Project. Casella said that there are a number of very good Italian chefs in New York. He teaches his students how to use Italian techniques and ingredients, and as part of their course of studies, the students go to Italy and experience Italian culture, tradition and language as well as learning to cook. His mantra, inspired by Leonardo Da Vinci, is "simplicity is sophistication".

Tony May once again spoke and once again stated "Italian food is the least understood cuisine, yet



everyone thinks that they know more about it than you do". In reality, they do not understand real Italian food. He went on to say that Italian food has become more expensive because we can get more authentic Italian products yet instructors at culinary schools do not understand the cuisine or the products. He pointed out that it was not until recently that culinary schools included serious programs in Italian cooking.

Lou Di Palo is the proprietor of [Di Palo Fine Foods](#) [16], a New York City landmark specialty store. He does not think there is an authenticity problem since so many things beyond our control are different here, such as, water, meats, fish varieties, vegetables, seasonings, and so on. He does believe in the importance of education and makes a point of explaining to his customers the origin and background of the products he sells. He feels that his store's mozzarella, which is made fresh daily, is as good if not better than some of the imported products, which must be adapted to meet American regulations and are frequently not as fresh as they should be when sold here.

Ennio Ranaboldo, CEO of [Lavazza's North American Subsidiary](#) [17], feels that Americans have a long way to go as far as their understanding of Italian customs are concerned. As examples, he cited American preferences for sweet coffee drinks served in big plastic cups, lack of understanding of a properly made espresso and the popularity of cappuccino after lunch and dinner.

Dear readers, we hope you have stuck with us this far and would love to hear your thoughts and opinions on this subject.

What conclusions did we draw? Like Tony May, we were left with more questions than answers.

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