



CineCucina. Celebrating Italian Food and Cinema in San Diego

Marina Melchionda (February 16, 2010)



On May 20-22 the San Diego Italian Film Festival will present CineCucina, a tribute to Italian food and cinema. The "main course" of the event will be the screening of "Focaccia Blues", a rousing story about a local breadmaker in a small city in Southern Italy that challenges Mc Donald's. Interview with organizers Pasquale Verdicchio and Victor Laruccia

On May 20-22 the [Birch North Park Theatre](#) [2] will host "CineCucina" a celebration of Italian film (Cine-) and food (Cucina) presented in its first edition by the [San Diego Italian Film Festival](#) [3].

The two-day event will open with an "Aperitivo" on Thursday, May 20, 7 pm, at the [Museum of Photographic Arts in Balboa Park](#) [4]. The evening will feature the screening of shorts and documentaries about food, as seen from an Italian perspective: its origins, use, and myths.

The "First Course" will be served on May 22, from 11 am to 6 pm. The lot behind the Birch North Park Theatre will be transformed in [Piazza CineCucina](#) [5], an outdoor fair featuring local farm fresh produce, artisanal foods and Italian specialties vendors offering certified produce from San Diego



farms, demonstrations, cook-offs and other events that will involve local producers and attendees.

"Finally, the "Main Course", the screening of "Focaccia Blues" by Nico Cerasola will be served by the San Diego Italian Film Festival and [Slow Food Urban San Diego](#) [6] at the Birch North Park Theatre (6:30 pm). The Slow Food movement, which began in Rome 24 years ago, celebrates the core values of Italian cuisine: local, seasonal, healthy, sustainable and flavorful. For the occasion, Slow Food Urban San Diego will provide an entertaining interlude based on the Italian roots of the movement.

"Focaccia Blues" is a movie about a local breadmaker located in Altamura, a small city in the region of Apulia, that challenges the international food corporation [Mc Donald's](#) [7]. In Italy, where the David stands as a monument to Italian passion and courage, this mythic story of a local hero standing up to an out of town giant affirms the importance of community and local enterprise.

We interviewed the organizers of CineCucina Pasquale Verdicchio and Victor Laruccia on the origins, meanings, and scopes of the initiative.

The San Diego Italian Film Festival aims to promote Italian Culture in California. Why have you organized this very original event, CineCucina, specifically dedicated to "shorts and documentaries about food from an Italian perspective". Why is the Italians' relationship with food so interesting to the American audience?

PASQUALE VERDICCHIO: In the popular imaginary what most people commonly associate with Italy (we'll keep to the positive things) are food, film and fashion to name but three. But even in these there is a fairly limited sense of what that might include. Since we have had such a great success over the last few years in attracting an ever-growing audience to our film screenings, which tend to fall outside of the more conventional sense of "commercial" films, we thought to put into action an idea that we've been considering for quite a long time. Putting film and food together is almost a natural, and it is also a way of expanding the notion and vocabulary most people have available to them regarding food just as we have done with film.

The features and shorts we plan to show foreground a relationship with food that intimately tied to people's lives in every sense and not only at certain times of the day or only to fill one's stomach. And, since Italians too feel more and more the impositions of "fast" and processed foods as they crowd the shelves of markets, this marriage of film and food also serves as a reminder to all of us of the necessary aspects of a slower and more attentive relationship with what we put into our bodies. Of course we are not the first to do this, but we are the first to do it in San Diego and so we are breaking ground and making connections with local restaurants, food establishments and slow food enthusiasts that we hope will continue to grow over the years to entertain and inform our communities.

VICTOR LARUCCIA: Joining film and food may be original, but for the SDIFF it really is essential. At every movie we've shown our audiences want to tell their own stories in the most congenial way they know - sitting down with friends to drink and eat something. The SDIFF sees this impulse as key to its own objectives: making culture, not consuming it, and making it in the stories we tell and in the relationships we nourish. But for the board of the SDIFF there is a stronger impulse than simply encouraging our visitors to tell stories. Almost each member of the board derives from an Italian family, and everyone on the board has Mediterranean roots. And each of us knows how key to our own histories and our own sense of culture is the food that has tied us together as families and given us that part of our identities which are the most important to us. In my case my mother's family was from Lazio, my father was from Puglia, and they both loved to cook.

