

Accademia Italiana della Cucina's Monthly Dinner. Searching for True Italian Spots in NYC

Marina Melchionda (October 04, 2009)



Every month the Soho Delegation of the Accademia Italiana della Cucina organizes a dinner with its members and guests in a different Italian restaurant in NYC. On September 21 the Serafina Restaurant on Madison Avenue had its turn. The Accademici were called to vote on every aspect of the dinner, from the environment and service to the food and wine offered. What was their opinion? Is Serafina a “true Italian restaurant?”

Do you need to know where to eat “real” Italian food in New York? Ask Accademia Italiana della Cucina!

Every month the Soho Delegation of this cultural institution of the Republic of Italy, led by its President Berardo Paradiso, organizes a dinner in a different Italian restaurant in the city and its members, the “Accademici”, are invited to judge on all different aspects of the meal, from the dishes, to the environment and service. In other words, they are asked to express their opinion on the “italianità” of the venue, a verdict that can actually mark its “destiny”.

Every “Accademico” is selected according to very strict criteria, he must have “a gastronomical



background constructed through personal experience, love for his own roots, and through the participation, investigation and curiosity for the different traditions. (...)His distinct education in taste allows him to appreciate and practice the rules which make the table pleasant", recites the statutes of the institution. Being recognized as real experts in Italian food, the Accademia considers their judgment worth publication in a monthly magazine that is distributed worldwide and becomes a real vademecum for those looking for Italian food in whatever nation they might be.

Curious about the Accademia's activities, i-Italy participated at the event organized at one of the restaurants of the Serafina Chain on September 21. We must say that the first thing that really surprised us was the atmosphere of conviviality we could feel as soon as we walked into the dining room on the third floor of the brownstone building on Madison Avenue (& 79th St.), Upper East Side, Manhattan.

We recognized some familiar faces right away, Italians in New York that represent our country in every possible field. The table just beside ours was occupied by several representatives of various institutions, among which Andrea Fiano, Chairman of the [Primo Levi Center](#) [2]; the Deputy Consul Maurizio Antonini; the Director of the [Italian Tourism Board](#) [3] in North America Riccardo Strano; and of course Berardo Paradiso, director of [IACE](#) [4] and of the Soho Delegation of the Italian Academy itself. Sitting at our table were RAI journalist Giulio Borrelli, Mediaset anchor Didi Leoni, the Dean of the [Calandra Italian American Institute](#) [5] Anthony J. Tamburri with his wife Maria, Executive Director of the [National Organization of Italian/American Women](#) [6], and Alessandra Rotondi, journalist and wine consultant for Serafina.

"I have been working with Serafina Group for two years, I am their wine consultant. All kinds of celebrities come to our venues to enjoy true Italian cuisine, and every dish is accompanied by a particular wine which I believe espouses it perfectly. My collaboration with the Accademia Italiana della Cucina and its director Berardo Paradiso has finally brought its members here for their monthly event, and tonight we are going to serve a four course dinner accompanied by four types of wines I personally chose. After each dish, I will tell interesting stories about the wines tasted, their origins, and the land where they come from. My aim is not to provide my guests with mere technical information about the wine, but to make them laugh and enjoy themselves in this convivial atmosphere".

The first wine on the list was a sparkling one, Prosecco Zonin.

It accompanied bites of focaccia with figs and prosciutto, a recipe invented purposely by Chef Paqui for the occasion. All of our table mates liked it very much...they just could not stop themselves from having a second, third helping...

While still sipping our Prosecco, we were served the first course of the dinner, an antipasto of sautéed shrimp on a bed of artichoke hearts. This was possibly the dish the diners preferred the least, as all the tables agreed that the savory shrimps somehow covered the delicate vegetables. But, still, it was a moment to enjoy since Director Paradiso captured our attention with an informative dissertation on the history of artichokes in Italian cuisine and on their use in different regions.

