

Niaf 43rd Anniversary Gala in Review



Family, friends, music, wine and food! Now that's Italian! On Saturday, October 13, The National Italian American Foundation's 43rd Anniversary Gala hosted more than 2,000 Italian Americans and special guests from Italy in a weekend-long celebration of our heritage and culture at the Washington Marriott Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, D.C.

The nation's premier Italian American gathering, this year's [NIAF \[2\]](#) Gala was presented by the 2018 NIAF [Region of Honor, Puglia \[3\]](#); so, the weekend's theme was Pugliese, from wines and cuisine to décor and dancing. Highlighting the schedule of events was Saturday evening's black-tie Gala Awards Dinner, featuring a feast of Pugliese-inspired dishes and wines while recognizing the outstanding achievements of six honorees who have made distinctive contributions in their professional fields and toward making a better world.

This year one of the big sponsors of the Gala was EICMA (Esposizione Internazionale Ciclo Motociclo e Accessori) the world-famous two-wheeler exhibition that for over a century has brought to Milan all the major players in the industry worldwide. EICMA is devising a comprehensive plan to promote its trade fair in the U.S. and the NIAF Gala was an event they could not miss.



Following the invocation by Reverend [Ezio Marchetto](#) [4], C.S., of the Holy Rosary Church in Washington, D.C., and the Italian and United States Anthems sung by Italian tenor Marco Fiorante, NIAF Co-Chairpersons [Patricia de Stacy Harrison](#) [5] and [Gabriel Battista](#) [6] welcomed a full-capacity ballroom of guests.

“Welcome to this incredible celebration of our shared heritage, and welcome to our friends from the NIAF 2018 Region of Honor, Puglia,” said Harrison, as she recognized the evening’s honorees and VIPs seated on the dais. Pointing out that the Gala draws friends and guests from across the nation and abroad, she ended her comments to loud applause: “We’re all Italians tonight.”

While guests started dining with the centerpiece platters assorted charcuterie and cheeses, and marinated artichokes, sundried tomatoes and olives (thank you Gala sponsor Cibo Italia), alongside the famous Pugliese bread of Altamura (provided by Gala sponsor Oropan), Battista reminded guests of the importance of their support of the Foundation: “You make it possible for NIAF to continue to provide scholarships for Italian American students nationwide. We cannot do this without you.... Grazie mille.”

After thanking NIAF Board members as well as the hundreds of volunteers who make the Gala Weekend and NIAF’s mission possible, 43rd Anniversary Gala Chairman [John F. Calvelli](#) [7] made and announcement that led the audience from awe to applause. “Ambassador [Peter Secchia](#) [8], a member of our Board for many years, an individual who has given much to this organization, and helped set up the Voyage of Discovery [which takes] young Italian Americans to Italy to understand the incredible rich culture of that nation,” he said, “...is making a \$1.5 million gift” to NIAF to further support and expand that program. “I just heard ‘Wow!’ That is wow!”

Catch a glimpse of the entire weekend by viewing a selection of photographs captured and curated by our house photographers, Andy DelGiudice and Rachel Couch. To see a wider selection of images from the entire weekend, and purchase your photos, [CLICK HERE](#).

In his robust remarks that started with “What a night!” and ended with “Tonight we celebrate our Italian and Italian American identity,” the personable Ambassador of Italy to the United States [Armando Varricchio](#) [9] emphasized the special ties between the United States and Italy, and called for increased promotion of learning the Italian language and increased business and trade between the two longtime allies.

Speaking on behalf of the Region of Honor, President of Puglia Hon. [Michele Emiliano](#) [10] told guests about the allures of Puglia and the celebrities who flock there for its beauty and charm, for special events, even to make films—from Madonna on Instagram to Justin Timberlake and Jessica Biel’s wedding, to Hellen Mirren’s mansion there. “Should it be for holiday or business, for love or friendship—or simply because you long for the scent of fresh Apulian bread and the caressing sea breeze—you shall always be welcome!”

As Master of Ceremonies [Mark DeCarlo](#) [11], TV personality, comedian, travel and foodie expert, and author, took the stage, dinner was being served: orecchiette with sautéed broccoli rabe; braised short ribs with demi-glace; grilled julienne zucchini, red peppers and eggplant; and dauphinoise potatoes. Dessert? Rum-soaked almond sponge cake with chocolate cream and coffee buttercream, topped with a chocolate ganache, followed by Italian coffee from Gala sponsor Lavazza.

DeCarlo opened his remarks by telling guests they were looking at something NIAF’s Galas helped to pay for: “I was a proud NIAF scholarship recipient at UCLA.” Before naming the long list of NIAF Gala sponsors (please view the Gala Sponsor Presentation below) and diving into a laugh-filled monologue about being Italian, he said he just returned from three weeks in Italy “and wandering around the hotel this morning, I feel like I never left.”

Following a video about NIAF’s many educational programs, including the Amb. Peter F. Secchia Voyage of Discovery, the NIAF Congressional Fellowships, and NIAF on Campus, Ripley Lucas-Tagliani, a 2018 Voyage of Discovery participant who studies opera at the Manhattan School of Music, sang a lovely rendition of “O Mio Babbino Caro” from Puccini’s opera “Gianni Schicchi.”



