

SD26. A Delightful Combination of Tradition and Modernity

Charles & Michele Scicolone (December 20, 2009)



"I did a restaurant that I think is what the consumer wants today. I give them quality and use only the best ingredients. The dining room has an open kitchen, it creates a lot of movement in the restaurant, like a theater where you can eat well." Interview with Tony and Marisa May, owners of the recently opened SD26, a stylish and contemporary Italian restaurant and wine bar located in the heart of Manhattan

Father and daughter Tony and Marisa May's highly anticipated SD26, a stylish and contemporary Italian restaurant and wine bar, recently opened in Manhattan. The glamorous tri-level space was designed by the renowned Italian designer [Massimo Vignelli](#) [2], perhaps best known for his New York City subway maps.

Tony May is one of the most distinguished professionals in the restaurant world. For decades, he has worked diligently to elevate the image and quality of Italian cuisine in America. He was first general manager, then owner of the [Rainbow Room](#) [3] in Rockefeller Center (1968 to 1986) and later



opened [Palio](#) [4] to great acclaim.

His restaurant [San Domenico](#) [5], which closed last year, was a New York City icon for over 20 years. In 1996, it was chosen as one of only 24 restaurants throughout the world to receive the first Insegna del Ristorante Italiano from the President of the Republic of Italy, distinguishing it as one of the finest Italian restaurants outside of Italy. Tony was a founder of the Gruppo Ristoratori Italiani, an organization devoted to codifying, clarifying and elevating the perception of Italian food and wine. He has served on the GRI board of directors, as well as on the board of the Distinguished Restaurants of North America ([DIRONA](#) [6]) and the [Culinary Institute of America](#) [7], where he helped to establish the Caterina de Medici Restaurant and a course of study on authentic Italian cooking for American students.

Marisa May began working in her father's restaurants when she was in high school. She furthered her education at NYU and by travelling throughout Italy. She was the General Manager of San Domenico and when the restaurant closed, she and her father launched San Domenico Events, a full service event planning company. Known affectionately as "Bossina" or little boss, Marisa is the co-owner of SD26.

To Tony

Why did you decide to open SD26?

We moved from Central Park South because we could not come to an agreement with the landlord in our old space. This place is affordable, and we can seat 350 people -- twice as many as the old place. It was office space before so we could design it as we wanted. I wanted it to be progressive and looking to the future.

People today are not so easy to please. They don't go out to eat because they are hungry, but because they want to have fun. They want to eat as they like, and not just the way the restaurateur recommends. They are looking for an experience, entertainment. Also, with the economic crisis, no matter how much money you have, you can't spend \$100 every night for dinner. It's a lot of money. So I did a restaurant that I think is what the consumer wants today. I give them quality and use only the best ingredients. We are in a continuous search for the best Italian ingredients we can find. The dining room is a theater with the open kitchen and all the guys cooking there in the open. On the other side of the room is the place with the salumeria and cheese station. It creates a lot of movement in the restaurant, like a theater where you can eat well.

Who is the chef at SD26?

Odette Fada, who was with San Domenico for 14 years, is our Executive Chef. Matteo Bergamini, who also worked with us at San Domenico is the Chef de Cuisine. They are two of the top Italian chefs in America. They developed the menu and recipes. They give real Italian taste to everything we do.

My biggest problem is that the American consumer does not understand or recognize Italian food yet. We are way behind where we are supposed to be. Italian food is still a foreign thing to Americans. They think Italian American food is the same as Italian. People don't always understand what we are trying to do, but we will not compromise.

Can you explain more about Italian food?

Italian cuisine is a victim of its own success. Everybody imitates it and we cannot stop them. People



are producing foods and giving them Italian names and we cannot stop them. The only thing that can stop them is education. We need to educate the consumer, not an easy task. The way to do it is by starting with the young people in culinary schools and teach them what Italian food is. That's why I started the [Italian Culinary Foundation](#) [8] -- to teach them that Italian cuisine is a cuisine of product. We bring them the real products -- cheeses, flour, pasta, vinegar -- all kinds of things. The kids and instructors are amazed at how good they are. It is a long term educational process that has to start with the schools.

Your menu at SD26 seems unusual. How did you develop it?

As I said, our cuisine is a cuisine of product. If you look at our menu you will see that it is very different from the usual. We have categories like vegetables and salads, grains and legumes, fish and shellfish, and meats. In each you can find a variety of preparations -- large portions and small, hot and cold, appetizers and main dishes. That way you can eat in a more relaxed way. Order two appetizers, or a half portion of one plus a full portion of another. The way we present the menu, we give the customer a better way, a more enjoyable way, to experience the restaurant.

The Enomatic (an automatic wine dispenser) is the first thing you see when you walk into SD26. Is it there to attract young people and wine connoisseurs?

San Domenico reflected the times when we opened it 22 years ago. Now SD26 is positioned into the future. Every time I have opened a restaurant, I have tried to be a little ahead of things. This has not always been understood, but I am very persistent, I don't give up. With our wine-dispensing unit, you can put in a smart card and have 1 or 2 ounces or a full glass of wine. You can have a little fun tasting wines you may not be able to afford by the bottle.

