

Restaurant Royalty, Marisa May

Natasha Lardera (January 31, 2013)



A closer look at the life and career of Marisa May, co-owner of SD26 on Madison Square Park and daughter of legendary restaurateur Tony May.

Her playground growing up was an iconic place by the name the [Rainbow Room](#) [2], and we're not talking about a room with walls painted in red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet but the upscale restaurant and nightclub on the 65th floor of the [GE Building](#) [3] in Rockefeller Center. Indeed, her father, iconic Italian restaurateur [Tony May](#) [4], was for years (1968-1986), first as General Manager and then owner, running the show for the elite and influential of New York could gather to socialize over cocktails, dine on fine cuisine, and dance to the strains of legendary jazz big bands on a revolving floor.

Little [Marisa May](#) [5], born and raised a true New Yorker, 1st generation Italian-American, would sit at the table, or sometimes even fall asleep, by the likes of [Ella Fitzgerald](#) [6], [Frank Sinatra](#) [7] or [Luciano Pavarotti](#) [8], completely unaware of their fame and fortune. Those were her friends, her play dates basically, and without even knowing it that playground became the place where she

learned first hand, mostly from her dad, the restaurant business.

“My father was an immigrant from [Torre del Greco](#) [9] who came here to build a life,” Marisa explains to i-Italy, “He was poor, and he was the oldest of eight children who basically had to take care of his brothers and parents. He started working on cruise ships at 12 years of age to send money back home. His hard work paid off and his dedication to bringing real Italian food in American restaurants was often challenged but definitely successful. I could not imagine not following in his steps.”

Today, Marisa as the co-owner of [SD26](#) [10] with her father Tony May, brings her experience, charm and unique combination of attentive New York service and traditional Italian courtesy to reignite the New York City restaurant scene.

Marisa is a brunette during the winter months and a blonde in the summer time, she is an only child whose godmother is Mrs. Maccioni (wife of [Sirio Maccioni](#) [11], one of Manhattan's most celebrated restaurateurs), an hopeless romantic who foresees the future of the countless couples who sit at the tables of her restaurant and who is waiting to meet her true love, a strong believer in astrology, a real entertainer and restaurant royalty.

“I went to NYU and I studied Musical Theater, although I knew it was not going to be my career. I did take some electives in Hotel and Restaurant Management because I knew that was my calling. Working in a restaurant you get the best of both worlds: I love people, I love food and I love the theatrics of a restaurant. Every night you are part of a show, but we do it in a genuine way. I was always a natural in the business. When you walk into our restaurant you basically walk into our home. We spend more time here than we do in the actual places where we live. I was always the hostess in my home growing up. We always entertained in our house and had great chefs, restaurateurs and celebrities coming from Italy and other corners of the world. In our restaurant things don't change, I am still the hostess and our guests are still our friends.”

Marisa first began answering phones and taking reservations at the Rainbow Room and later at Il Palio, “My father did not pay me, but my reward where my summers in Italy getting to know different areas of the country and being exposed to the varied authentic cuisine and service of each region. “When I was in college I was in a sorority but if my father called because the restaurant was swamped I had to leave the party I was at right away.”

After graduating from NYU, Marisa May took on the full-time role of General Manager at [San Domenico NY](#) [12] at Central Park South. There she earned the nickname “Bossina” or “little boss” for her strong involvement in the restaurant and its management.

“At first I spent a lot of time in the kitchen helping to make the bread and pasta, or on the floor taking care of table, but then I realized, like the front of the house was where I really belonged.” For over twenty years, San Domenico New York at Central Park South set the standards for contemporary Italian cuisine in America, offering dishes inspired by what is served in Italy's fine kitchens. “I like to believe that we touch our guests' lives in some way... and not just with our delicious Italian food. I, just like my father, am old fashioned this way. We go to the tables to greet and get to know everyone. There are millions of chefs, restaurants and great recipes around and you need to stand out. Our service, our personal touch, definitely makes us stand out.”

The father-daughter team is simply unique, one of a kind, “Very different from the father-son relationships out there. There is no competition among us, I don't want to be my father, I am my own person, I have a different eye, a different touch and this creates a balance between the two generations that is simply successful.”

“Being a woman in the business is very challenging,” Marisa continues, “The restaurant business is still a man's world. I think a lot of it is because of the physical and mental work, all the demanding hours. It's very hard to balance life, especially if you want to be married and have children, if you want time for yourself or to spend with friends. Time management is crucial but because I was basically born into it, it was, and still is, all natural to me.”

After the closing of San Domenico New York at Central Park South, the “May team” moved on to a

new venue, a place Marisa calls “my baby.” Since 2009 the legacy of Tony and Marisa May continues at a new address, 19 Madison Square Park, at SD26 where the next generation of Italian fine dining is achieved through “the essence of the Italian designed space, the contemporary interpretation of Italian cuisine, and a 750 labels Wine List.”

“I thought of the name SD26,” Marisa May “we wanted customers to remember the old San Domenico and enjoy a new, more approachable San Domenico that is right with today and is projected into the future, without forgetting the past. We are on 26th street on Madison Square Park... yes another park, that has to mean something.”

SD26 is the first American restaurant designed by internationally acclaimed Italian designer [Massimo Vignelli](#) [13], who took the 14,000 square foot raw space and created a tri-level restaurant featuring rich colors of gold and red and artwork from renowned fiber artist [Sheila Hicks](#) [14] (the “star ceiling” is also known as “Marisa's ceiling,” as she is a strong believer in astrology). Offering guests multiple dining and drinking settings, SD26 features a 70-seat wine bar and lounge, a 138-seat dining room featuring an exhibition kitchen with a Chef's Table for up to 8 guests (this is one of Marisa's wishes come true), a 65-seat private dining mezzanine and a Salumeria (this is Tony May's wish come true) in the main dining room. A 14-seat wine cellar downstairs features an esteemed collection of vintage and special format bottles.

The food is definitely one of the main characters of the show and Executive Chef [Matteo Bergamini](#) [15] has created a one of a kind menu of contemporary Italian cuisine that includes historic dishes such as Egg-Yolk filled Ravioli with Truffled Butter and innovative delicacies such as Linguine di Gragnano with Clams, Grape Tomatoes & Parsley, smoked with Applewood.

“The restaurant life is a real challenge,” Marisa concludes, “You must be willing to sacrifice a lot but it is also very rewarding. If this is your calling, just answer to it. You will not regret it.”

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