

U.S. The Evolution of Italian Food

Natasha Lardera (July 25, 2011)



The Summer Fancy Food Show ended with a lively discussion on the future of Italian cuisine in America and on how authentic Italian food ingredients and wines fit with the modern concept of fusion, which blends high-quality components with other cuisines of the world.

Fusion or Confusion? A New Century for Italian Cooking in America was held at the Darlington House in Washington D.C. and it was the last special event organized by the ITC at this year's edition of the [Summer Fancy Food Show](#) [2]. Over breakfast, four panelists (two chefs, Luigi Diotaiuti of [Al Tiramisu](#) [3] and Mike Isabella of [Graffiato](#) [4]) and two food writers ([John F. Mariani](#) [5] and Corby Kummer), discussed the future of Italian cooking in America and the use of authentic Italian ingredients.

"It was a lively and engaging discussion," Trade Commissioner and Executive Director for the United States Aniello Musella said, "it raised questions on how authentic Italian food ingredients and wines fit with the modern concept of fusion, which blends high-quality components with other cuisines of the world."

The question for the panelists was simple: "Does getting creative and innovating on nonna's traditional recipes mean giving up authenticity of ingredients in the kitchen?"



Italian born chef Luigi Diotaiuti represented the traditional side of the panel. Chef Luigi opened Al Tiramisu in 1996 and his place is considered the most authentic Italian restaurant in Washington DC where he serves traditional Italian fare using fresh, high-quality ingredients and follows his lifetime cooking philosophy "Respect the ingredients, the food and the people." According to his stories, finding the right Italian ingredients was rather difficult at first.

"When I opened my restaurant, I had problems getting fresh fish to put on the menu, now I get it in just a few hours. I had gnocchi alla romana on the menu but nobody would order them because they didn't understand how gnocchi could not be made of potatoes but they were made of semolina instead, or I had to come out of the kitchen and show them radicchio and fennel because they had no idea what they were... now things are different, through the years people have become more educated in Italian cuisine."

According to writer John Mariani (author of *How Italian Food Conquered the World*) Italian food had a humble beginning in this country but improves as decades went by. "Fashion helped the food business quiet a bit. In the mid eighties the fashion scene moved from Paris to Milan, and the media presented big designers having dinner with fashion editors or other personalities in Italian restaurants... it all looked so good... trendy... fashionable. Then a decade later, the craze of the Mediterranean diet had its start and that introduced the health issue... so eating Italian was not just cool anymore, it was also good for you."

Of course through the years Italian food and its preparation developed even more and now we are witnessing a rise of "Italian inspired" places.

Mike Isabella's Graffiato was only two and a half weeks old at the time of the breakfast. "At Graffiato Chef Isabella serves seasonal, artisanal pizzas and small plates inspired by the food he grew up eating in New Jersey prepared by his Italian-American grandmother. With heavy influence from Chef Isabella's Mediterranean and Latin culinary training, Graffiato is anything but a traditional Italian eatery. Roasted potato gnocchi, chicken thighs with pepperoni sauce, bone marrow with cured lemon, and king crab legs with sea urchin and guanciale are a few of the signature wood oven roasted dishes."

"Very few ingredients are from as I prefer to use local products," chef Isabella said, "I am a third generation Italian and I grew up on my grandmother's food and have given her recipes my own touch, that is why I call it 'Italian inspired'."

There are those who think that if a chef was not born in Italy (and some have not even traveled there) he has no right to claim he is making Italian food and say that he is evolving Italian cuisine. Chef Luigi had his answer on this issue. "In Italy it is not just about food it is about culture, that's why some think others cannot do it, it's not that they lack the skills, they just don't have that culture. They are amazing chefs and they know what they are doing, they just come from a different culture, that's all... but as Italians we are a bit protective of our heritage."

We are protective but we also are proud gourmands... and 'Italian inspired' definitely makes us proud. Being an inspiration is part of being the best.

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