



“Keep a Map of Italy in your Kitchen”. Culinary Expert Fred Plotkin Comments Fancy Food 2009

Marina Melchionda (July 14, 2009)



A conversation with the world-wide known expert on Italian Cuisine Fred Plotkin. His love for “Made in Italy” emerged when we talked about this year’s edition of Fancy Food while we took a virtual tour of the Italian Pavilion. This passion, as he told us, has changed his lifestyle as a New Yorker and his approach to food and cuisine since his childhood. Find extracts of the interview in the video, and the full conversation in the article

This year the 250 exhibitors hosted in the Italian Pavilion at Fancy Food 2009 saw an average increase of visitors of 4% with respect to last year’s edition. Experts in the field, gourmets and the curious came to see, sip and taste, new or traditional products from the Bel Paese, while importers



and distributors were in search of new goodies to introduce to American consumers. Prosciutto hanging from the ceilings, enormous shapes of cheeses on the counters, olive oil dripping from slices of toasted crunchy bread: samples of the best of “Made in Italy” were disseminated all along the many corridors occupied by the Pavilion, constituting an irresistible temptation for all those who visited the three-day fair.

During this occasion, the Italian Trade Commission, the main coordinator of the event on the Italian side, offered a full program of initiatives aiming to promote the extraordinary value of Italian foods and diet, from both a health and an economic point of view. One of the major supporters of this thesis is Fred Plotkin, who also held a seminar on the second day of the fair entitled “Why is Italian food the best during economic hard times?”

Worldwide, Fred is considered one of the major experts in Italian cuisine and writes for trade

magazines such as “Bon Appetit” and Gourmet, and for other publications in Britain, Germany, Italy, and elsewhere. His definitive book on regional Italian food is Italy for the Gourmet Traveler. He is also the author of bestselling books about Italian culinary tradition and products, among which “The Authentic Pasta Book, Recipes from Paradise: Life and Food on the Italian Riviera”, “La Terra Fortunata: The Splendid Food and Wine of Friuli-Venezia Giulia” and “Italy Today: The Beautiful Cookbook”.

We met Fred soon after Fancy Food was over. We had a nice, long conversation about this

year’s edition of the fair, the products which were presented and his personal tour of the Italian Pavilion. His love for Italian food dates back to his childhood, and has deeply influenced his perception of food, life-style, and everyday home cooking.

How did you like this year’s edition of the Fancy Food?

I wrote an email last night to a friend in Puglia who asked me how Fancy Food was this year. I told him about the entire fair. I said that a couple of countries did very well, but that many countries were a little disappointing this year because of their lack of participation. But then I told him about Italy, because that’s what he cares about the most. I told him without doubt that the quality of the ingredients that the Italians presented was by far the highest of any nation. And I was very impressed and very pleased with that as an honorary Italian. But I also referred that the Italians often don’t do very much to promote their products and that’s because they feel that they are so good that they can sell themselves.

How has the economic crisis affected the popularity of Italian food in this country?

I would say that there was a lot of discussion about the economic downturn. But I am old enough to remember other economic crises. Like it or not, the economy will always go up and down. If we complain when it goes down then we are not recognizing the reality that eventually it will go up. This time it is a little bit worse, but we still have to sell Italian products and understand that these things give us nutrition, which in turn gives us health, and they also give us pleasure, which promotes serenity and these things are all very important when dealing with bad economic times.

If you had to define Italian culinary tradition in three words, what would they be? First of all, “regionalism”. There are very few national foods, everything is local and regional, which is magnificent; second, “historic”, because Italian goods are produced according to ancient agricultural traditions and in a sense belonging to a tradition; third, “clean”; when you look at products of most of the world you see that they have additives and colorings, and junk that are bad for the health. Most Italian food products even now are remarkably clean and safe. In addition to tasting great they taste pure in the mouth. I can tell the difference. I’d rather just have plain yogurt than have a yogurt



that has all kinds of additives that change the sensation of the yogurt.

This year there was also a huge presence of Italian organic products at the fair...Do you remember any particular stand?

