



**TORRISI**

**ITALIAN SPECIALTIES**

STORY and PHOTOGRAPHS by CARLA CAPALBO



A few years ago I took my Italian American aunt out to dinner in Tuscany. She was born in Pennsylvania to Sicilian and Calabrian parents and this was her first trip to Italy. We ate typically Florentine dishes: crostini topped with chicken livers and bitter greens, and pappardelle with wild boar. My aunt seemed confused: "This isn't like the Italian food we eat at home," she said. "Where's the red sauce?"

I shouldn't have been surprised. The food that was brought by my grandparents' generation of Italian immigrants to the US in the early 20th century was based primarily on the cucina povera of the south. Over time, it developed a lexicon of its own, starring such dishes as eggplant parmigian', spaghetti with meatballs, baked zitti and manicotti. Everything – from overcooked pasta with clams to breaded veal cutlets – was topped with lashings of 'red sauce', a thick tomato sauce that often tasted semi-sweet.

This is the food that has been loved by so many families of Italian Americans raised in the States. It's the food gangland bosses dined on in Scorsese's 'Mean Streets', that Tony Soprano raided the refrigerator for, and that represented the 'old country' to many Italian descendants who had never set foot in Italy. In New York it was identified with Little Italy, the historic Italian neighbourhood in lower Manhattan that seemed like a slice of home to many of these Italian Americans.

In the 1980s, when the discovery of 'authentic' Italian food hit Manhattan – most of it from the central and northern Italian regions – and a slew of refined and often very good restaurants became fashionable there, Little Italy's fate seemed sealed. Its on-the-sidewalk ads for 'all the pasta you can eat' now sounded like death knells. Little Italy had become a gastronomic theme park, a tourist trap for out-of-towners where the food was mediocre and the wine free flowing. At best, it seemed a picturesque time capsule in which to find typical Italian ingredients: espresso, biscotti, Parmesan and nostalgia.





A few years ago those perceptions began to change. A pair of young chefs from New York, Rich Torrisi and Mario Carbone, hatched a plan to open a different kind of Italian restaurant. "Mario and I met in culinary school when we were 18," says Torrisi who, like his partner, is now 30-something. "We're both third generation Italian Americans and we grew up on red sauce and eggplant parmigian'."

"Yes, we love that food, and we were upset that it was getting no respect in high-dining circles," Carbone agrees. "We talked for years about how to re-interpret it and give back its dignity." After their training, they worked stages in kitchens in New York and Europe before making their move in New York. They found a site downtown in Little Italy: a modest storefront on Mulberry Street. Their model was the kind of old-fashioned Mom and Pop restaurant that had always been popular in the neighbourhood, with lace curtains and colourful tomato cans in the window.

The concept behind the food was anything but retro. On the one hand, Torrisi Italian Specialties set out unapologetically to feature Italian American food. "We don't come from a specific region in Italy, so there was no point for us to try to reproduce authentic Tuscan or Sicilian food," says Torrisi. "We wanted to celebrate what's great

about American Italian food by recreating the flavours of our New York childhoods."

The restaurant's scope went well beyond that brief. Instead of limiting themselves to a geographical delineation of Italian food, the chefs took Manhattan's wider multicultural cityscape as their terroir. Little Italy is at the crossroads of Chinatown with Jewish, Polish and other immigrant neighbourhoods. Mulberry Street has an eclectic mix of residents. "We grew up in this melting pot of cultures and flavours, and we wanted our restaurant to recognize that being from New York means being an active part of all that," says Carbone. "We're free to be creative with all the great stuff we find in and around the city, but that doesn't make us any less Italian." This innovative model has re-drawn the parameters for cooking in an urban setting, and could be applied anywhere.

"We're not limited to ingredients that fit the usual Italian palette or are imported from there," Torrisi says. "We work with whatever we can source each week: vegetables grown in upstate New York, mozzarella made in Brooklyn, Asian spices from the Korean neighbourhood, bread from a traditional Little Italy bakery, or fresh produce from our nearby Chinatown market."

"You know, we can't all be Magnus Nilsson, of Faviken restaurant in rural Sweden, who goes foraging in the woods around his restaurant," says Carbone with a smile. "If an old lady on Long Island can go out and find wild herbs for us, that's fine too," he says, as he chalks the evening's menu onto a blackboard in the window.

