



NIAF's 42nd Anniversary Gala Honoring the Region of Sicily

Alexandra M. Fanelli (November 07, 2017)



This past weekend the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) hosted its 42nd Anniversary Gala, at the Washington Marriot Wardman Park Hotel in Washington D.C. A weekend-long celebration of Italian and Italian-American heritage, traditions, educational talks, food and entertainment with Sicily being the region of honor for this year. NIAF also saluted his President & COO John M. Viola, resigning from his role after six years of exceptional dedication.

The [NIAF](#) [2] Gala is an occasion to carry on the organization's mission of promoting Italian American heritage and culture, and strengthen ties between US and Italy. Each year for the past 5 years, NIAF has recognized a particular region of honor, and this year's event paid tribute to the region of Sicily. This unique region served as inspiration for all the programs and events, with the Marriot Wardman Park Hotel all adorned in Sicilian-inspired décor.



The celebratory events began on Friday November 3rd with NIAF University, introductory sessions in “all things Italian,” and continued with NIAF's Friday night kickoff party, featuring talents such as actor and musical entertainer, [Joe Piscopo](#) [3], singer [Lena Prima](#) [4], and daughter of the famous Italian American performer [Louis Prima](#) [5], and tenors [Carmelo Sorce](#) [6] and [Alfio](#) [7].

The Expo Siciliana

Saturday, November 4, began with the Expo Siciliana, which showcased and celebrated the unique characteristics and excellence of this region. Amongst the many exhibitors was David Greco, from the historic [Mike's Deli](#) [8] of the Bronx, offering complimentary old fashioned sandwich box lunches and other exquisite delicatessen. Actor, producer and performer [Tony De Nonno](#) [9] delighted the younger audiences with a playful yet traditional Sicilian marionette show [Opera dei Pupi](#) [10]. Throughout the day, visitors could also learn how to apply for dual citizenship, sample the best Italian wines and play traditional Italian Bocce ball. Additionally, [Nonna Romana](#) [11], of the popular TV show Cooking with Nonna hosted by [Rossella Rago](#) [12], was there to teach guests how to make orecchiette pasta from scratch. [Anima Italica](#) [13] tour operators was there to assist you in planning a dream vacation to Italy. They also introduced their new project “[RADICI-ROOTS](#) [14]”, which consists of a personalized designed itinerary for Italian-Americans who want to rediscover and reconnect with their roots.

The 42nd Anniversary Awards Gala

Following the Expo was the NIAF Gala Reception, the 42nd Anniversary Awards Gala and the After Hours Party. The Gala was co-hosted by NIAF President & COO, [John M. Viola](#) [15] and Emmy Award-winning journalist and Fox Business news anchor, [Maria Bartiromo](#) [16].

This year's event was especially significant since it marked Viola's last gala with the National Italian American Foundation after six years of exceptional dedication and visionary leadership.

The black-tie Sicilian inspired dinner acknowledged several Italian and Italian-American honorees who have achieved special distinctions in various fields. Other important individuals present that evening included [Vincenzo Amendola](#) [17], Foreign Secretary, [Armando Varricchio](#) [18], Ambassador of Italy to the United States, [Antonello Montante](#) [19], president of the Chambers of Commerce of Sicily, [Marcella Panucci](#) [20], Director General of Chambers of Commerce of Sicily.

2017 NIAF Honorees

NIAF Special Achievement Award in Business and Finance was given by [Vincenzo Boccia](#) [21], President of Confindustria, to [Alessandro Profumo](#) [22], Chief Executive Officer of Leonardo S.p.a., an Italian global high-tech company and one of the key players in aerospace, defense and security.

NIAF Special Achievement Award in Philanthropy was given to [Her Royal Highness Princess Beatrice of Bourbon-Two Sicilies](#) [23], the eldest sister of Charles of Bourbon-Two Sicilies, Head of the Royal House, which ruled the southern half of the Italian peninsula and Sicily until 1861.

NIAF Special Achievement Award in Business was given to [Jon DeLuca](#) [24], Director at Doctor's Associates/Subway Restaurants. Other honorees include Celebrity Chef, [Nick Stellino](#) [25], and Italian tenor [Vittorio Grigolo](#) [26].

Educational Programs

A part of the special event was dedicated to NIAF's educational and grants programs. The organization is proud to foster and create opportunities that support the career development of the next generation of Italian Americans. Special attention was given to the NIAF and i-Italy internship in Journalism and Italian American Affairs. Amongst the other programs the hosts highlighted were the 168 Scholarships that NIAF awarded, NIAF Congressional Fellow Program, the NIAF on Campus Italian American Leadership Council Fellow Program, the Film Forum, NIAF Sonia Raiziss Giop Foundation Grants in Translating.



Music and Entertainment

For entertainment, guests had the pleasure of seeing young Sicilian singer-songwriter, [Alessandra Salerno](#) [27] performing with her enchanting autoharp, along with her guitarist [Umberto Porcaro](#) [28]. They first played Never Ending an English cover of the popular Italian song Senza Fine, wrote by [Gino Paoli](#) [29] and interpreted by Italian iconic singer [Ornella Vanoni](#) [30]. Secondly, Alessandra paid an homage to [Rosa Balistrieri](#) [31], historic Sicilian singer-songwriter, with her rendition of Cu ti lu dissi, Balistrieri's most popular tune. Other magnificent artists on stage included [Tom Sinatra](#) [32], Alfio and [James Valenti](#) [33], [Vittorio Grigolo](#) [26], and [Vanessa Racci](#) [34].

The night ended with an incredible NIAF After Party and Italian Karaoke where all the guests converged to sing, dance and continue the celebration.

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The National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan educational foundation that promotes Italian American culture and heritage. NIAF serves as a resource on the Italian American community and has educational and youth programs including scholarships, grants, heritage travel and mentoring. NIAF is also the voice for Italian Americans in Washington, D.C. and works closely with the Italian American Congressional Delegation and the White House. NIAF's mission includes advancing U.S.-Italy business, political and cultural relations and has a business council that promotes networking with corporate leaders.

For more info visit the NIAF website here [>>](#) [2]

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[21] <https://geinewyork.com/pres-vincenzo-boccia/>

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[24] <http://www.niaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Jon-DeLuca-Bio.pdf>

[25] <http://www.nickstellino.com/AboutNick/>

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[27] <http://www.iitaly.org/node/52398>

[28] http://www.umbertoporcaro.it/?page_id=23

[29] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gino_Paoli

[30] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ornella_Vanoni

[31] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosa_Balistreri

[32] <https://www.discogs.com/artist/2165249-Tom-Sinatra>

[33] <http://jamesvalenti.com/biography/>

[34] <http://vanessaracci.com/about/>