

"It's all about Family and Italian Food"

Francine Segan (January 28, 2016)



Recently I sat down with celebrity chef Lidia Bastianich for a long conversation that was produced and broadcast by i-ItalyTV. We talked about Lidia's new book *Mastering the Art of Italian Cuisine*; as well as what it's like being a TV chef, the genesis of the Eataly concept, cooking for several Popes, including most recently Pope Francis, and, most importantly, how cooking is, and has always been for Lidia, "a family affair."

Now an internationally acclaimed chef, bestselling author, award-winning television host, and



successful restaurateur and food-business entrepreneur, Lidia Bastianich came to the United States with her family when she was twelve years old. Family was extremely important to her back then and still is today, both inside and outside of the kitchen.

Just as she learned to cook from her mother and grandmother, Lidia's own children—Joe and Tanya—grew up around food and are now themselves established figures in the food industry.

Like most parents however, Lidia initially urged them to do something else with their lives, to study, find "real American jobs." And for a while they did, going to college, getting graduate degrees, and starting their own careers and families.

When both Joe and Tanya Bastianich turned back to the food industry, they did so "on their own terms," as Lidia says, and because of that she is happy to be undertaking this "viaggio insieme", this adventure together with her family.

Her son Joe opened his own restaurant, and, using his business skills, began the successful partnership with Mario Batali, while Tanya collaborated with her mother on the realization of her last five cookbooks.

Lidia's latest book

The latest of these best-selling cookbooks is *Mastering the Art of Italian Cuisine*, released in October 2015, and Lidia has been on tour through early 2016 presenting it to audiences around the country. As Lidia tells me, this book features over 400 hundred recipes and it took her and her daughter three years to complete. This "Bible" of Italian food—a guide to cooking Italian dishes the Italian way—discusses the importance of ingredients in Italian cuisine.

"Use traditional products", insists Lidia, "because they will bring the flavor of Italy right on your plate." The book goes beyond just prescribing delicious recipes, it gives its readers guidelines, describes products, explains where to find them and how to prepare them, in order to better understand the nuances of a particular Italian dish. Lidia's goal is to increase the reader's knowledge and skills so they can eventually create their dishes without even needing a recipe.

Lidia's innovative way of engaging with her readers and her public, giving them the opportunity to make any dish their own all while providing clear and thorough explanations of how to use each ingredient, is certainly part of what made, and continues to make her a huge success worldwide. Not only has she published thirteen bestselling cookbooks and runs successful restaurants, but her cooking television show *Lidia's Italy* has earned her a prestigious Emmy award.

A TV chef feeding the Pope

Interestingly, Lidia explains that she did not initially plan on becoming a TV chef. It happened by chance when she appeared on set with none other than the famous Julia Child. Noticing her ability and strong TV presence, the producers asked her if she was interested in hosting her own show.

Far from being one to shy away from new opportunities, Lidia promptly agreed.

The show, along with her numerous restaurants around the world, became so successful that Lidia has been called to cook for not one but two Popes, making her a "papal chef" of sorts, she jokes. These instances were of course an immense honor for her and she particularly remembers her experience preparing food for Pope Francis during his visit to New York the past September with great fondness and admiration.

"He was so easy-going, he even came in the kitchen" she says "he talked to each individual, asked about our lives". Once again, the whole Bastianich family participated and even Lidia's grandchildren got to meet the Pope. Lidia mentions the great responsibility of having to feed the man who nourishes the souls of so many people all over the world. She recalls every detail of the meal she



prepared, taking into account His Eminence's Piedmont roots and his love for sweets (yes, apparently, the Pope "has a sweet tooth").

The Eataly experience

One of the best things about Italian food is certainly its versatility. Italians engage with food in many different ways and within various contexts ranging from a meal (literally) fit for a Pope, to a simple (but still delicious) panino. And Lidia covers the entire range of Italian food experiences, particularly thanks to the Eataly enterprise, founded in Turin by Oscar Farinetti, and expanded to the rest of the world through her partnership with Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich.

Now present in six different countries including Italy, the US, Japan, Brazil, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, this innovative Italian food "marketplace" brings the entire Italian culinary experience worldwide. It does so by providing everything from artisan grocery products to fine dining, and everything in between, including coffee-shops, birrerie (beer hall), gelaterie and paninerie (gelato and panino shops) and so much more.

It's no wonder that its New York Flatiron location is one of the most beloved food venues, and most visited tourist spot, in the entire city. It's a great place for any occasion, especially for a family outing, because food, and Italian food in particular has always been, as exemplified by Lidia Bastianich, first and foremost about family.

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