Why do you have the hand held electronic wine list instead of a traditional book?

I have always had problems with the big heavy wine books with a thousand labels. Its not easy to find something and the waiter never knows where to put it on the table because it is so big and heavy. So I said, 'I want to have a hand held electronic wine list'. To do it, I recruited my friend Stefano Millionini from Italy. You see the label, the information about the grape varieity, vines, and producers. This is something you can't get from a typical wine list. But you have to know how to work the thing. It is still a work I progress. I have 4 sommeliers in addition to the wine list. We have \$100,000 worth of wine in here.

What do customers think about the electronic wine list?

They like it! Many people keep it on the table throughout the meal. Last week, we had Alain Ducasse here. He spent an hour looking at it! He's going to do it in his restaurant -- I guarantee it! Other restaurateurs are interested, too.

How is it working with your daughter, Marisa?

She is very good. She is the best, a natural for the restaurant business. Everybody loves her. She loves what she does and she is sincere. She would like to be a friend to everybody in the city.

To Marisa**How did you get interested in the restaurant business? How is it working with your father?**

I remember when I was a little girl I loved to go to see my father at his restaurant, the Rainbow Room. I loved to see what was going on in the kitchen, the glamour of the restaurant, the theatrics, the music, and great food. I met Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Sinatra and many



other stars.

When I started working in the restaurant, I didn't think it was going to be my whole life. I went to NYU and studied voice and English. I thought of doing it just for the summer. But I didn't know how hard it was going to be to leave.

I never studied the restaurant business, but my father would take me to all the best restaurants in Italy. He taught me everything I know about Italian food and hospitality. I learned all my life from him and I never stop learning from him. He is an incredible boss and inspiration. I am very touched that he actually promoted me to be his partner; we are 50/50 co-owners of SD26.

We are unique. For all the family restaurants and businesses in Italy, they are mostly father and son teams, but we are father and daughter. I'm a mini-Tony May! For a macho Italian, my father is really very liberal -- he even has a female chef.

We've noticed that the staff on the floor of the restaurant is very young, the sommeliers for example.

My father has always believed in young people, always looked for the edge, technology or things other people don't have. He has always been a very hip dad, very cool in his thought process, not old fashioned at all. In most family businesses, the parents are very old fashioned but my father has always been ahead of his time. The ironic thing is I am more old fashioned than he is. He's the one who came up with the idea for the electronic wine list, the Enomatic. I was like, "are you sure you want to do this dad?" But I always trust his opinion, he is always right on.

Can you explain the "quadrifoglio" section of the menu?

The quadrifoglio is a nutritionally balanced menu consisting of 4 small tasting courses. We serve it in a beautiful wooden box, like a bento box, designed by Massimo Vignelli. The idea for the quadrifoglio comes from Milan where it was created so that people could enjoy a nice meal without getting sleepy after lunch. It energizes you. The chef came here from Milan and helped us to create a balanced menu and we have developed a couple of hundred recipes for it. People really seem to like it. It is very popular.

What about some of the classic dishes from San Domenico? Do you still serve them?

We still have the raviolo, it is one of our trademark dishes. Some restaurants are copying it now, but we have heard it is not the same. Our recipe is still a secret. We were the first restaurant to serve pasta made with the chitarra, and Scott Conant (chef of Scarpetta) always says we taught him to make the pasta alla chitarra.

And what is new on the menu at SD26?

We have all kinds of new cheeses and salumi. Roberto Rizzini is our chef in charge of the salumeria and every day he has something new to show me. He loves to talk about them, their history and so on.

How do you like your new neighborhood?

We are excited about it. The whole neighborhood is changing, becoming a destination. We love our new park. Madison Square Park is much more of a neighborhood. We feel the love, the neighborhood has really embraced us. Some of our customers come in 2 or 3 times a week. People have really taken to us. We are now just over 2 months old, and we are still settling and making



changes.

We have eaten at SD 26 several times now. The wine bar area is attractive and fun, with a few small tables and a large communal table near the Enomatic for those who don't want to be too far from the wine. The dining room is comfortable and beautifully appointed and decorated with Mediterranean colors. The open kitchen features a chef's table where you can dine right in the midst of the action. Downstairs there is a Connoisseurs Wine Room which is available for private dinners.

Upstairs there are private party rooms seating up to 150 people. All of this would not amount to much if it were not for the delicious food. Among the salumi, we were delighted with the culatello, pink satiny slices of sweet and salty ham. Michele could live on the Raviolo al'Uovo, though she was very impressed by the Pappardelle al Cinghiale. Charles still talks about the Black Tagliolini with Seafood Ragu and the melt-in the mouth beef cheeks in spiced red Wine.

The wine list is very large. Among the many choices two that Charles recommends are Prosecco Rustico from Nino Franco and the Torgiano Rosso (Rubesco) from Lungarotti.

SD26
19 East 26 Street
New York, New York 10010
212-265-5959
Open for lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday

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