

Enjoying an Italian Meal with the Cristoforo and Amerigo's Menu

Natasha Lardera (January 21, 2015)



Meet Italian actors Francesco Meola and Danilo Ottaviani and their The Cristoforo & Amerigo's Menu, a collection of poems, songs, comic scenes, both in English and in Italian. All the pieces featured in the menu are masterpieces of Italian culture, in all its levels, from the highest to the lowest (from Dante's poems to spicy Italian jokes).

Two young Italian actors: [Danilo Ottaviani](#) [2], 24 from Turin, and [Francesco Meola](#) [3], 29 from Milan, have left Italy in the pursuit of their ambitious American Dream. Under the names Cristoforo (as in Colombo) and Amerigo (as in Vespucci) the two have been reciting a menu of Italian and Italian-American songs and poems in the Italian restaurants of Little Italy.

It all started for fun and as an opportunity to do what they really love but as the project is getting bigger, and spreading out to other neighborhoods, the two are reliving the adventurous spirit of the two Italian explorers that are so important to America.



The two are now acting in numerous Italian restaurants including [Ribalta](#) [4] and [Amarone](#) [5], which are outside the Little Italy area. The duo attributes their success to a magnificent Italian repertoire of poems, songs and comedy scenes that capture audiences of all nationalities.

Depending on the request they act in Italian or in English, and among the most requested pieces we find '[A Livella](#) [6] by [Totò](#) [7] and the verses of [Dante](#) [8].

We were able to find out more by speaking to them directly.

How did you guys meet and come up with the idea?

Francesco Meola - I met Danilo Ottaviani in the Spring of 2014 during the opening night of Neighbors, a show I wrote and acted in both in NYC and in Italy. Danilo was in the audience. After the show we shared opinions and I was getting wonderful vibes from this tall guy beside me. We started talking about projects here, as Italian actors, and the fact we can't wait to get a job, we have to create our job. Because of that he explained to me the project he was involved in: street performances in the Little Italy of Manhattan, made to entertain the customers seated at the tables of the restaurants. The repertoire was a bunch of different poems selected from Italy's longstanding cultural tradition. I immediately understood the potential of this idea we established our comical duo: Cristoforo & Amerigo.

Danilo Ottaviani - Being an actor Italian in Little Italy was a great idea, so we decided to give a new look to the project, creating an attractive menu, two strolling players that offer special dishes for hungry customers and entertainment made in Italy.

How did you pick your names?

FM - We wanted to keep the original project created by Danilo, shaping it in a more specific way. So we started to work on these two characters: two Italian immigrants, travellers and dreamers. We wanted to give to the audience a simple idea: even if they are poor immigrants and they have to face several adversities, they always have in their pockets a poem or a song to offer.

The selection of the names, Cristoforo and Amerigo, was influenced by all these concepts and by the idea of those two Italian travellers, so important for the birth of the American Nation. Therefore, we finally created The Cristoforo & Amerigo's Menu: a collection of poems, dialogues, songs and sketches, included in a real menu.

DO - [Cristoforo Colombo](#) [9] and [Amerigo Vespucci](#) [10], have probably been the most important explorers of the entire history, and they were both Italian. We were sitting in Union Square in a sunny afternoon, talking about the project and Francesco came up with these two names. I just thought it was a great idea.

How do you decide what to put on the menu?

FM- Our goal is to communicate in an interesting and funny way all the distinctive peculiarities of our country: food, love, joy and a lifestyle that is grounded, gaudy and loud. When we started to approach this material, we understood how lucky we were, as Italians. In fact, we had a treasure to take advantage of and we had to select just a part of it. So we started to think about what we really wanted to perform, in order to satisfy our tastes and, of course, the tastes of our audience. So we opted for a good variety of pieces which could give a brief and bright idea of the richness of our culture. Dante, Totò, [Modugno](#) [11], [Rodolfo Valentino](#) [12], [Umberto Saba](#) [13], [Paolo Conte](#) [14], [Dean Martin](#) [15]: these are just some of the names that appear in our Menu.

DO - Our project will always be a work in progress because there is so much to choose from

Please share some anecdotes - the funniest, strangest, saddest request...



FM- One evening we took pictures with some guys who thought we were part of the cast of Newsies. Another evening we sang for 30 seconds "Volare" and a Swedish lady gave us 20 bucks. Another night we recited one of our poems ('A Livella written by Totò) with the owner of a restaurant in Little Italy. And it happened that during some dialogues about love, some old ladies tried to seduce us... but we were working so we flew to the next table.

DO- The first time we did it the police stopped us... It was not fun, but it was a great night. It also happens that the owners of the restaurants after the performance invite us to stay for dinner. But for me the funniest thing is that you never know what is going to happen, which can be scary at the times but it is also the reason why we do this job; it is an adventure.

How do people from different countries react to your show?

FM- Reactions are universal. So, when the audience is willing to listen, it is always very inclined to reward our street performances with good tips: Italians, Americans, foreigners and native citizens... it doesn't matter. But it's also true that it's not simple: first of all we have to break the wall of skepticism. We are weird characters and our first approach is the most important part of our show. We never know what to expect: because we can find tables with one person in a good mood but with the others who don't want to listen, or couples that don't want to be disturbed (of course we never want to bother anyone, so when we see they don't want to participate to our performances, we immediately walk away to another table and to another customer. So we can be rejected, but normally when the customers have the desire to listen to our poems and songs, we receive compliments, wishes of good luck and so many words of encouragement. They are the best fuel to never give up and to be proud of what we are doing. Some restaurant managers have a very good disposition and they see us as a source of entertainment and a way to bring in more costumers. Others, the minority of them, reject us without even listening to our project as they are afraid their customers would be bothered by our presence.

DO- I don't think it's about people from different countries, it is about having two REAL Italian actors, performing in New York City's Little Italy. This is what makes all the people from every country in the world, happy. For them it's like going to a country and also knowing a bit of its culture.

Does performing in Little Italy feel any different from performing in other neighborhoods?

FM- Performing in Little Italy is an advantage because we can use the history of the neighborhood. At the same time, the audience is not too demanding. Normally they always want to listen to the same songs of the Italian American repertory. So performing something more intellectual or sophisticated is very challenging. Other restaurants in different neighborhoods are more inclined to accept our theatrical dialogues or our poems. But we never do any distinction because we love what we do and we always are happy to satisfy every single request. So we sing, we recite and, if they want, we dance. Sometimes we just sing "Tanti Auguri a te" ("Happy birthday to you") seeing a table which celebrates a birthday.

DO- Little Italy is the perfect place for what we want to do, we haven't found other neighborhoods besides that one. Yet, our goal is to spread Italian culture throughout the world not just in the Italian communities or venues.

Is America still the land of opportunity?

FM-As Cristoforo and Amerigo, we still believe in the American Dream and we consider this land a prolific ground where we can build our future. Besides, through this experience, we are aware the dream is something you strictly have to pursue; otherwise it could die after a few months. But we are stronger, Cristoforo and Amerigo are stronger and we are not inclined to give up easily. That's the strength of our ancestors who arrived here with nothing and built a fortune. The secret is to always work hard and be imaginative and positive.

DO- I strongly believe that America is the land of opportunity; it still has many contradictions but it



recognizes and rewards merit, something that in our beautiful country, unfortunately, doesn't always happen.

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