

Interview

In quest of real I



An Italian who chose to live in Malta for the last 15 years, she was recently appointed Delegate of the Accademia Italiana della Cucina. **Marie Benoit** wishes you to meet

MASSIMILIANA TOMASELLI

Massimiliana has been living here with her husband Mauro and their daughter Maria Vittoria for some 15 years. She is very much part of the Maltese Establishment and speaks perfect English. What exactly is the *Accademia Italiana della Cucina*? Says Massimiliana: "It is a non-profit, cultural institution of the Italian Republic that was founded sixty years ago, in 1953, by Orio Vergani, a well-known Italian writer and journalist. It supports initiatives that are conducive to a better understanding of traditional Italian culinary values, also as an expression of its customs, culture, civilisation and science. Moreover its aim is to encourage public awareness of the restaurants which respect the traditional qualities and characteristics of Italian cuisine."

Massimiliana explains that one of the reasons why a branch has been set up here is to encourage public awareness of the restaurants that in Malta truly respect the traditional qualities of Italian cuisine. "The Accademia started visiting them and last Thursday we organised a "gala" dinner for the exchange of Christmas wishes at *la Dolce Vita* in St Julian's'. For the occasion the Italian Ambassador Giovanni Umberto De Vito and the Director of the Italian Cultural Centre, Dott. Salvatore Schirmo, with whom we collaborate, attended as did members of the Accademia who came from abroad. This was similar to a banquet where hospitality, communication and intelligent conversation, together with an open heart and mind were the true protagonists of the event." Furthermore, says Massimiliana, it was also an occasion for the investigation of the state of catering in Malta. The Accademia, through its Sympoiarch, first chooses a restaurant, then proposes a menu to which the chef agrees. After the meal is over by means of a detailed evaluation form, the Academicians express their judgment regarding the chef's ability to interpret the menu, the quality of the products used and the combination of each course to the wine. Hospitality and reception of the establishment as well as the ratio of price to quality are also taken into consideration. The point of all this is to evaluate the chef's work and to stimulate the public to pay more attention to quality in restaurants. This dinner, she explains, together with the Ecumenical dinner and the Dinner of Culture, constitutes the three pillars on which the Accademia's value of conviviality better expresses itself.

After this successful dinner the Accademia intends to organise other events. "One such event we are thinking of organizing is that of bringing out Italian

artists from different fields, be it cuisine or art in general, to talk about their regions, through the preparation of their typical dishes, their music or songs, paintings, writings and poems. These evenings will be followed by convivial tastings and presentation of products of that particular region. These activities are being planned with the collaboration of the Director of the Italian Cultural Institute Dott. Salvatore Schirmo. The first two regions presented will be the Trentino-Alto Adige and Calabria, this one with the help of restorer Giuseppe Mantella: so a north region and a southern one, very different from one another but both beautiful and Italian!"

What other methods are going to be used to reach the Accademia's objectives in Malta? "There are different and many ways to achieve these goals. The Academicians not only need a gastronomic background which they might have built through personal experience, but most of all they must be ready and willing to learn, to improve their education in taste and direct knowledge of food and all its implications, in order to avoid critical judgments based on personal preferences. To achieve this, we are planning to invite people to talk to us about subjects related to the world of food: nutritionists like Dr Pierantoni, who will speak about 'Alimentation and Well-being' or a wine producer of the calibre of Dr Emilio Rotolo, from the Volpe-Pasini wineries, for guidance to wine tasting."

One other aim is to help the general public choose restaurants that really do respect the characteristics of Italian cuisine.

Massimiliana explains that education, knowledge and impartiality in judgment are the fundamental requirements to carry out this task. "When we visit a restaurant, that restaurant must be aware that it will be evaluated on criteria which are far from the 'I like it' or 'I don't like it' kind of appreciation." She continues: "However, the *Accademia* is not just about cuisine as merely the art of eating well, it is most of all about seeing food as a vehicle to culture, as it is in the case of language, literature or art in general. Culture and food go together."

