

Mambo Italiano!

PHOTO BY WANDA STHILAIRE



Three crazy Italianos at Bella Napoli Pizzeria.

● A Taste of Little Eataly in Vallarta

BY WANDA STHILAIRE

After a 15-year absence, I returned to Italy last fall with a friend. The vacation reignited my fantasy to live a third of the year in Mexico, a third in Canada, and a third in bella Italia. Introduced to the wild and wonderful life of an Italian family at age 12 by a childhood friend, I have been intrigued by Italy's history, culture, and cuisine since. A big piece of my heart always remains in Mexico when I leave, but Italy captures my imagination. My friend and I both

suffered from food depression back home; the quality of food in Canada compared to the exquisite explosion of flavors savored in the four regions we visited left our palates bereft.

When I came to Vallarta in December, I sought out Italian restaurants to recapture a little of Italy. I had no problem finding them; the proliferation of Italian eateries has blossomed to an unofficial count of 40 in the bay area. Being a curious travel bug, I asked the owners—who'd come directly from Italy—where they were from and why they'd made Mexico home. Here are just a few of their stories ...

Napolitano Gaetano Fernandez was working as a chef on the island of Ibiza when he met Mexicana Nohemi, an art student from Guadalajara. They fell in love and married,

and browned-eyed baby Maya was born last year. Gaetano first worked as a chef in another local Italian restaurant and opened *Boccon di Vino* on Basilio Badillio in June of 2010. He hand makes his pasta and his tagliatelle porcini is delicious. The calamari frito brings back memories of the same dish my friend and I moaned over in a hidden trattoria tucked under a bridge in Venice.

Pinocchio opened this past December on the newer part of the malecon near the bridge. Cousins Marco Guisto and Mauro Davanzo run the restaurant with the help of the clan. This family of fourth-generation pizza-makers hail from the mystical city of Venice and it was the matriarch of the family whose desire it was to move to Mexico for the climate and lifestyle. Aside from great pizza with handmade cheese

from Mascota, *Pinocchio's* offers organic pastas and salads. Ask Marco to show you the original photo of his great grandfather, the image that graces the label of the famed Moretti beer in Italy.

If you want a pick-me-up on a bad day, visit the three crazy (and cute) Italianos at *Bella Napoli Pizzeria*. When Roman Manuele and Napolitano Agostino first met, they disliked each other so immensely that they had a fight. The second time they met, they became inseparable paisanos. On a visit to relatives in Barra de Navidad two years ago, they spotted a bevy of babes (American tourists) at the PV airport where they were retrieving lost luggage and decided not to leave. Alessandro, Manuele's brother, joined them a year later and they started up the tiny pizzeria just off the malecon on Augustine Rodriguez. Agostino is a proud, third-generation Napolitano pizza-maker. They serve it up whole or by the slice, along with fabulous fornobaked chavatta.

Roman Antonio Barbato moved to Mexico City to start an import/export business. There, he fell in love with his beautiful Mexicana neighbor, Hortencia. They married and have two teenage girls, Cristina and Plavlova, who help out at the restaurant. They moved to Vallarta and opened *Funiculi Trattoria* on Lazaro Cardenas. This tiny, unassuming Roman style trattoria serves tasty salad/pasta combos for between 99 and 130 pesos. I highly recommend the spaghetti and mouth watering mozzarella-filled meatballs. And don't forget to try their delectable homemade desserts.

Tobia Pompili visited Mexico on his annual vacations for a respite from his bustling home city of Rome and on each trip, he felt more drawn to a new, quieter life near the sea. On a trip to Vallarta, he noticed a perfect locale available for the restaurant he dreamed of opening. He made an offer and began renovations on the quaint *Pomodoro*

e Basilico in Plaza Romy, which he opened in January of 2010. He uses a special "anti-bloating" pizza-making technique he learned at school in Italy. He offers innovative daily specials and a wide selection of tantalizing white pizzas.

Chef Marco Santini was born in the Lake Como district. His family immigrated to Mexico when he was 12 years old and one of his brothers is Stefano of La Dolce Vita. Marco is married to a Mexicana and has four children(!) who speak three languages. He opened *Espresso* on Ignacio Vallarta in 2000 and has a strong local following. *Espresso* boasts a brick oven and northern Italian cuisine. I had a delicious saltimbocca special and a friend raved about her seafood spaghetti, but as with each *pizzero* I spoke with, Marco claims his pizza is the best in town and that the "Markus" pizza is *uber* popular.

After 25 years in the fashion industry in the Lazio region, Roman Eugenio Sommo needed a lifestyle change. He'd owned a restaurant in Rome and moved first to Cancun, then came to Vallarta in 2005. He now owns the *Moka Caffè* in Plaza Marina with his beloved Argentinean partner Silvina whom he met in PV. They specialize in ultra tempting pastries, freshly baked each morning, and homemade pasta available for both in-house and to go. A "must try" is the scrumptious chocolate strudel with a café Americano. Silvina describes Italians well: they are a passionate people, a lot like Marco Polo, with their feet on the floor and their heads in the clouds. *Buon Appetito!* ■ VT

Wanda St.Hilaire is the author of *The Cuban Chronicles, A True Tale of Rascals, Rogues, and Romance* and is currently living in Vallarta to write her second travel memoir. You can visit her website at www.wandasthilaire.com and her book can be found at *El Sofa, A Page in the Sun, Casa del Libro* or from the author at destinoex@aol.com



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