We just could not wait to try the pasta on the menu, "trenette al pesto", pesto being a traditional condiment from the Liguria region prepared with basil, garlic, pine nuts, and extra virgin olive oil. Even though we were served linguine instead of trenette (tradition calls for either one or the other

of these two shapes of pasta), all the guests were particularly satisfied with the dish which deserved an average vote of 8. As Mr. Fiano said, "Pesto is the nearest thing to religion in Liguria", and we all agreed with that. Wine consultant Rotondi chose a Vermentino di Sardegna, Sella & Mosca to go with it, a wine that can also be found in Liguria, she explained to us.

After having savored the whole plate up to the last linguina, we were served the third course: grilled tuna fish with candied ginger sauce accompanied by a side dish of mashed potatoes and sautéed spinach. We agreed with the somehow unconventional choice made by Ms. Rotondi who picked a red wine for this fish course. "When the tuna is grilled it releases a rich juice that can be perfectly matched to a red wine. This is why I chose a very hearty one, a Montepulciano d'Abruzzo Zonin, she told us. Although the dish had an amazing taste, and the quality and tenderness of the tuna fish was just outstanding, the guests agreed in giving it quite a low rating, since "it was not a typically Italian recipe". Ginger indeed is not a traditional Italian spice, and our co-citizens, moreover, love to eat their fish as naturally as possible, the only condiments in most cases being garlic and olive oil and sometimes tomatoes. The owner of the restaurant Vittorio Assaf could easily defend himself by stating that it is one of the most appreciated dishes on the restaurant's menu, but the Accademici took the occasion to show how uncompromising they are when it comes to Italian food!

No worries at all because the best part of the dinner for many of us was just about to start. The dessert was not only a very abundant portion, but most of all it was simply exquisite: a scoop of delicious Italian tiramisu and two slices of white pizza topped with chopped green apples and powdered sugar gave a sweet aftertaste to the last wine of the dinner, a Moscato d'Asti Strev, Marengo. "I never serve sparkling wine at the end of a dinner, the prosecco or the champagne are too dry for a dessert. We need a sweet wine, and Moscato d'Asti is just the right one for this unusual sweet and sour pizza", finally said Ms. Rotondi.

It was she who introduced us to the owner of the restaurant, Vittorio Assaf, who has been running the five Serafina Italian restaurants of the chain for 15 years with his partner Fabio Granato "I am satisfied with the outcome of this dinner with the Accademia Italiana. I am especially proud of the '9' we had on environment and service. These qualities always make our restaurant a welcoming place to return to".

There is no doubt about this, we thought. The wooden tables and the warm light had made us feel at home the whole evening and the joyous atmosphere did the rest for our wellbeing. "I wanted this dinner to be hosted here, in this particular restaurant of our chain, because it was the first one I founded with my partner. There is a sentimental bond with this place, and it was my desire to see it appear in the monthly magazine and the annual book published by the Accademia della Cucina".

At the end of our meal, it was also a pleasure to finally meet Chef Paqui, the Spanish chef that has studied Italian cuisine in Milan for over 10 years. She should be considered the real "heroine" of the evening, having prepared a four-course meal for over 60 people in a 10x10 foot kitchen. "The number of people I had to feed influenced my choices on the menu. What is more important, in any case, is that these true Italian gourmets agreed that most of the recipes prepared were to be considered 'authentically Italian'. Even though I am Spanish, I respect and deeply know Italian traditions in terms of food, and I would never mix its cuisine with any other", she stated.

Chef Paqui has been working for Serafina for several years now, and she has no intention of leaving her position there. "I will never find in any other place such a warm environment. Here I feel like I am part of a family, everybody helps everybody in case of need. And this is also part of Italian culture".

...And it's certainly one of the reasons why we shall return to Serafina, and maybe tour the other venues too, since every restaurant of the chain has a different menu. There are of course things that won't change in any of them: the fabulous pizza, the articulate wine list chosen by Alessandra Rotondi and the hospitality of owner Vittorio Assaf. Bon Appetit!

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