

Lifestyle & Culture



Marie D. Diary



A very special evening to celebrate Leonardo da Vinci

Let me quote the French playwright Jean Anouilh: "Everything ends this way in France – everything. Weddings, christenings, duels, funerals, swindlings, diplomatic affairs – everything is a pretext for a good dinner."

It is certainly no different in Malta. Few can argue that food doesn't play an important role in our lives. The problem with food is, that try as you may to escape it, it is always everywhere, making certain that you don't escape it no matter how much you duck.

Now, the Italians too, love their food, but not in the large amounts that we do, with the result that on the whole they are a slimmer nation. While we are eating a dozen ravioli with ricotta, their filled pasta is more delicate and they eat it in much smaller amounts.

So seeing their love of food it is not surprising that they have their own *Settimana della Cucina Italiana nel Mondo* in November and which has existed for the last four years. This special week is all about Italian taste, Italian culinary traditions and promoting a healthy way of life with the Mediterranean diet.

In Malta this popular *Settimana* is a collaboration between the Italian Embassy, the *Istituto Italiano di Cultura*, the *Accademia Italiana della Cucina*, the *Associazione Italiana Sommelier*, *La Scatola Magica* and the Food Safety Commission Malta.

Throughout the week there were three talks but the highlight of the week was a gala dinner at the Casino Maltese.

Leonardo da Vinci was this year's protagonist as the world is celebrating the 500th anniversary of the death of this genius, so the gala dinner centred round him.

It was created as a typical banquet given by the Sforza and of which Leonardo was *Gran Cerimoniere*. He was mostly interested in the setting of the banquet: the dancing, the music – he played the lyre – the poetry and the table.

The group La Rossignol which specialises in early music and dance, was brought over, and we enjoyed a number of dances at the *Istituto* before dinner and then during dinner.

The menu was devised by Chef Gordon Amato with recipes which were of interest to Leonardo when he lived in the Duchy of Milan.

We started with quails' eggs with caviar which at the time, was popular and not reserved for the rich only.

This was followed by *Carabaccia con Pan Tostato*: a Florentine onion soup which is said to have been Leonardo's favourite dish and which, at one time, was served with almonds, honey and cinna-



The ballroom of the Casino Maltese at a gala dinner celebrating Leonardo's 500th anniversary from his death



Massimiliana Tomaselli orchestrating the evening.



Marino, Maria Virginia, Massimiliana, Sig. Federica and on the right of the group the Direttore of the Istituto Italiano di Cultura, Dott. Massimo Sarti



Emanuela Mori who recreated the Acquarosas Leonardesca drink



Medieval instruments

mon. Onion soup is still served in Florence. As we know it is a French favourite transported to *La Belle France* when Caterina de Medici married Henry II di Valois.

Main course was *Riso d'Oro con Ossobuco di Vitello*. Massimiliana told guests that *Riso alla zafferano* is still the symbol of Milano today. "During the Renaissance dishes, rich in colour were very much in fashion. The yellow of the saffron was considered the colour of happiness and eternity. It represented Gold. Saffron inspired Ludovico il Moro's chefs to create this golden rice, a symbol of power and wealth of the Duchy of Milan. It was served with *l'ossobuco di vitello*. This medieval recipe contains no tomatoes for the tomato arrived on Italian tables only in the 17th century."

And so dessert time. This sweet made with millet is sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon. Massimiliana remarked that these ingredients were always present during medieval and Renaissance periods, when sweet desserts were very much in fashion.

A variety of wines was served throughout but the dessert was accompanied by Acquarosa Leonardesca the only recipe left by Leonardo da Vinci. It is semi-alcoholic

and created in 1517 and can be found, in his own handwriting, in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana.

A pretty blonde young woman, Emanuela Mori, who is bar tender at the Hotel Marmolada di Corvara, came to Malta and recreated it here from the original recipe.

The long table in the ballroom of the Casino Maltese was beautifully decorated with leaves and fruit – the work of the indefatigable Massimiliana Tomaselli, who, as President of the Malta branch of the *Accademia*, leaves no stone unturned to make these evenings a complete and utter pleasure. She is a perfectionist – her husband Mauro tells me that 'everything Massimiliana does, she does perfectly' – and from what I have seen over the years, that is so true.

Having organised everything in the morning and early afternoon, she then turns up looking fresh and elegant, ready to greet dinner guests and making sure it is a very convivial evening indeed.

La Rossignol wore beautiful period costumes and brought with them musical instruments of the kind used from the time of Leonardo. They were a fitting background to such a meal, so different to the many I have eaten, in a relatively long life, half of which was spent looking for something,



Three members of the gifted Il Rossignol

keys, specs, mobile etc. (St Anthony doesn't always oblige.)

Marino Paolucci always reads a poem at the end of dinner, either from his own writings or something in tune with the evening. This time it was a Leonardo da Vinci poem: *Se Voi Star Sano...* good advice from our genius – 'non mangiar senza voglia...mastica bene e quel che in te riceve; sia ben cotto e di semplice forma.'

I was privileged to be sitting between H.E. the ambassador to Italy and his wife Federica, both of sobre character and who keep a low profile; no fuss but getting on with what they have to do without resorting to headlines. Let us say, very different from the Berlusconi of this world and thankfully so. They enhanced my evening even further if that were possible.