When we talk of Italian food we are speaking of different kinds of food, for Italy has a regional cuisine. Could she elaborate on her idea of Italian food? "The beauty and goodness of Italian food lies in its diversity, as in a painter's palette where all different colours, beautiful on their own, contribute to the final masterpiece that is Italian cuisine. It is extremely simple, and prepared with few ingredients. It is centred more



Photo: Jonathan Borg



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italian food

on the quality of the ingredients than on the complexity of its preparation. All regions can count on a variety of products and herbs which they know how to use and mix, according to long-established tradition, they know how to cook them properly and for how long; Most recipes are those of our grandmothers and suitable for our everyday meals. Italian chefs take their inspiration from them, interpreting them sometimes, and always giving them that "hic et nunc", the here and now touch that make them unique, like a work of art.

Our cuisine, finds its roots in what used to be the Italian family's life-style, always revolving around meals. It is around the table that the members of the family used to communicate, relax, establish bonds. Mothers did not work and I remember, as a child, my grandmother getting up early to start cooking; simple different dishes to suit the tastes of each and every one. She took a bit here, a bit there, some salt, some herbs and, out of what we thought was nothing, came a mouth-watering dish. What one could smell in her kitchen was love, and as children we were unknowingly breathing those aromas that would always stay with us, and through us would be passed down to future generations, like a chromosome. They say I'm a good cook. Well, because of that our daughter, of course, has never wanted to cook. 'I will be the queen of frozen food', she would proclaim. Now she has grown up, got married and is temporarily living in Canada, teaching everybody how to make a good dish of pasta, with sophisticated suggestions like, 'drain the pasta one minute before and then 'ripassala in padella' that is give it a last finishing touch in the pan,

without overcooking it! She had never done it before, but she was there with me in the kitchen while I was doing it, as I used to be in my grandmother's and my mother's kitchen where I learnt the tricks of the trade."

Massimiliana acknowledges that our way of life has dramatically changed and there is less and less time to devote to cooking and fast food has become a necessity for most working women. "That is why our task to safeguard our traditional cuisine has become even more important, so that the next generations might continue to enjoy and support a patrimony that cannot and must not be lost."

How does she find Italian food in Maltese restaurants on the whole? "As happens everywhere outside Italy, in Malta it is also not easy to maintain the standards that you find in Italy. This is partly due to the fact that one cannot always find the right ingredients and even when found, they do not keep the same freshness or characteristics that one enjoys on the land they were produced, which is the case for restaurants or *trattorie* in Italy offering typical, local dishes. For example, if one prepared a dish of pasta with pesto Genovese, that is normally made with the basil grown in Liguria, and one makes it with local basil instead, it *must* taste different. I was at an Apulian restaurant, with a menu offering *melanzane alla parmigiana* and they were rightly pointing out that the taste of the local aubergines differs from theirs, making their dish still good, but different from the traditional one."

Massimiliana agrees that with the improvement in transport some restaurants successfully import ingredients directly from their respective regions to



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prepare their dishes according to local tradition in Italy. But not everybody is ready to do so, so the result is often disappointing for those who might have tasted the same dish in its country of origin. "However, I am being very particular. A dish can be good also without being the perfect reproduction of the original recipe, and one of the requirements in judging a dish is also tolerance, keeping in mind the difficulties that a restaurateur might encounter abroad. One thing that I have noticed during my many years here, is that all the Italian restaurants opening in Malta, really start on the right foot, so a client enjoys a meal, recommends it to friends, only to go back later on and be deeply disappointed. The quality in

restaurants tends to get worse and worse and this leads to the loss of clients who were originally very enthusiastic." Massimiliana thinks that this deterioration might be due to the masses of tourists, who are mostly not Italian, who every year invade the island and who are not too difficult to please. "For the restaurateur it is a huge temptation to deal with that kind of clientele instead of a permanent one which is difficult to satisfy and with whom one has to be consistent. Easy work, easy money. Grab and run! The key to good cuisine is the love one puts into it and the pride one takes in presenting a dish where one can savour the genuineness of the ingredients. Without these qualities, which make a dish special, one will produce just insignificant, average, standard food. Luckily there are restaurants on the island that have proved consistent in their offer of excellent cuisine and to these we are grateful. One can still find places where everything is always fresh, the ingredients used are the right ones and the methods and length of cooking perfect."