Their styles and recipes were completely different, one heavier, one lighter, one full of brio the other full of light, one from the farm, the other from the sea, but they and all my family found the most sublime pleasures in each other's cooking and in sharing that with their families and friends. That's something most of our audience would like to share in. And as we find more reasons to rush life, take shortcuts, twitter rather than converse, we as Americans also find the routines of daily life to be generally unrewarding. When our American friends come to the movies, they see that Italy is changing, yet even so the importance of human relationships and of pleasures in the fundamental aspects of life comes across very clearly. We hope to make the point even more forcefully in our CineCucina events



The festival is organized in collaboration with Slow Food. When did this partnership start, and why? Is there a "shared worldview" between SDIFF and Slow Food Urban San Diego?

P.V.: Slow Food now has become a global movement. The fact that it began in Italy and that these sorts of food and film events are already organized there was of course in part the inspiration. But, while the fact of Slow Food being Italian is very important for us, it also gives us the opportunity to highlight how this influence has helped generate an interest in locally produced food stuffs. So, while an Italian emphasis is obvious in the content of the overall event what we wish to emphasize is also the Italian "influence" on certain current trends in food culture.

V.L.: The SDIFF has been considering this project for several years. And because so many of the core values of Slow Food and of Italian culture are similar if not the same, the pairing is natural. Almost all the Italians on our board come from southern Italy, all of them have been raised inside La cucina povera. When I was a little boy, my grandmother, aunts and all the grandchildren would go to the local baseball field and pick the dandelions out of left field. And while my mother and aunts would laugh at the delicious absurdity of the moment (this was just at the end of WW II), they also spent a lot of time discussing how they would cook these greens and what would go best with them. There was a strong sense among these Italian women that the earth was a dear friend, and that it provided its goodness with love and generosity, even if it was only weeds, and all that was required was work.

To us the Slow Food movement is rooted in that notion of both a good earth and a small earth, one which can provide delicious treats but only if treated well. Of course, this is a notion that now is threatened by the needs of rapidly expanding post-industrial demand, even in Italy, but it is a notion that offers at worst some mitigation and at the best a more satisfying and sustainable life. My grandfather, even though blind, grew enough food in his garden to provide the majority of his family's sustenance, except, of course, for the main holidays. We do not advocate any back to the earth philosophy but rather wish to hold out the basic principles of food culture that are important to both the roots of Italian culture and to Slow Food. Those principles are an important tool for increasing the beauty of life.

The "Main Course" of the event will be dedicated to the screening of "Focaccia Blues", the movie about a small focaccia shop that forced a local Mc Donald's to close. ?Are you aware that the Italian Ministry of Agriculture is now partnering with McDonald's to promote the new "McItaly burger"? Slow Food, among others, has been very critical of this partnership. What's your opinion and how, in your mind, is this going to affect the message launched by the movie to the eyes of the Americans?

P.V.: Yes, we are painfully aware of the Italian Ministry's endorsement of McItaly. However, since the Slow Food movement began as an alternative, an opposition to what have become conventions in the food industry (such as MacDonaldis or other fast food places), we don't believe that it takes any of the impact out of the meaning of films such as Focaccia Blues. In fact, it gives them that much more relevance and continues to represent the struggle of small producers, businesses and individuals against the more faceless and enormous manufacturers for whom not the product but the profit is important.

V.L.: First, there is something completely ridiculous about the Minister of Agriculture flipping burgers, but there is nothing ridiculous about the ensuing debate. At a superficial level, the brand of Italy has been used for a host of conflicting purposes, not all benign. And no matter what the name is or the burger type, that will not change any of the realities we all confront regarding alienation and various forms of cultural degradation. Again, our Festival isn't taking up a position for or against any Italian minister flipping burgers; the pay flipping burgers isn't all that good anyway. What we are trying to do is underline the basic roots of Italian values in food culture as we see them and experienced them. If someone wants a hamburger with a little Parmesan cheese, so what? But ultimately someone who wants only that won't be interested in our movies or our perspective.

