

Piccolo Cafe, The Fairytale

A.L. S. (November 03, 2016)



In a corner of his tiny Upper West Side eatery, Michele Casadei Massari and I chatted amiably about his business philosophy while tucking into an exquisite bowl of fettuccine Bolognese. His story, like the story behind his restaurant Piccolo Cafe, is straight out of a fairytale.

Michele and his partners/ pals, Alberto Ghezzi and Gianluca Capozzi, hail from the area around Bologna.

“Alberto and I were classmates in school,” says Michele. “We hung out together. Then came our first experience in the restaurant business, working shoulder to shoulder at a lido in Sardinia. I was the general manager and executive chef. Alberto was my manager, the one who opens and shuts the place down every day.”

The pair worked well together. And when they needed another cook, they found Gianluca. “We haven’t been separated since. We’re practically brothers now.”



Nonno Gigìn & la Mamma

But to explain Michele's success, one has to go back to its architect, his maternal grandfather, a "passionate" chef during the war with "an incredible work ethic." 'Nonno' Gigi, aka Gigìn, doted on his grandson, and, when Michele turned six, asked his parents if he could teach the boy how to cook. They said yes. That marked the beginning of Michele's long apprenticeship. "We'd start in the fields, looking for things to eat - vegetables, flowers, tubers... Back home he'd teach me how to wash them, clean them, conserve them. It was the same with animals... He helped me understand how important it is to cook 'cleanly' and how much love goes into preparing a dish."

Equally fundamental to his formation was Michele's mother. A door-to-door saleswoman in the 1970s, she peddled a machine for heating curlers so women could style their hair at home. "I still have a dry-cleaning machine in Bologna," says Michele. "It's almost 70 years old and doesn't miss a beat. She always had a gift for warming to clients, offering them guidance, looking after their needs. It was a great lesson in entrepreneurship, simple but real."

Union Square, NYC

Michele was on track to become a doctor but never finished school. He worked nights in restaurants. Then came his experience in Sardinia with Alberto and Gianluca. But something was missing.

"I wanted to try my hand in an unfamiliar setting. I wanted to create something from the ground up, something based on what I really knew how to do." What better place than New York? Even if it didn't work out, he'd still have gained experience in a major venue. He began looking into acquiring a US visa. In order to obtain a visa for investors and businesses - an "E" visa - he'd have to construct a one-of-a-kind project.

"It was 2008. I barely had 7,000 euros. I decided on a kiosk to serve coffee in Union Square. There'd be a million clients and, beside the investment, it would take a lot of work: the stand, the insurance, a certificate, plus hiring people... I applied and 15 days later my dreams were shattered. Denied!" What was the problem?

"There was no running water!" But US law states that if you are denied a visa for a specific problem and prove you can resolve it, your application will be reconsidered. So Michele set about looking for a solution: "In sailing, there's a real fear that at a certain point water will enter the boat. So they use small pressure pumps to collect the water and dispose of it. I thought that a cistern equipped with one of those pumps could create running water. I filled out the application again and attached my design." The State of New York liked the project, and 9 days later Michele received his license. He called Alberto, who was then working in Australia, and asked him to come along.

"He arrived 48 hours later!" They began by serving coffee, cappuccino, hot chocolate, mini-desserts, and cookies. "In thirty days the numbers were extraordinary: nearly 70,000 cups of coffee, gallons upon gallons of milk for making chocolate." But then something unexpected happened. "On the last night of the Holiday Market, this guy John approaches us. 'I've been following you,' he says. 'I always get my coffee from here. I live around the corner. There's an empty retail space in my building. Want to open a cafe?' We'd only been there 28 days!"



Four Joints in one Year

So Michele and Alberto sign a contract and transfer their earnings from the stand to open their own space, which they renovate themselves. They open April 1. Says Michele: "I thought to myself, April 1 is April Fools'. If we fail, we can always tell people it was a joke..."

Little did he know, the fairytale had just begun. Six months later, "this one client who came in for breakfast every day told us, 'Guys, there's the perfect place for you right in front of the New York Times Building. I work there. Give me a call?' And he hands us his number..." Thus venue two was born. Same set-up, same concept. Yet there was still more to come. "Another six months pass. Same dynamic. A regular client says, 'There's a space in my building. They'd really like to have an Italian cafe that serves pasta. Want to take a look at it?'"

Thus venue three was born. But the chain continued to expand...

"Same thing with the fourth place. The owner was a regular in Midtown and asked us to take it. His father had been in the restaurant business. He saw something in us and that's how we wound up opening a place on the Upper West Side!"

They also cater; in fact, Dulcis in fundo catering has become one of their strongest assets. "Yet again a client came in and asked us to cater. I said, 'Of course!'" But Michele didn't know exactly what he was getting into. Back home, he told Alberto, and the duo studied up to create a catering menu. "Maybe it's because of where we're located," says Michele, "or our affordable prices or the way we treat our clients, but a number of big companies have asked us to cater for them."

The Recipe for Success

Besides professionalism, hard work - and storybook luck! - what, I ask Michele, are the secrets to success?

"First off, never sell lies. Our venues don't do marketing or tablecloths," says Michele, "nor do they sell lies. They're not illusions. They're places for Americans, not Italians," he says with a smidgeon of bittersweet irony. "In our venues, clean service, honest prices, and respect for the clientele are fundamental. Our core value is hospitality. It's like a hotel - the client is our guest." Second, don't forget family and friends. "They're all with me: here there's my cousin. In our Madison Avenue space there's my ex-girlfriend. In our first shop there's my business partner. I have another relative in our third. I don't have any friends left in Bologna; they're all here. I got visas for all of them. All of them!"

Finally Michele arrives at his most important advice: study. "If you're good at cooking, cook. Don't be a manager. If you're good at being a manager, don't try to work in the kitchen. If you don't know how to run a cafe, learn how. Study!" So obsessed with studying is Michele that for a long time he refused to be called a chef. "It really weighted on me. I didn't think of myself as one until I studied and trained." Any dreams you'd still like to see through? "I'd like to be able to work alongside Alice Waters. For me, she's perfection: honest, prepared, humble, and very conscientious about raw materials. She's a role model."

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