

Chef Fortunato Nicotra Serves up Sicilian Summer in NYC

Roberta Cutillo (July 03, 2019)



We were invited to taste the new summer menu at Felidia, one of New York's finest restaurants owned Lidia Bastianich. We were so impressed by our meal, a culinary trip to Sicily, that we thought we should not only tell you about it but also take the opportunity to interview Fortunato Nicotra, the Executive Chef at Felidia since 1996. We discussed his story, his influences, his and Lidia's shared cooking philosophy and how all of this informs his remarkable creations.

The best thing about great cuisine is how it manages to transport you to another place, to evoke a feeling so vivid that you momentarily forget where you really are. That's what happened when we tasted Chef Fortunato Nicotra's new summer menu at Lidia Bastianich's Felidia Restaurant in Manhattan.

Maybe helped by the pleasant and familiar atmosphere of the restaurant itself reminiscent of an Italian home, we quickly found ourselves in Sicily, where Chef Fortunato is from, savoring a variety of dishes which, though not strictly traditional in the sense that they follow specific recipes, are distinctly Italian in their philosophy and Sicilian in their taste. Even though, as the Chef



explains, they are the product of various influences and are always informed by the season and the land they were made in.

So, where are you from and how was your passion for cooking born?

I was born in Sicily and then moved to Turin with my family when I was 6 years-old. My parents put me with a Piedmontese lady who was always cooking, I remember that on thursdays she already began to prepare food to give to her sons on the weekend.

Then I studied hospitality and cooking in Turin. I also studied in France, in Germany, then worked in restaurants in Turin. Then one day a restaurator from Turin asked me to go to Sicily to help him launch a restaurant, Villa Marchese in Milazzo. I went and then stayed and became the executive chef. We got a Michelin star. Afterwards I was the executive chef in another restaurant in Milazzo, at Villa Esperanza, which also got a Michelin star.

And what type of cuisine did you make then?

Sicilian. Growing up I saw a lot of Piedmontese cuisine and at school that's what I trained in but my mother's imprint always remained with me, she also cooked.

Then, being in Sicily I used Sicilian products and that informs the type of cuisine you make. I used extremely local products, some very particular, like what we call "orecchie di mare," which are abalones, a type of shellfish, very hard, pearly, and usually divers would get them, off of dinghies, not even fishing boats.

And local vegetables too.

We also cooked for very few people. At Villa Marchese, we also did big groups in one part of the venue, for conferences and such but the villa's a la carte menu served a room of about 30 people. This changes the way you cook.

How did you end up in New York?

I felt I had given everything I could in Sicily. Back then, in Italy there weren't many restaurants below Naples.

And I had always dreamed of going to America so at 33 I called a friend who had contacts there. He knew Lidia and she was looking for a chef then. So I went there and I was supposed to stay six months, a year but instead I've been here since 1996.



I know you also met your wife here.

Yes, she was the first person I spoke to because she spoke Italian. She's American but she studied Art History in Florence with Lidia's daughter and then she started working at Felidia a few months before me.

I like to say that she hired me because I spoke to her, from a telephone booth. If it weren't for that booth I wouldn't be here now.

And how was New York from a professional point of view?

Bad. (laughs)

It was hard. You couldn't get the products. And the numbers were different. Here the a la carte menu serves 200-300 people.

And there's a lot of pressure. When the New York Times came... a lot of pressure. And that can turn into stress or it can turn into energy and thankfully it turned into energy.

Tell us about working with Lidia Bastianich. What's your relationship like? Do you decide the menus together?

We come from opposite regions we could say but we have the same philosophy.

And here in the United States there isn't much regionality, (in Italian cuisine, ed.) it's a question of philosophy. We focus on the quality and seasonality of the product. I never prepare products out of season, you won't find asparagus in the winter here.

Seasonality is very important in Italy but not so diffused here.

Not at all. It doesn't exist here.

But they're starting to understand it here too.

So the New York clientele has changed over the course of the years?

Yes, very much so.

Now the people who come here know real Italian cuisine, they compare the food to the one you can find in Italy. Before they didn't have anything to compare it to, just American or Italian American food you find here.



Other than seasonality, what are the main elements that characterize your approach to cuisine?

Vegetables are extremely important. They are what characterizes a dish, what distinguishes it. Because maybe two restaurants might use the same meat but what makes the dish unique are the vegetables that come with it.

What other influences besides the Sicilian imprint can be found in your cuisine?

Certainly Piedmont for the winter and fall menus, so the woman who hosted me, her ravioli, the roasts she used to make.

We tasted the summer menu and every dish really felt like summer. We also noticed you used some unexpected ingredients, for example, corn, which isn't very present in Italian cuisine.

Yes, it's used in Piedmont sometimes but it's not very common.

Here corn is one of the most local and seasonal products you can find. So the approach again is the Italian one.

Final question: future prospects? Do you plan on staying here, going back to Italy?

No, I'm staying here.

I go to Italy for vacation, maybe I'll retire there but I could never get used to the rhythm again.

In case you were wondering, here is what we had for dinner at Felidia:

For antipasto, we tasted the Tutto Crudo, a delightful mixed fish carpaccio with artfully arranged thin slices, shavings almost, of raw tuna, salmon, and branzino, speckled with tomato, cucumber and horseradish. This was probably one of the best dishes: both citrusy and herby, it was very light and delicate, the perfect starter.

The other appetizer we tried, the more substantial vignarola "carbonara," was no less exciting. It consisted of a sunny side up egg placed atop a small mount of seasonal vegetables (including an incredibly tender artichoke heart) and drizzled in parmesan and crispy bacon bits. So it's a carbonara



without the pasta. And with vegetables. Guilt-free and delicious.

Then came the pasta dishes. The first one was the Cappellacci, a type of ravioli served with lobster, burrata and corn, which somehow remained extremely fresh despite the richness of the ingredients.

The second was the Filei, hand-rolled pasta in a unique rabbit ragu. As Chef Nicotra explained, this is the summer version of the ragu, since rabbit meat is much lighter and was mixed with carrots and n'duja for that extra touch of spiciness. Overall the flavor was strong but not too overwhelming and some of the meat was ground while some of it was cut into small pieces, giving the dish an interesting and very balanced texture.

The two secondi - or "main" dishes - were tuna and beef. The first was lightly grilled on one side and accompanied by a delightful caponata, a typically Sicilian eggplant-based salad with a sweet and sour taste. The meat was a wagyu beef tagliata, served with mushrooms, carrots, and a summer salad. Both extremely flavorful and so tender they melt in your mouth.

Finally, it was time for the desert: a thin crostata - or tart - topped with braised summer plums and a scoop of refreshing fennel gelato, so light and delicate that, while we repeatedly stated how full we were, we devoured the whole thing and would have gladly eaten a second.

In sum, everything was delicious with a subtle but unique twist. Even the bread was special, particularly the black bread which had a strong olive taste but wasn't oily in the least and was served with a wonderful light green dip, a sort of lighter hummus/guacamole variation, possibly made with fava beans. We thoroughly enjoyed all the dishes we tried and would gladly go back to taste some of the other ones we caught glimpses of as they went by to neighboring tables.

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