I remember a few of them. There was a carrot seller from Abruzzo who I met last year, and he only works in carrots because his soil produces really good carrots. He makes carrot juice, pasta and flour. Another I really love is a company called Sotto Bosco, which means “under the forest”. The owner’s name is Ugo Palli and he’s from Trentino. He produces the most magnificent products from berries. His blueberry juice, which was just blueberry juice, no sugar or coloring, was sublime. His strawberry juice was a funny color because we think strawberries need to be intensely red. This was a dark tomato red, because that is what you get from real strawberries. You smell the forest and the berries before you drink it, and it was just magnificent. It’s the recognition that basic foods, if treated with proper respect, can give more pleasure than any salsa or dip that some of the other countries were showing.

What about the differences from last year—did you find anything particularly different?

Well, I don’t know statistically that there were fewer people, but there were fewer types of products. Last year I saw certain individuals come with things that were not necessarily back this year. There was someone this year, and I cannot recall her name, but she was wonderful and I remember the name of her company—Ritrovo. She’s in Seattle and she goes around Italy much the same way I do, looking for products of value, of meaning, flavor, and she brings them into the United States in small quantities. She had me taste beans that were produced by a man in Campania. He grows these beans and only he grows them. You cook them in cold water very slowly for eight hours. They were so rich, flavorful and delicate, that you don’t have to add any oil or pepper; you just eat the beans as they are, and they taste of soil and life. And I really respect the fact that this woman travels Italy to “rediscover” and invests time and energy in this. Americans tend to do this in Italy, I think, more than the Italians do. There’s a passion among certain Americans who will learn the Italian language, study the country’s history and geography, then find these products and try to save them, because often the Italians don’t recognize the patrimony that they have. These beans, once they are gone cannot be replaced.

Now with changes in immigration and the fact that many Italians will not work the land, we see immigrants from elsewhere filling particular nations. In the Campania region, (the region where Naples is), there are shepherds from Tunisia who come in and herd the sheep and make the Pecorino cheese that the locals don’t make anymore. So the Tunisian shepherds are saving the patrimony. In Trentino there’s a similar thing being done with cheeses and products.

Throughout the country now, when I travel in Italy I am very happy to see that “extracomunitari,” a word I don’t like, are saving products that would otherwise disappear. I’m an American “extracomunitario” as well, but it’s a globalized world and we are all equal. Therefore if someone else will save a product and save a piece of history, then I have great respect for him or her.

Is there a product you saw or tasted that you would like to find here in America that you cannot find now that you think Americans would really love?

Actually, I just mentioned it, the Sotto Bosco berry products because we know how healthful berries are, and we eat berries that are flown in from South America and South Africa in the winter that taste of nothing. I’d rather have a glass of this berry juice, which I can pour over ice cream, I can use in different ways, and it’s intensely flavorful.

What about the wines? There were so many stands inviting people to taste wines., There was an especially important presence from the Calabria region also. Did you taste any particular wine?

This particular time I didn’t do any wine tasting only because I am familiar with the wines. I love Italian wine. Italy produces more types of wine by far than any country in the world. I think it’s great that a region like Calabria, which has been forgotten by many people or thought of in a bad way, is



presenting itself anew. As it happens, the week before the Fancy Food Show, I was in Calabria traveling along the coast, and they're doing great work there. If you were to ask me to name another product that I love from Italy, it would be the Cipolla di Tropea, particular onions that come from Calabria which to me are the best I know. I cook with them. The only rival are the Vidalia onions in the U.S. which are completely different in style. And there is no reason we shouldn't have these beautiful Calabrian onions here. About the wine—Italy produces sublime wine, and a particular wine goes with certain regional food. The only thing I would discourage a bit among Italian producers is to try to produce a Bordeaux or some foreign wine that is not native to Italian soil, because Italy already produces great wine.

The Italian Trade Commission organized two seminars during the Fancy Food Show. One was dedicated to you and your topic. Let's talk about this one first. You said that Italian food was the best to eat during economic crises. Can you please explain a little bit more about that?