Torrisi illustrates this point by having me try their version of the 'chicken fra diavolo' that was once found on every Italian menu in the city. "Our take on that old favourite goes beyond the confines of traditional Italian cuisine.

We cook the chicken sous-vide, and serve it in a vinaigrette of smoky Mexican chillies with local yogurt and lemon juice, over bitter salad greens." The chefs take pride in making the food look as if they've taken the technique out of it, but there's a lot of modern method in this contemporary soul food.

Torrisi's dining format is novel for New York: a single seven course set menu at \$65 is prepared each day for all the diners, take it or leave it. The 25-seater opens at 5:30pm, and offers a choice of meat or fish for the main course. The atmosphere is cosy and unfussy with simple wooden tables closely clustered under an original, pressed-tin ceiling, and mood-setting music that shifts from Tamla Motown to rock and jazz. The 'pass' is in the dining room, with dishes cooked downstairs in the kitchen basement brought up to be 'finished' in the dining room by one of the chefs.

"We've been inspired by what's going on in Europe, in Parisian bistros like Iñaki Aizpitarte's Le Chateaubriand, where the concept of the single menu has really taken hold," says Torrisi. "Those guys have revolutionized the concept of eating out. In their tiny kitchens and no-frills dining rooms they're cooking with their imaginations and very little waste." 'Poor' ingredients, like the ubiquitous iceberg lettuce, shine at Torrisi, where it is wilted and served spiced with peperoncino and good oil.



Most diners come for the 7 course menu, but Rich Torrisi has recently also added a chef's 20 course tasting menu, to be ordered ahead, where he is free to push his creativity further. When the restaurant first opened, the lunch menu differed from the evening's: it served Torrisi's terrific version of eggplant parmigian' along with broccoli rabe, peperonata and other neighbourhood favourites. Since then the chefs have turned the shop next door, Parm, into a sympathetic Italian sandwich shop and dinette – a 'diner d'auteur' as they like to describe it – and moved their casual Italian American food over there. Now each of the two restaurants offers a distinct aspect of the chefs' cuisine.

At Torrisi, each meal starts with a set of four antipasti, to be shared by the table, accompanied by chunks of grilled bread topped with the chefs' emotion-laden red pizza sauce and freshly chopped herbs. Big balls of fior di latte, made in-house from local curd and served with Californian extra vir-



gin olive oil, is a constant. In late winter it is accompanied by Arctic char, a salmon-like fish from cold northern waters, served with smoked cucumbers, dill oil, char-roe vinaigrette and bagel chips, in a clear nod to the area's Jewish heritage. Parsnip consommé creates a fun visual pun: the amber broth looks like a cappuccino topped with apple cider froth, with a stick of crunchy parsnip in lieu of cinnamon. The Americans love sweetness with their salt, and this dish, reminiscent of spiced Christmas apple pie, would work as a dessert too. Crispy fried sweetbreads come with a colourful giardiniera of winter vegetables cured in vinegar, the cauliflower chunks looking very much like the sweetbreads.

There's always a pasta course, of course, and today's is a marine marriage between pasta shells and a classic Mediterranean octopus and potato salad with just a hint of peperoncino. Then there's a choice between the day's two main courses: scallops or quail cacciatore scented with Manhattan honey. The scallops prove to be my favourite dish of the meal. They're large diver scallops, roasted on only one side to a golden crust and left quaveringly undercooked in the centre. They come with bitter wilted radicchio, tomato confit, a 'vinaigrette' of sliced razor and littleneck clams (the closest you can get to vongole veraci), and small triangles of smoky, grilled pizza dough topped with tomato sauce and marjoram that are so delicious they readily evoke the mood of an Italian American pizza parlour.

After a paper thimbleful of lemon sorbet to cleanse the palate, Torrissi's home-baked cookies and cakes finish the meal. Their appearance suggests a throwback to the old-fashioned Italian bakeries of our childhoods, but these bakes are thoroughly modern

and laced with in-jokes. Celery pound cake topped with Concord grape gelée and peanut butter is a piece of pure Americana – as every child who was brought up on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches knows; ricotta cannoli are given a current twist when dusted with fennel powder; ginger-snap cookies topped with butternut squash custard and spiced pumpkin seeds suggest Thanksgiving, that most American of feasts, but the marzipan tricolore lets you know you're in Italy, no matter how far from the old country you may be.



