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Cuisine Focus 2015: Italian

Shaheen Nouman, March 18th, 2015

Italian cuisine is famous for being comfort food as well as the speciality of some of the most acclaimed chefs in the world. Shaheen Nouman discovers how this cuisine adapts to many different palates while remaining traditional

Meet the Experts

- Marcello Rivetti, executive corporate chef, BiCE International
- Luca Banfi, executive chef, Circo, InterContinental Abu Dhabi
- Fabio Nompleggio, executive chef, Frankie's, Italian Bar & Grill
- Matteo Giordi, chef de cuisine, Ronda Locatelli
- Corrado Pani, executive chef, Solo Bistronomia & Vino Bar
- Mauro Ferrari, Italian chef, Tuscany, Grand Hyatt Muscat



Would you say Italian cuisine is popular in this region?

Marcello Rivetti, executive corporate chef, BiCE International: There are no doubts that it is definitely one of the most popular, and there are a multitude of Italian restaurants across the GCC. One of the reasons for its popularity is that it significantly contributes to the Mediterranean diet, which has been recognised by UNESCO's epidemiological studies to help reduce the risk of coronary heart disease.

Luca Banfi, executive chef, Circo, InterContinental Abu Dhabi: Italian cuisine is very popular in the region; you can see that just about every hotel, mall, and neighbourhood has an Italian outlet. It is mainly due to how well-known and recognisable Italian dishes are, and that there's a bit of everything in Italian cuisine for every palate. Matteo Giordi, chef de cuisine, Ronda Locatelli: Classic dishes of Italy are well known, like pasta arrabbiata and pesto. Residents now have many different Italian restaurants that are offering flavours from northern and southern regions, giving them a chance to explore the real taste of Italy.

Corrado Pani, executive chef, Solo Bistronomia & Vino Bar: Yes, for sure. Italian cuisine is very popular and has been playing a significant role in the hospitality industry in the UAE for the last couple of years. In fact, more and more people are also getting to know about regional Italian cuisine because of the many restaurants and outlets in the region.

Mauro Ferrari, Italian chef, Tuscany, Grand Hyatt Muscat: Italian food is popular throughout the Middle East due to its simple presentation and excellent taste.

How authentic is the preparation of Italian cuisine?

Rivetti: We always wish to be as authentic as possible to Italian tradition and heritage. As far as food is concerned, we are willing to tweak and adjust our offer close to the local taste, keeping in mind the respect for Italian traditions.

Banfi: I try to stay authentic in my preparations, focusing mainly on making the dishes a bit more contemporary. However, I have to be aware of the local audience, so instead of tweaking the dishes, I try to feature items that suit the taste of local diners.

Fabio Nompleggio, executive chef, Frankie's Italian Bar & Grill: Tailoring to the local audience helps create a special experience for the customer, but I always ensure that authentic flavours and dishes from Italian heritage are showcased. Across the world, there are many small trattorias and pizzerias that face restraints when sourcing ingredients, and unfortunately end up giving diners an inaccurate impression of what true Italian cuisine is.

Pani: Of course some of the recipes are tweaked to suit the local audience in order to be more regionally friendly, but at the same time keeping Italian authenticity intact.

Ferrari: We always aim to give the guest an authentic Italian taste, hence we use the majority of our base products from Italy. If a guest would like to have some spice added, we can accommodate that.

Do you rely on importing ingredients or are there local products on the menu?

Banfi: I do rely on a lot of imported ingredients due to the fact that some items are inherently part of the culinary culture of Italy, such as cheeses and cured meats. However, I have found there are more and more businesses providing excellent quality, locally-made products, such as fresh pasta and dairy.

Nompleggio: We locally source as many ingredients as possible. A lot of the dairy products, vegetables, herbs, and spices that we use are from local suppliers. Speciality products that aren't easily available here are flown in from Italy and other parts of Europe about three times a week.

Giordi: Our menus vary according to the four Italian seasons, so many ingredients are imported from Italy. At the same time, we are trying to support the local farms and markets by creating special menus using vegetables, fish, meat, etc. during periods where the climate allows the highest quality.

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What are your biggest challenges in this market?

Rivetti: To offer the highest quality food for a wide numbers of customers, while being reasonably priced and maintaining authenticity.

Banfi: The products themselves are one of the biggest challenges since a good chunk of them come from abroad. Due to this it can become tough to get the same item consistently, and sometimes there are gaps in supply. So as a chef I sometimes have to think creatively or even tweak recipes in order to keep consistency in my dishes.

Nompleggio: It would be striking a balance between simplicity and modernity, without affecting the traditional values of our recipes. We take responsibility for delivering Italian food in the right manner.

Giordi: To have high quality and fresh products year round from the local market.

Pani: The main challenge is to bring people to our restaurant and show them the beautiful venue we have. Also, to make sure that the food is so good that guests come back for it.

Ferrari: The biggest challenge is to train the staff about Italian food and getting them to reproduce the authentic taste.

What is the latest trend in Italian cuisine?

Rivetti: A return to the origins, giving the highest importance to prime ingredients, and the originality of cooking techniques.

Banfi: From what I saw the last time I was back home, there's more focus on local and global at the same time; taking on flavours or influences of other cuisines and Italianising them, if you will.

Nompleggio: The sharing concept has recently gained prominence here in the UAE, since it comes with a great sense of conviviality, a significant feature of Italian hospitality and culture.

Giordi: A move towards modern cooking methods without compromising on authenticity.

Pani: The latest trend is to experiment with ingredients from East and combine them with Italian cuisine recipes.

Ferrari: Everything should be fresh, light to eat, nutritious, healthy and simply prepared.