I was very grateful that the Italian Trade Commission asked me to do this because they understand the role of selling and also of culture. I would say that Italian food is great not just during economic hard times, but also when we are all very rich. The point is—it's about the quality of life, which does not necessarily relate to having a lot of money. People who think that they are good when they have a lot of money are not good. I believe that we have to be beautiful inside as well as outside. Being beautiful inside means connecting to a certain kind of spirit and finding beauty in small things. If I eat a perfect onion, I recognize that a perfect onion is a work of art. Italy has always understood agriculture, seasonality and flavor in ways that other countries are just beginning to understand.

The French and Spanish and we Americans get it to some degree, but Italy is the professional in those aspects of food. Buying a sundried tomato or truffle does not make us good, we are good if we can experience pleasure in every little thing, and that's Italian eating. So spaghetti are perfect pieces of technology—you get nutrition from them and they're versatile. With Italian cheeses as well, the point is to savor them and experience the flavors. You can eat less, but eat well. For people who are trying to lose weight, you can eat a beautiful Italian meal instead of packaged diet foods. This is Italian cuisine and we can always learn from the model of Italy.

Plus Italians prepare food using only four or five ingredients...

Yes but cooking is not necessarily easy. You know that in America we think that the more ingredients we have, the better. I believe that one ingredient is better than three, and three are better than five. Each ingredient has to stand out and be a star in the dish. My garlic has to be gorgeous, my tomato perfect and my pasta perfectly cooked. These are not necessarily expensive ingredients. The drop of oil that I add has to be just right. That makes a beautiful dish that cannot be beaten by some mixture of very fancy ingredients. Another thing I love in Italy is that, if you go to restaurants, you get a plate that will have one item on it, like your meat, it will not have vegetables all around it. You will get a side dish with greens on a simple white dish. You get a proper portion of meat, about four ounces, and a beautiful side dish.

That's intelligent, mature eating that makes sense. We have to unlearn the habits of eating like animals and just eating for quantity, and learn to eat with pleasure, understanding that each thing that we get is a gift. I think another important lesson of hard times is that when we are back in good times, we should still preserve, respect, and not waste food. I make a point of doing that so I tend not to buy things I do not need. When I lived in Bologna as a student, I lived near the markets and I would go twice a day. For lunch I would get 100 grams of prosciutto and a beautiful melon to go with it. For dinner I would go get a little piece of fish and cook that with some vegetables.

Do you still do this in New York?

I do go to the markets once a day. Anyone who lives in an urban environment within walking distance to a food market can do that. If they think it's a waste of too much time, I would invite them to think about how they spend their time. I have always had the belief that if there is something you want to do, then you make the time for it. And our thinking has always been that we do not have enough time for anything, but we do not use our time well. Eating well is a priority. So I can make



the time to spend ten minutes buying the right food and preparing it properly, and sit down with no telephone, no television, and the food is the focus and enjoy it.

Plus in Italian tradition, food is always an occasion to gather and stay with people, share thoughts and moments together.

It's a wonderful thing to share food with people, and I do it all the time, but I think we have to acknowledge that many people live alone, or are working and not eating with others all the time. Just because you are not eating with others doesn't mean you shouldn't be eating well on your own. We always have to love and respect ourselves. Food is about health, and therefore if we don't eat properly, we are harming ourselves.

President Obama and his wife Michelle have espoused their cause and are promoting healthy food here in America. The Mediterranean diet and Italian food are commonly perceived as healthy food. Do you think as an American that American people will espouse this cause and that the Mediterranean diet is going to be one of the most followed in the U.S.?

I think we have to be really careful about the terminology “Mediterranean Diet” because that is an extremely misused term. If you go to Tuscany, where they eat a lot of meat and a lot of cheses and animal fats, nobody would ever call that the Mediterranean Diet. But if you go to Puglia or Liguria, where they eat smaller amounts of protein and many more grains, oils and vegetables; that is the so-called Mediterranean Diet. So I would rather not use that term but use a term that underscores eating a lot of plant-related foods, whether fruits or vegetables or nuts and using good oils, like olive oil. Proteins should be present in smaller, but necessary amounts, and food should always be pleasurable—we should never forget that. I don't mean junk food; but if you want a really good piece of chocolate, have it. If you want ice cream, make sure it's good ice cream as opposed to the kind with additives, and have it because it's part of life. Now President and Mrs. Obama are doing a really good job setting an example.