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## Veal sweetbreads in brown butter with pickled vegetables

Serves 4

### For the pickled cauliflowers

1 cauliflower head  
salt  
250ml distilled vinegar  
extra virgin olive oil  
dried oregano

Take one head of cauliflower and cut it into 2-cm pieces. Submerge for 24 hours in a 5% salt water brine. Remove and cover with a pickle of two parts distilled vinegar, one part olive oil. Add a copious amount of dried oregano and leave to pickle for 72 hours. Remove the cauliflower from the pickling liquid, reserving the liquid.

### For the court bouillon

1 carrot  
1 celery stick  
1 onion  
1 bay leaf  
sprig of fresh thyme  
½ teaspoon whole black peppercorns  
3.75 l water  
500 ml white wine

### For the veal sweetbreads

115 g veal sweetbreads  
milk

Soak the veal sweetbreads in milk to cover overnight. Make the court bouillon by bringing it to the boil; season to taste with salt. Poach the sweetbreads in the court bouillon for about 5 minutes until they are still just underdone and cool immediately.

### To serve

corn starch  
1 carrot  
celery root  
browned butter  
seasoning to taste

Clean the sweetbreads of any membrane and break into bite-size pieces. Dredge in corn starch and fry at 350°F/180°C until golden and crispy. Season. Dress with chopped cauliflower pickles, raw shaved carrot and celery root. Finish with browned butter and additional pickling liquid from the cauliflower.



## Parsnip cider in a cappuccino cup with cinnamon

Serves 4

### For the parsnip broth

1 kg peeled, lightly dry-roasted  
parsnip  
10 l water  
Salt

In a pressure cooker, combine the roasted parsnip with the water. Bring to full pressure and cook for 30 minutes. Cool completely; open and strain. Discard the solids and season the liquid with salt to taste.

### For the cider froth

200 g apple cider  
1 g malic acid  
0.8 g xanthan gum

In a blender, combine the cider with the malic acid; while the blender is running, add the xanthan. Pour it in to an Isi Master canister (siphon) and charge three times with cream chargers.

### For the parsnip chips

1 parsnip peeled and shaved thinly,  
lengthwise  
oil for frying  
ground cinnamon  
salt

Fry the parsnip chips in 270°F/130°C oil until golden. Immediately roll each chip into a cylinder, it should resemble a cinnamon stick. Season with ground cinnamon and salt. Drain on paper towels.

### To serve

nutmeg

Heat the broth and pour into cups. Extrude the cider foam and top the broth. Garnish with a chip and a light grating of nutmeg on the foam.



## Pasta shells with octopus, potato and mussels

### For the octopus

- 1 onion
- 1 x 2 kg octopus
- 4 bay leaves

Slice the onion. Place it in a large saucepan with the octopus and bay leaves. Cover with water and cook, at circa 170°F/75°C until the octopus is tender. This will take several hours.

### For the potatoes

- 225g fingerling potatoes
- extra virgin olive oil
- salt and freshly ground black pepper

Cut the potatoes into small rounds. Cover with oil and season to taste. Cook over low heat until tender.

### To serve

- extra virgin olive oil
- lemon juice to taste
- chopped parsley to taste

Turn the heat up under the sauce. Turn the pasta into the pan when it is still a little chewy and continue cooking in the hot sauce for 1-2 minutes. Add oil to taste. Mix with the octopus, mussels, drained potato, lemon juice and another handful of parsley.

### For the mussel stock

- 1 onion
- 1 garlic clove
- 2 stalks celery
- 1 kg mussels
- 250 ml white wine
- extra virgin olive oil

Slice the onion with the garlic clove and celery. Cook slowly in a large saucepan with a little olive oil until soft. Add 250ml wine and the mussels and cook over high heat until the mussels open. Strain and decant the liquid.

### For the pasta

- 130 g medium-size pasta shells, "conchiglie"
- 2 anchovies, chopped
- extra virgin olive oil
- 1 clove of garlic, grated
- fermented chilli paste
- handful of chopped parsley
- 125 ml white wine
- salt

Bring a large pan of salted water to the boil for the pasta. Stir the pasta into the boiling water and cook until almost al dente.

Meanwhile, soften the anchovies in a tablespoon of oil over medium heat. Add the garlic, chilli paste and a handful of chopped parsley. Add the remaining wine and mix well. Stir in 250 ml of the reserved mussel stock.

In a separate pan, sauté the octopus legs in enough oil to keep them from sticking. Once golden, slice thinly.

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