

Two Brothers from Salerno, the Panuozzo and the Saint

L. A. (July 20, 2016)



This is a story of emigration like so many others, or so it may seem. But in our opinion, this one has a special determination. We are talking about two brothers originally from Salerno, Fabio and Ciro Casella. About the patron saint of their city, San Matteo, who “protected” their business in New York. We are talking about their family bonds, about panuozzo – a sandwich made with pizza dough, and about their passion for coffee amongst so many other things.

“I am from Salerno, I came here for the first time in 1986, but then I went back to Italy,” Ciro Casella begins telling us while sipping a coffee. “Ever since my brother and I were young boys

we chased the American Dream... Also my grandma is American and my mother’s four brothers all live here.”

But Ciro wasn’t ready for America the first time he came here. He went back to Salerno, did his military service and got married.



His life seemed like it would unfold there – but that wasn't to be the case. The American Dream was always in his heart, especially because his brother had stayed in America. He had to go back, to go back to Fabio. After several years, he left again for New York, this time to stay for good.

With the Saint's protection

The two brothers opened their first restaurant on 2nd Avenue, the original San Matteo, and two and a half years later they opened the second, Il Salumaio.

Then in 2015 they fulfilled a new dream by opening the San Matteo Pizza Espresso Bar, a place that unites the pizza of San Matteo and the cuisine of Salumaio with a bar serving alcohol. But of the three restaurants, it is clear that Ciro has most affection for the original San Matteo. "I worked there while it was being built, I took care of the interior so it has a real identity. Everything that happened afterwards originated from this place."

The cuisine that they decided to make is from the Salerno area. But everything comes under the "protection" of a saint... we talk about it half-jokingly and half-seriously. San Matteo is in fact the Patron Saint of Salerno and his image is found all over the first restaurant.

"We started with nine tables and the image of the saint, a simple cuisine made inside a wood-fire oven, offering everything that could be done with that oven." Then, almost like a 'miracle', the other restaurants came...

How difficult was it?

It was difficult, but it was also easy. The biggest challenge was that six years ago no one knew who we were, but we believed in our project and in our product. Right now people like the place; they have a good time here, almost as if they were at home. It is a small restaurant, but actually New York City is like that – made up of small spaces. Critics responded well, from Zagat to Michelin and the New York Times.

From panuozzo to coffee

Let's talk about food. You brought over the panuozzo—a product from Gragnano, on the Sorrento coastline, which wasn't known here. What is it?

It is pizza dough in sandwich-form. It is put in the oven, stretched, and comes out like a sandwich. Then you open it, season it and either eat it as it is—with mozzarella, prosciutto, or caprese style—or instead you put it back in the oven with various fillings. Our most successful panuozzo is the Bartolomei that comes with roast pork from Ariccia, arugula and mozzarella. It is dedicated to the great football player, Agostino Di Bartolomei [1955-1994 editor's note], an international sportsman who began his career with my favorite team, Salernitana.

Is there another dish that may make our readers want to visit you even more?

At San Matteo we make an eggplant parmigiana, baked in the oven with caciocavallo cheese. Everything that we cook in the restaurant is made in our wood-fired oven. At Salumaio we make a typical Campania cuisine instead: Scialatielli ai Frutti del Mare, for example, and then various different antipasti. In the new venue, the San Matteo Pizza Espresso Bar you can enjoy the specialties of both the other restaurants, in a better location with greater comfort. We are in the process of opening other commercial realties, but I don't want to lose the identity of San Matteo, it will never be a franchise.



And what about coffee? You are known to be a great coffee lover, have you also produced your own blend?

Coffee is indeed my passion. I think of coffee as the start of a day and the end of a meal, it is essential. You may eat because you are hungry or stressed, but you drink a coffee to enjoy it, like a dessert – you know if it's good and if it's not good. I have put a lot of effort into my coffee, and I have had some great recognition.

This is my next project. A classic Campania-style coffee shop, not based on alcohol but on a good breakfast, coffee and excellent paninis. We are looking for a location.

Salerno and the family

It is undoubtedly because of you and your brother Fabio that New York knows more about Salerno today. You are great promoters of your city.

Salerno has a coastline, the Amalfi Coast, famous all over the world, with thirteen Blue Flag beaches. But we promote internal Campania too, which is also full of beauty, like all of Italy. We are not parochial.

However strong your ancestral bond with your land of origin, it is family that is actually at the center of your life.

One of my two daughters, Alessia, stayed in Salerno while the other, Marika, came to New York. She works with me and attends an English school. She wants to carry on our project, she has taken the business to heart, she likes it; her fiancé is also here and so is my nephew, Vincenzo.

What do your parents think about their American children and grandchildren?

They are proud. In Italy we know how many problems there are for young people finding work. My parents worked all their lives and now they can enjoy their retirement, without having to help their children financially. This is a great satisfaction for them.

And what's the secret of success for anyone who wants to come here?

You must be patient, you can't have everything in life all at once. I worked for months as a dishwasher and it was the best job because it taught me how the business works.

ALL ON 2ND AVENUE

[San Matteo](#) [2]

Pizzeria e Cucina

1559 2nd Ave

(at 81th St.)

San Matteo

Pizza Espresso Bar

1739 2nd Ave

(at 90th St.)



Il Salumaio

1731 2nd Ave

(btw 89th & 90th St.)

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