The idea of planting a garden in the White House goes back to WWII when Eleanor Roosevelt planted a victory garden encouraging people to grow their own because the food supply was unpredictable. The chef Alice Waters from California, who I admire a lot, had proposed to Bill and Hillary Clinton to plant an organic garden in the White House. They flirted with the idea but they didn't do it. The Obamas understand that modern times dictate that you need to eat locally, which means in your own garden, and healthfully. They are models of that. I think maybe he's a little too extreme. I would like to see him eat something that would give him a little pleasure. She seems to enjoy her food more and you can tell.

They are great Italian food fans, too.

Yes, they are, as I am. But what I want Americans to understand that while I love Italian food more than anything else, we live in America. So I would recommend following Italian models, but sometimes the models mean eating the fish that you find in the Atlantic, Pacific or the Gulf of Mexico or in lakes or rivers; and eating vegetables that are grown here. Now there are many products such as pasta, olive oil, beautiful espresso coffee, wine and many things that come from Italy that we do not do as well. I always wanted to buy those things; but I would not encourage people to buy water from elsewhere in the world, when we can keep our own water pure and drink it locally.

That's just better for the environment. Anyone who loves their children, and loves other people's children, has to respect the environment. Even though I don't have children I understand the importance of their future. Americans understand that to some degree but they have not yet learned how to completely respect the environment in relation to our children's future. The Obamas understand this, but they don't have a background in this.

Italians, who live in a densely populated country, and who have had to live on what's nearby, have understood this for thousands of years. That's why I love and respect the Italian model of eating. And I think what the Obamas are trying to do is emulate that. The fact that Italian food tastes so good and has so much knowledge behind it is another good thing to emulate. So Italian food, whenever possible, should also be augmented by other local products.



The Italian Trade Commission is doing a great deal to protect Italian products here in America. What is your opinion on counterfeit products?

A couple of years ago I was called as an expert witness on a trial in Washington. There was a Canadian company trying to sell, in the U.S., an Italian food product with a similar name to the authentic product. It was cheaper and did not taste as good as the original product, and when I looked at the Canadian product it had food additives, nitrates, and things that the pure Italian product did not have. Because of the aging time it takes to produce certain goods in Italy, they cost more. The point is that you don't have to eat a lot of a food to savor its flavor. Italy is a very complicated and regional country and Americans and the Italian Trade Commission must understand that Italy is a nation first and should be thought of as such first and foremost; and that Italy has regions just as we have our states here. Within these regions are provinces and local areas, and all of these things have meaning for food. If we get across to American consumers the basic facts that food does not necessarily happen in the same places, then we can understand why Prosciutto San Daniele or Mozzarella di bufala, or an onion from Tropea in Calabria or basil from Liguria, is not going to taste the same if you produce it elsewhere.

We have to link geography to food products, and when a food has a story, you tell it, print it on a card on the food product and say that this is why it cannot be replicated anywhere else. Anyone can call something Parmesan, but it's not Parmigiano Reggiano, which only comes from five provinces in Italy. If it's produced somewhere else with different soil and tradition, it's not parmigiano. Parmesan that's made in Wisconsin, Argentina or the Netherlands can never replace the original.

What advice would you give to the American people on this issue?

Keep a map of Italy in your kitchen. Look for the regions and provinces and put pins in the map to indicate where certain foods come from, and remember that all these places give us great food. Then when you know you've had a great lentil from Casteluccio, you won't want one from any other place.

What are you eating tonight?

I haven't planned it yet. We'll see how hungry I am, what the weather dictates, if it's hot or cold. I'm a living, breathing organism and I eat what instinct tells me to eat. So when I get hungry around seven o'clock I'll start thinking about it. Chances are it will be fruit, vegetables, some dairy products, maybe a little bit of pasta if I'm hungrier.

What's the Italian product that is always in your home?

Espresso. There is nothing in the world like Italian coffee and it is always in my house and is always consumed.

Do you have a message that you'd like to send to our audience after the Fancy Food Show?

Don't worry—food should not be stressful. Food should not be competitive and about going to a restaurant that everyone is promoting. Food is about pleasure and health. And if you understand what is good for you and why it's good for you, and you enjoy your food, everything else falls into line.

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