

NIAF's Spring Gala 2014 ~ A New Generation

I. A. (April 09, 2014)



NIAF's Annual Spring Gala, an opportunity to recognize members of the Italian American community who have particularly distinguished themselves in their respective professional fields. Louis Prima Jr. and The Witnesses, an eight-piece brass-infused swing band which performed toward the end of the festivities certainly made the evening an unforgettable experience.

Once again [Cipriani 42](#) [2] became completely Italian, as over five hundred guests filled it to the brim on the evening of the 3rd of April for the Annual Spring Gala of the [National Italian American Foundation](#) [3]'s (NIAF).

For the third year during the Spring Gala, the organization took the opportunity to recognize members of the Italian American community who have particularly distinguished themselves in their respective professional fields as well as for their voluntary work contributions to the community.

NIAF's Chairman [Joseph V. Del Raso, Esq](#) [4]., welcomed the honorees and guests to the



Foundation's annual dinner. He proudly spoke about the [NIAF Ernest L. Pellegrini grant](#) [5] in the amount of half a million dollars, which was awarded to the [University of Maryland](#) [6] for the completion of their project: "Between Washington and Ancient Rome: The NIAF Pellegrini Program on Roman Antiquity and its Legacy in America," a program which offers opportunities for students to conduct research, pursue fellowships that support the study of Latin and ancient Roman archeology and civilization.

The award certainly goes along with the mission of the foundation which aims to promote Italian American culture and heritage, and serves as a resource on the Italian American community through the offering of educational and youth programs including scholarships, grants, heritage travel, and mentoring.

"We need to thank NIAF for a lot of things, and as a scholar of Italian American Studies, as a sort of cultural broker I must say that NIAF supported numerous cultural activities, and as we say in Italian *con tanto di cappello* (our hats are off to them)," stated [Anthony Julian Tamburri](#) [7], the Dean the John D. [Calandra Italian American Institute](#) [8] of Queens College.

The gala's mistress of ceremonies, [Alexis Christoforous](#) [9], CBS news correspondent addressed the guests and proudly spoke of her (half!) Italian heritage before kicking off the awards ceremony.

[Carmine Di Sibio](#) [10], global managing partner—Client Services at EY, received NIAF's Special Achievement Award in Financial Services, recognizing him for the 28-year career in the industry.

[Joseph Brancato](#) [11], managing partner at Gensler, received NIAF's Special Achievement Award in Real Estate and Design for his continued struggle to improve people's lives by partnering with clients to make cities more livable, more efficient, and more engaging.

NIAF's Special Achievement Award in Military Service went to Lt. Gen. USMC (ret.) [Frank Libutti](#) [12], CEO and president of PS&S Global LLC, the environmental remediation and alternative and renewable energy firm. Libutti dedicated 35 years of his life to a career in the military.

For her authentic cooking style and passion [Chef Mary Ann Esposito](#) [13] received NIAF's Special Achievement Award in Culinary Arts. Her hit culinary TV program [Ciao Italia](#) [14] is one of America's longest running cooking programs and for years it has brought a positive image of Italians to the rest of the world.

"I'm very passionate about what I do, and for twenty-five years I've been doing that on television, trying to educate a national audience about what real Italian food is all about, there is no such thing as Italian food there is only REGIONAL FOOD, and that has been the mission of CIAO Italia," stated Chef Esposito.

NIAF's President and Chief Operating Officer [John M. Viola](#) [4] spoke about the energy and passion in the room. He was very pleased with the growing numbers of young members of the foundation.

In an interview with *i-italy* he stated: "The young people are very well represented, we have done a concentrated job of trying to get out and bring Italian Americans and young Italians into the organization, we've created a student membership for those that are in University and graduate Schools, and those number have gone really up, we have an ever-younger foundation here and people are excited about what we are doing."

"We hope that the young people come here because it gives them an opportunity to first and foremost celebrate their heritage, celebrate their culture but after that it gives the opportunity to be around successful Italians and Italian Americans. And frankly gives us the opportunity to help one another, as we all should be able to look to the elders in our community for mentorship, for guidance, for opportunities, for career growth, and if we bring people to the same organization that opportunity is there. So we want to be Italians passing expertise and knowledge to other Italians," continued Viola with pride.

An honorary guest of the Spring Gala, Italy's Consul General in New York, [Natalia Quintavalle](#) [15]



appreciated the foundation's new initiative of encouraging young members of the Italian American community to join the organization, as she stated: "I think is a new approach to a very old tradition such as NIAF, which is the oldest organization of the Italian Americans together with the [Order Sons of Italy](#) [16]."

NIAF's Chairman Joseph V. Del Raso, expressed his thoughts on the subject as well: "We are absolutely thrilled with the transition of leadership at the foundation. We are very focused on the new generation taking over and we believe in actions not words. You just can't say that we want to invest in a new generation, there is a need for making a move, so when the board elected John Viola as President and made him a member of the board at the age of thirty, I think we sent a strong message that we really do believe that its time for the new generation to take the leadership and this I think is the real recipe for success in the future."

The wonderful evening could not be complete without the famous Bellini cocktails offered to the guests prior to the exquisite dining on Italian specialties, which included fresh Burrata with marinated pear tomatoes and micro basil.

The magical ambience of the legendary Italian Renaissance-inspired dining space and musical guests: singer, songwriter and world champion whistler [Michael Barimo](#) [17] who sang the U.S. national anthem and "Inno di Mameli," Italy's national anthem before the reception as well as [Louis Prima Jr. and The Witnesses](#) [18], an eight-piece brass-infused swing band which performed toward the end of the festivities certainly made the evening an unforgettable experience.

The NIAF New York Gala proceeds support the Foundation's philanthropic and educational programs. This year's Spring Gala presenting sponsor was EY (Ernst & Young LLP).

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