

“Cucina Italica”? An Exercise in Post-Colonial, Mutual Understanding

Ottorino Cappelli (July 05, 2009)



Can you “cook good and eat well” even if you are not trying to imitate some dinner from some far-off restaurant in Italy? Musings around an interesting article, the politics of “cuisine criticism,” and the strange relationship between Italians and Italian Americans.

In the past few days, while i-Italy has been reporting so intensively about the Italian presence at the Fancy Food Show 2009 in New York, I have been wondering: Why are there so many Italian restaurants in America, but none (to my knowledge) depicts itself as Italian-American? Or, to put it differently, why is it that so many experts engage in such a humble and endless search for “real” Italian cuisine in the New World, while systematically ignoring—if not deriding—real-life Italian-



American cuisine?

It seems like a sort of colonialist attitude to me: well over a century after the first Italian immigrants landed in America, their descendants can't cook really Italian anymore; they invented a hybrid, contaminated taste that bears little resemblance to "the original"—therefore it cannot have any merits of its own. This, nonetheless, should not take away from the Italianate cuisine they have indeed created, a cuisine that has its roots in Italy and has developed, rightfully so, into its own being here in the United States, if not equally so in other parts of the world outside of Italy where we find the progeny of Italian immigrants.

While immersed in these thoughts, I perused my google newsreader and I found an article by Star-Ledger's Teresa Politano, [which I suggest everybody read](#) [2].

Here Politano talks about Joe Cerniglia, a chef who used to work at Gallagher's Steak House in New York and whom you may know from his television appearances.

The way she describes Cerniglia's cuisine at his Bergen, NJ, restaurant Campania—which he bought and re-styled with the help of guru chef Gordon Ramsay—struck me.

From the outside Campania "doesn't appear the least bit atypical," but when you enter "you know you're not in a typical Jersey red-sauce-and-eggplant-Parm Italian restaurant." There, says Politano, chef Cerniglia serves "amazingly progressive and innovative food" plus "traditional Italian-American dishes prepared with such clarity that they seem to transcend their origins."

How does Cerniglia achieve this? Precisely by being himself—i.e. an Italian-American, not an Italian chef:

"Cerniglia is an Italian-American, but he's third generation; as a chef, he doesn't try to replicate some dinner from some far-off restaurant in Italy. He uses American methods, and New Jersey produce, local honey."

That's supposedly a high crime, isn't it? Well, maybe not. Cerniglia just "brightens traditional dishes with a modern energy. ... [E]ven though he knows his way around a chicken Marsala, he's also a progressive foodie."

"He re-interprets standard-issue bruschetta, for example (because it's just wrong to serve tomatoes before they're literally hanging off the vine) with lush zucchini over mascarpone with a hint of lemon zest. He also serves what have to be the best meatballs in New Jersey. ... Veal Saltimbocca (\$23) will not disappoint the old-school traditionalist ... But those meatball (\$5)! These are hands-down Cerniglia's must-have dish. Even Pasquale's Sicilian grandmother would humbly respect these meatballs. Cerniglia would not divulge his secrets, but he did tell us that he doesn't believe in the traditional trinity of meats; beef, he says, makes a meatball taste too much like meatloaf. So his meatballs are made with just pork and veal."

I am not a food expert, and I have never been to Campania (though I believe I will pay it a visit, sooner or later). Nor do I know Teresa Politano (my fault).



But I just believe that this little article raises a number of issues—some, no doubt, involuntarily—that merit serious attention. It seems to suggest that there might indeed be some room for a good, even “progressive” Italian-American cuisine, even though—or, perhaps, exactly because—it doesn’t try to imitate some distant, “original” Italian recipe... and does use American methods and local produce. You might, in other words, “transcend your origins,” run a restaurant that is not “a typical Jersey red-sauce-and-eggplant-Parm Italian restaurant,” while at the same time serve some creatively modified version of meatball-and-spaghetti... and still your food may be good, even excellent. It may be appreciated by Sicilian grandmothers and it may even command some attention on the part of learned “cuisine critics.”

I can see several eyebrows raising here at once. But, rest assured, we’re not going to call this Italian cuisine.

Our friend [Piero Bassetti](#) [3] in Milan would probably call this post-modern phenomenon Cucina Italica: a hybrid indeed, a contaminated, creative, independent product of “civiltà italiana” that still awaits to be recognized, appreciated and judged on its own merits. There will be, of course, a bad and a good Cucina Italica...

Yet, if anything along these lines could at all be argued, then we might start abandoning the colonialist equation: “real Italian = good cuisine; Italian-American = bad cuisine.”

The cultural, historical, even political implications of such an approach would be beyond the reach of a short blog post; but, to my mind, they would be enormous. Just try replacing the term “cuisine” in the equation above with anything else, or skip it altogether. Italians and Italian-Americans are still two worlds apart, rarely amenable to inter-cultural dialogue, even at the kitchen table.

Creating a bridge requires architects better equipped than myself, but i-Italy has been trying something of this sort for over a year—and with some results. Now I wonder whether my friends, who are just starting an ambitious “TasteBook” section here at i-Italy, think I’m just fool.

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