

A Tuscan Chef in New York

Michele Scicolone (June 30, 2010)



For Cesare Casella, it's all about the ingredients

“Simplicity is sophistication,” says chef Cesare Casella, paraphrasing Leonardo Da Vinci, to explain his approach to cooking. “When you have good ingredients, you don’t have to do anything to them. It’s important for people to understand that. Many people buy good ingredients, but what



do they do? They damage them. You need to have respect, treat ingredients the right way.”

Cesare’s philosophy about food and cooking comes from his parents, who owned a small trattoria called Vipore outside of Lucca in Tuscany. His mother, Rosa, was a natural cook, says Cesare, while his father was an expert at sourcing the top quality ingredients used in their kitchen. The trattoria had a small store up front and a dining room in the back. Outside there was a large terrace overlooking the garden where more than 40 different types of herbs were grown. But it wasn’t until Cesare finished culinary school and began working at Il Vipore full time that the restaurant earned a Michelin star and became a destination for celebrities like Tom Cruise and Henry Kissinger.

Eventually, Cesare found his way to the U.S. After stints at Il Toscanaccio, Coco Pazzo, Beppe and Maremma, he recently opened Salumeria Rosi on Manhattan’s Upper West Side in partnership with Parmacotto, a company that produces cured meats in Italy. “When I met Mr. Rosi (the owner of Parmacotto), he talked about salame, and pigs, and I thought -- this guy, he knows what he is talking about. I told him my new place is going to be a salumeria, and he said we would like to open a salumeria, too. Why don’t we do it together?”

Explaining his concept for the salumeria, Cesare said, “It’s difficult to bring people in to buy stuff that they are not familiar with. It’s better to have a restaurant, there is more communication,” and people can try the things before they buy it. “We got the movie set designer Dante Ferretti to do it. He has done the films for Martin Scorsese, Federico Fellini, and so on, and even won two Oscars for his work. But he is not known for doing restaurants, so when he told me about his ideas for black glass walls and ceiling with a big relief map of Italy in white, and a painted portion for Tuscany and Emilia Romagna where many of our ingredients come from, I thought, this is going to be so tacky.”

Ferretti had all of the work done at Cinecittà studios in Rome. “When I saw it I was so happy”, says Cesare smiling in remembrance. “I had a magnum of Dom Perignon and I opened it and called up all my friends to come and see.”

The menu at Salumeria Rosi consists of small plates, called assaggi, of pasta, soups, salads, etc., plus prosciutto and other cured meats, olives and cheese. It changes seasonally, and might include something as simple as an arugula and shaved Parmigiano Reggiano salad, or as complex as traditional lasagna made with pork and beef ragu layered with bechamel. The Pontormo Salad, named for the Tuscan artist, is one of Cesare’s signature dishes and it has been on his menu since his days in the kitchen at Vipore. “I took a chance,” says Casella, “I made this restaurant the way I like to eat.” And he was right, his customers, many of whom are Italian, come back often because it is a serious restaurant that is also fun.

Beans, a part of the culture in Italy, are among Casella’s favorite ingredients. When he opened Beppe, he could not find the varieties he wanted, so he began to import them. Some of his friends who are chefs asked for his beans, so he began to supply them, too. Now he has his own company, The [Republic of Beans](#) [2] () to import and distribute some of Italy’s best varieties.

Casella also missed the Chianina beef that he used at his restaurant in Tuscany, so he decided to raise them at a farm in Upstate New York. He became involved with the [Center for Discovery](#) [3], which cares for people with special needs. Their farm, which will be sustainable in 2011, produces not just meat, but vegetables, and eggs. Cesare is very involved with the organization to which he devotes his time and expertise. His latest project is to improve the quality of the food served to those who live on the farm and others who receive home meal deliveries.

While we chatted, Cesare ordered us a snack of his latest creation, a porchetta sandwich served on toast slathered with “bomba Calabrese”, a hot sauce, and slices of provolone cheese and a pickle. “It’s a little bit different,” he said, “this is how I like to eat porchetta.” Spicy, crunch, cheesy, tangy and totally delicious, we enjoyed it with a glass of Lambrusco from Cantine Ceci. By coincidence, this happens to be the first dry Lambrusco we tasted in Parma many years ago.



When we asked about the pickle and whether it was made in the restaurant, Cesare admitted that it was bought. "If somebody makes something better than me, I buy it. I know my capacity, it doesn't make sense for me to waste my time." It's not just pickles that Casella buys locally. He includes a number of wines from New York State on his mostly Italian wine list.

We still have fond memories of the great meals we enjoyed when we first encountered Cesare at Vipore, such as the pork ribs. When we reminded him of this, Casella modestly replied, "It wasn't me, it was the pig. All I did was put salt and pepper on it and grill it."

Cesare brings his exacting standards for choosing the right pig to selecting prosciutti for his restaurant. Right now, he has 1,000 of them aging for him at Parmacotto in Italy. Though he does not choose the individual pigs, he does choose the farm they come from, the way they are cut, and how they are salted. He sells some of the prosciutto to restaurants here in the United States, such as The Four Seasons.

As to the future, Cesare is writing a book about Italian ingredients and is looking for an opportunity to open another branch of Salumeria Rosi. Cesare's loyal clientele will be happy to enjoy the Salumeria Rosi experience in another part of town.

[Salumeria Rosi](#) [4]

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