DeCarlo then introduced the first of the evening's distinguished honorees, [Dr. Giovanni Caforio](#) **[12]**, M.D., chief executive officer and chairman of the Board of Bristol-Myers Squibb, whom NIAF awarded The NIAF Leonardo Da Vinci Award In Science and Medicine. Speaking of his home in Italy where he grew up, about medical and cancer research, but mostly about the alliance between the two countries he calls home, he said. "The relationship between the United States and Italy grows stronger and more meaningful."

Next, Honoree Vito Pertosa, a native Pugliese born in Monopoli, and founder of Angel, an industrial and high-technology holding company, received the NIAF Leonardo da Vinci Award in Technology. The briefest of the evening's speakers, Pertosa focused primarily on thanking his colleagues and family for his remarkable success, and thanks NIAF for recognizing his contributions.

As Pertosa returned to his seat on the dais, the ballroom lights dimmed for short clips from the three finalists of The 2018 [Russo Brothers](#) **[13]** Italian American Film Forum, a NIAF-Italian Sons and Daughters of America grant initiative that funds filmmakers depicting and exploring the Italian American experience. Following comments from the podium by NIAF Board Member Basil Russo about the program, his sons, American film and television directors Anthony Russo and Joseph Russo, broke precedent this year. "Because the quality of the films this year" made it difficult to choose a winner, they said, they decided to choose two: Anton Evangelista, whose film "Il Signor Jackson" chronicles the life of a remarkable African American with an Italian spirit; and Tim Moriarty, whose film "The Field Afar" celebrates the life of Fr. [Vincent Capodanno](#). **[14]** a Marine Chaplain during the Vietnam War, who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for bravery, and who is currently under consideration for sainthood.

Following a stirring video documenting the destruction in Italy from earthquakes over the past several years and the role NIAF played in raising \$8 million to assist in the recovery and rebuilding, the evening's third Honoree, [Vincenzo Boccia](#). **[15]** was awarded the NIAF Leonardo da Vinci Award in International Business.

"When beauty ... and technology come into play, Italia is foremost," said the president of Confindustria, The General Confederation of Italian Industry, who spoke of Italian manufacturing and business. But he spoke most poignantly about the cemetery near Salerno where he lives "where a lot of young Americans are buried who sacrificed their lives for the freedom of Europe." He added, "To Them and to the U.S.A., I give my gratitude for being a free man."

Measure for measure, the next Honoree, [Antonio De Matteis](#) **[16]**, chief executive officer of the luxury clothing company Kiton, headquartered in Naples, Italy, attributed his presence there to receive the NIAF Leonardo da Vinci Award in Business to his uncle Ciro Paone, who founded the company in 1968 and taught him to be a professional. What drives the brand's success, he added, is "importance of family and obsession for quality."

After the Georgetown Chimes, the oldest a cappella singing group from Georgetown University, sang Dion's "Runaround Sue" and Frank Sinatra's "Come Fly with Me," NIAF Board Member and Gala Auction Chairman Dr. John Rosa conducted the evening's live auction raising tens of thousands of dollars in support of NIAF's core mission. Live Auction sponsors included once-in-a-lifetime travel excursion, dining experiences and products from Nero Group, [Lidia Bastianich](#). **[17]** Fregoli, Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria, Ferragamo and many others.

Talking about her own life as a post-WWII refugee and immigrant girl in New Jersey and New York where she became one of America's most beloved television chefs, cookbook authors and food-empire entrepreneurs, Honoree Lidia Bastianich, recipient of the One America Award for Entrepreneurship, said "I am an immigrant and, yes, you cannot speak of Italian history unless you speak of immigrants." Paraphrasing Sophia Loren's famous quote about everything she had, she owed to pasta, Bastianich said, "Everything I have, I owe to the phenomenal Italian culinary tradition."

The final of the evening's Honorees, [Carl Schramm](#) **[18]**, recipient of the One America Award for



Entrepreneurship, began explaining how he, of half-Irish half-German descent, came to stand on stage and receive an award. “I can only figure out that I am NIAF’s diversity candidate tonight,” said Schramm, an economist, professor at Syracuse University, world renowned expert on entrepreneurship and philanthropy—and a dedicated Italophile. Then, Schramm closed on a note of gratitude to NIAF and to America, for embracing not just the Italian immigrants, but “all of us who came from all of the various nations....”

Following a lively performance by Argentine opera singer [Carlos DeAntonis](#) [19], singing Andrea Bocelli’s “Con Te Partiro,” Puccini “Nessun Dorma” from the opera “Turandot” and Domenico Modugno’s “Nel blu dipinto di blu,” the Gala Dinner ended with [La Notte della Taranta](#). [20] a folk music and dance group from Puglia, performing the Pizzica, a traditional Pugliese folk dance that brought much of the ballroom to its feet and dancing.

As every year, the After Hours Party in the hotel’s mezzanine brought the best and worst of karaoke talent and kept the dancefloor into the early morning.

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