

Southern Italy Flavors in New York

Michele & Charles Scicolone (March 02, 2010)



At Il Gattopardo Restaurant -- classic Neapolitan dishes -- Polpettone, Gatto di Patate, Paccheri alla Genovese and La Pastiera

From the moment we arrived at [Il Gattopardo](#) [2], we felt as if we had stepped by magic directly from the streets of New York into a restaurant in Naples. Situated on the ground floor of a classic New York brownstone, the dining room is long and narrow with an inviting glass-roofed garden at the rear. Gianfranco Sorrentino, the owner, greeted us warmly and showed us to a cozy table in the simply decorated all-white dining room.

Gianfranco told us that his idea for the restaurant came from his desire to bring authentic Southern Italian cooking to New York. He chose the name Il Gattopardo, The Leopard, as homage to the novel by Tomasi di Lampedusa that depicted the waning years of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, with its capital at Naples, then one of the greatest cities of Europe. At first he thought he would include food from the rest of Southern Italy also, but when Gianfranco saw how popular his Neapolitan recipes



were with his customers, he decided to make them the theme of the restaurant.

On the menu at Il Gattopardo are dishes typical of Naples that are not easily found elsewhere in New York, such as Polpettone, meatloaf made with ground meats, salame and mortadella stuffed with a hard cooked egg which Gianfranco told us his mother used to make from odds and ends she found in the refrigerator. Gatto di Patate is a rich casserole of mashed potatoes mixed with prosciutto, salame, mozzarella and Parmigiano Reggiano.

Michele was delighted when she saw the Paccheri alla Genovese on the menu. Its name is often attributed to sailors from Genoa who may have introduced it to Naples centuries ago. Pasta alla Genovese is a dish she grew up with, made according to her Grandmother from Procida's (an island in the Bay of Naples) treasured recipe. It consists of beef pot roast slow cooked in a thick onion ragu. The ragu is served as a first course over the pasta, while the beef is saved for a secondo. Another Neapolitan classic is la Pastiera, a ricotta and grain-filled pie delicately scented with orange flower water and cinnamon. Michele said it, too, reminded her of her grandmother's cooking.

The chef at Il Gattopardo is Vito Gnazzo, a native of Felitto, near Salerno outside of Naples. According to Gianfranco, the two research every day to find classic dishes to present at the restaurant. A few years ago Gianfranco suggested they add baccala, salt cod, to the menu. Vito was unsure if the customers would like it, but they gave it a try. Both were surprised at how well it was received. Now you can find at least one or two variations on baccala on the menu, including baccala in casserole with black olives, capers, potatoes, and cherry tomatoes; baccala ravioli; and baccala in a salad. Another specialty is baby goat, which is not always on the menu, but is available whenever the small farmer in Upstate New York can supply it.

Il Gattopardo opened on September 15, 2001 shortly after the devastating attack on the Twin Towers. At first it was a struggle to get supplies and there were few customers, but with the help of his staff who all pitched in and did extra work, the restaurant finally began to catch on. Now more than 90% of his clientele are regulars who return again and again.

Gianfranco said that he has seen many changes in Italian restaurants in this country since he first arrived here from his native Italy in 1984. The biggest difference is in the availability of top quality ingredients, especially those from his region of Campania. He uses the best pasta from Gragnano or Torre Annunziata, oregano from the Cilento and bufala ricotta and mozzarella. His customers, many of whom live or work in the neighborhood, or who are visiting the Museum of Modern Art across the street, are well travelled and appreciate his efforts.

Gianfranco personally selects the wines for the restaurant. He has created a list of Southern Italian wines primarily from Campania, Sicily and Puglia, that complement his menu and offer good value to his clientele. He makes a point of educating his staff about the wines by holding weekly tastings and annual seminars to familiarize them with the wines on the list.

Gianfranco is enthusiastic about the future of Italian cuisine. He said that originally, Italian food in restaurants in this country was made with whatever ingredients the cook could find, but now there is an enormous market for first quality ingredients from Italy. "Everyone loves Italian food, and once they taste it made with genuine ingredients, they always come back for more," he said. "I tell the distributors there is a huge opportunity for them to sell Italian food products here, especially outside of centers like New York or Chicago."

When asked what he thought about the restaurant business, he replied, "I wake up every morning with a smile. Thank God, I like my job."

Il Gattopardo

33 West 54th Street, New York, New York.

Lunch: Monday - Sunday 12 PM - 3PM:

Dinner: Monday - Saturday 5PM - 11:30 PM; Sunday 5 PM - 10 PM



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