

A Cheese-Centric Trattoria

Kayla Pantano (December 15, 2016)



Naples native Gianfranco Sorrentino has over 30 years of restaurant management experience around the globe and now owns three flourishing Italian restaurants in Manhattan. His most recent undertaking, Mozzarella & Vino, is located right across the street from the MoMA and serves inexpensive, traditional Southern Italian cuisine without sacrificing quality.

As the saying suggests, good things come in three. Husband-and-wife team, Gianfranco and Paula Bolla Sorrentino, along with Partner and Executive Chef [Vito Gnazzo](#) [2], own a trilogy of Italian restaurants in Manhattan—a long way from Gianfranco’s native Naples. First, they opened [Il Gattopardo](#) [3] as scheduled a few days after the 9/11 tragedies, demonstrating the city’s collective strength and resilience. It quickly grew into one of New York’s preeminent power-Italian



restaurants widely popular for dishing out traditional Southern Italian comfort food.

Confident in their initial success, they embarked on an ambitious project, renovating the ground floor of an early 20th century illustrious apartment building to house [The Leopard at des Artistes](#) [4]. Akin to the former, the restaurant is founded in top quality fare, hospitality, and outstanding service. However, the restored [Howard Chandler Christy](#) [5] murals that adorn the walls and the unparalleled wine list are equally as enticing.

Moving Il Gattopardo down the block to the historically landmarked Rockefeller Townhouses three years ago, the youngest sibling of the restaurant family is [Mozzarella & Vino](#) [6], located opposite the [MoMA](#) [7]. Giving the space more informality with a rustic interior, the menu reflects the simplicity and authenticity of Italian cuisine and showcases the best products from Campania.

Italian-Born World Traveler Settles in New York

At the age of fourteen, in order to pay for his studies, Sorrentino entered the industry as a commis at a five-star hotel in Capri before advancing to the renowned [Quisisana](#) [8]. Quickly discovering his fervor for food, he ventured to London to work at [The Dorchester](#) [9]. Thereafter, he had the great fortune to work at the [Four Seasons](#) [10] in Tokyo. When he was 30, he moved overseas to the US and eventually settled in New York, where he realized that this was his home. He opened his first bar on the Lower East Side, and in 1990, he proceeded to open Sette MoMa, where he started working with Chef Gnazzo. Ten years later, the prevailing Il Gattopardo group was born.

From Salerno to the Sorrentinos

“Vito is like the great Italian wines; he is absolutely becoming better and better with age,” Sorrentino raves of Chef Gnazzo. Hailing from the same region—born and raised in Salerno, he began his culinary career in Milan at the three-Michelin-Star [Antica Osteria del Ponte](#) [11]. He immigrated to the States in the 1980s, working in Los Angeles, before moving to NY, where he became the artist of the Sorrentinos’ kitchens. “I never met a chef who has such a respect for the ingredients and his craft. Even after so many years in the US, he is one of the very few Italian chefs who has kept the Italian taste,” Sorrentino continues. According to Gnazzo, the main ingredient derives from the heart. “The food is prepared with lots of passion. Without this fundamental ingredient, the food, the hospitality and the service, wouldn’t be the same.”

Low-Priced High-Quality

Mozzarella & Vino distinguishes itself from its counterparts with a more affordable, seasonally inspired menu with a heavy emphasis on Mozzarella di Bufala Campana and affettati served in a fast and easy way with the Italian approach to exceptional quality.

Though the moderately priced menu is simple, the freshness and flavors are anything but. Everything is made on-site from scratch and twice a week the best of ingredients are flown in from small artisanal farms in Campania. “As we all know, the Cucina Italiana is a cuisine of fresh, natural ingredients, and we apply this concept to all of our restaurants. We go twice a year to Italy to taste new products and to see how our producers work,” Sorrentino proudly says. Gnazzo also owns a property in Felitto, where he cultivates wild fennel and harvests the pollen, which he brings back to incorporate into certain courses.

Through their careful, handpicked process, each season brings a collection of different dishes. “In the fall we might add a traditional borlotti bean soup scented with prosciutto, hearty slow-braised beef tenders with mashed potatoes, or an Italian sausage dish,” Gnazzo explains. However, the classics will always be on deck, like homemade meatballs with fresh tomato sauce, ravioli, and lasagna. This methodology translates to sweets as well. On his most recent annual summer trip to Salerno, Gnazzo collaborated with the acclaimed pastry chef [Pietro Macellaro](#) [12] to create distinctive desserts.

All About the Wine and Cheese



The unassuming space boasts a chic and inviting atmosphere with dark wood tables, a sleek enoteca style bar, and a glass-encased, sun-drenched back patio. The restaurant balances modern design and old-fashioned hospitality that makes you feel at home. And who doesn't love wine and cheese when visiting family? "We have the best buffalo mozzarella from both Cilento, which is sweeter, and from Caserta, which is saltier," Sorrentino acclaims. "We also have an array of buffalo milk cheeses, like caciocavallo, treccione, smoked mozzarella, butter, and so on."

Their small wine list focuses on showcasing smaller family estates and independent Italian winemakers. "With our Enomatic wine dispenser made in Montepulciano we can store opened bottles of wines in perfect condition for over a month. This allows us to serve rare and expensive wine by the glass," Gnazzo says. In fact, Sorrentino personally selects every bottle. "He is always in search of something new and worthy that pairs perfectly with my dishes."

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