Massimiliana dislikes one thing in particular: "I particularly dislike going to a restaurant, looking at a menu offering Italian dishes such as Amatriciana, Carbonara and so on, dishes which are typical traditional Italian dishes, and then discover that the ingredients have been changed. So you are waiting with anticipation just to get a Carbonara that instead of having bacon (*guanciale*) as a basic ingredient has Maltese sausage or, even worse a Pizza Margherita topped with onions or pepper. This is something that should be stopped."

What are her favourite dishes? What does she cook at home? Massimiliana replies without

hesitation: "Pizza Margherita, the Queen of Pizzas which was named after Margherita of Savoy, first queen of modern Italy, garnished with tomatoes, basil and mozzarella cheese in order to represent the Italian flag. It is the simplest and I like it thin and crunchy with loads of melting mozzarella on top. As one former Italian ambassador made my rabbit famous after hosting and participating in a competition that was held at the Residence and which I won, I always feel obliged to cook this dish for newcomers in the way my mother, and before her my grandmother, used to in summer or winter version."

I have several dishes that belong to my family tradition, some very simple and some more complex like the "anolini" a special, stuffed home-made pasta that we serve at Christmas. This is more than a dish as it keeps all the members of a family busy together for a couple of days, using it as an excuse for getting together and creating that anticipation that always precedes the celebration of Christmas."

Massimiliana describes her daily cuisine as "usually simple and healthy." Whenever she finds fresh fish, she buys it and cooks it in the simplest way possible, letting the freshness of the fish speak for itself. "I apply the same criteria to all food the taste of which must be respected, making it a point to use just the few and appropriate ingredients to help exalt that taste. Basically my cuisine is onions, garlic and all the herbs, especially parsley and basil, and of course its "leitmotif" is the extra virgin olive oil that is one of the products Italy must be proud of. My advice? Always look for the freshest and cook it in the simplest way possible. The simpler it is, the better."

DECEMBER 2013 / JANUARY 2014 BUSINESS HOURS

Day	Date	Times
Friday	13th Dec 2013 - PUBLIC HOLIDAY	8.00 am - 4.00 pm
Saturday	14th Dec 2013	8.00 am - 4.00 pm
Sunday	15th Dec 2013	8.00 am - 1.00 pm
Monday - Friday	16th - 20th Dec 2013	8.00 am - 7.00 pm
Saturday	21st Dec 2013	8.00 am - 4.00 pm
Sunday	22nd Dec 2013	8.00 am - 1.00 pm
Monday	23rd Dec 2013	8.00 am - 7.00 pm
Tuesday	24th Dec 2013 - CHRISTMAS EVE	8.00 am - 1.00 pm
Wednesday	25th Dec 2013 - CHRISTMAS DAY	CLOSED
Thursday	26th Dec 2013 - BOXING DAY	CLOSED
Friday	27th Dec 2013	8.00 am - 4.00 pm
Saturday	28th Dec 2013	8.00 am - 1.00 pm
Sunday	29th Dec 2013	CLOSED
Monday	30th Dec 2013	8.00 am - 4.00 pm
Tuesday	31st Dec 2013 - NEW YEAR'S EVE	8.00 am - 4.00 pm
Wednesday - Friday	1st - 3rd Jan 2014	CLOSED
Saturday	4th Jan 2014	8.00 am - 1.00 pm

Christmas Hamper Selection

Bring a smile to your business associates, customers and friends with a Special Meridiana Christmas Hamper. A wide choice of carefully selected fine wines, spirits, confectionery and other delicacies is available in attractive wicker baskets and presentation boxes.

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S. RAUSI
Trading
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Stadium Street, Gzira GZR1301, Malta.
Tel: 2133 0447, 2131 6210,
2131 5744, 7909 3197
Fax: 2133 6952
E-mail: info@srausi.com
www.srausi.com