Our audience is both inquisitive and yearning for something beyond a McDonald's burger, no matter how it's labeled and anyone who mistakes a hamburger, even with Parmesan cheese, for an Italian dish is probably not going to care very much about where his food comes from or what's in it, and he's certainly not going to care very much about learning what goes into a great Italian meal. On the other hand, if you come to our event, you may begin to question your own food culture, or you may be tempted to try something besides a hamburger of any kind. I like hamburgers. I prefer my wife's



pasta. The world can contain both, but to the extent any industrialized process makes it more difficult to create a wonderful Italian meal, the less likely it is that any wonder in the world will survive.

What place does Italian food have and is destined to have in Americans' everyday life? What can be done to enhance and maintain its popularity?

P.V.: Italian food has a very central place in American life. It may be a limited notion of what Italian food is. It might be limited to pizza and pasta, and even then to very narrow notions of those things, but it is already present and it is on the increase. Food is also a wonderful way to introduce culture indirectly. So many people now speak Italian words without even realizing it when they order a cappuccino, a latte or an espresso; not to speak of tiramisu, gelato and of course pizza and pasta. By expanding the horizon of what Italian food is and stands for through an association with film means also expanding these very simple ways by which people slowly come to know and hopefully understand another culture. Some of our partners in this venture are very proud of their Italian products even though they might not be Italian themselves. Their pride comes from representing and making available something that stands for cultural and social value, something that gives them a connection to long-standing traditions that they then pass on to those who frequent their establishments and businesses.

V.L.: All cuisines are important because each expresses an important and unique way to fulfill a fundamental necessity to life. But Italian cuisine has some peculiar aspects that make it ever more attractive in America. Of course, there are probably more Italian restaurants or ones that purport to serve Italian than any other type. And they are popular, and they endure, so at a surface level, it's possible to say that to the extent that these restaurants represent Italian food they will have a very important place in everyday American life. But beyond that, many of the principles of Italian cuisine (local, fresh, simple, basic ingredients that are perfect in their own way, and combinations that express a specific locale with flair) have now become rooted in many other cuisines. The idea of the freshest ingredients, the most local produce, the learned ability to judge the quality of the produce and meat, and the demand for rich combinations that present themselves without other complications, these are becoming much more dominant in the work of most major chefs.

Enhancing and maintaining that popularity means becoming involved with your local community to help your friends, neighbors and fellow citizens learn how to make those judgments, how to distinguish flavors and textures as they come out of the earth, roaster or barrel.

Slow Food does this very well. The SDIFF is attempting to create a specific event dedicated to these principles in the hopes that we can help orient our paesani (who share our town with us) to the joys to be found in learning about our cuisine. We expect to make this into an annual event that everyone looks forward to, learns from, and finds ways to use that learning joyfully.

The show at [MoPA](#) [4] is open to all, suggested donations of \$5.

Vendors and sponsors interested in participating in [Piazza CineCucina](#) [5] can visit the website or call 619.233.3901

Advance tickets for the movie and Slow Food presentation can be purchased beginning in April at the [San Diego Film Festival's Official Website](#) [8]

A limited number of tickets will be available at the [Birch North Park Theatre](#) [2]'s door the day of the show. Cost of theater ticket also includes a special Restaurant promotion program designed



especially for this celebration.

The San Diego Italian Film Festival is a non-profit 501c(3) organization dedicated to sharing Italian culture through film with San Diego Audiences. Italian films with English subtitles are screened throughout the year in a variety of venues. All films are open to the public. Please visit the website for full details, including addresses, start times, complete movie schedule and movie reviews.

Related Links: <http://slowfoodurbansandiego.org> [6]
<http://www.sandiegoitalianfilmfestival.com> [3]

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[2] <http://www.birchnorthparktheatre.net>

[3] <http://www.sandiegoitalianfilmfestival.com>

[4] <http://www.mopa.org>

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