

# Lifestyle & Culture



## maie & Diary



### Table talk: The Marquis Terrace, Dragonara Casino

**M**assimiliana Tomaselli, she who is the boss of the local branch of the Accademia Italiana della Cucina informed me a couple of months back that the next dinner would be held in the Marquis Terrace, Dragonara Casino. "You are invited," she told me casually.

As to the Accademia, it all started back on 29th July 1953 when a group of friends, united at dinner, agreed with the idea which Orio Vergani had long been nurturing: that of founding an academy with the task of safeguarding together with the traditions of Italian cuisine, the culture of the civilization of the table, lively and active expression of the entire Italian nation. The personages gathered around a table at the Hotel Diana in Milan - all qualified exponents of culture, industry and journalism - shared the belief that cuisine was not a matter of small importance, but was worthy of the highest care and attention from every cultured and intelligent person. And so, the Accademia can now be found world wide and in Malta too.

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The Dragonara Palace, our rendezvous that evening, was built in 1870 as a summer residence for the Scicluna family, their main home being Palazzo Parisio, in Naxxar. This extraordinary palace is situated on the tip of the 'Tad-Dragn' promontory in St Julian's and is one of Malta's most imposing private properties built in the classical style - perhaps one can say it is almost a romantic folly. This distinctive landmark with its surrounding colonnaded veranda that abuts directly onto the sea fits beautifully into the landscape; so unlike the high rises which so many are determined to build and as many determined to prevent. Clearly, Marquis Scicluna (ic-Cisk) did not do things by half. I recall very well when Dragonara Palace was converted into a Casino, in 1964. It was a glamorous place to spend an evening in those days and on the few occasions when we went there, we wore 'cocktail' dresses and tried to look as glamorous as possible.

The Marquis Terrace restaurant is now surrounded by glass so that it can be used both summer and winter, when the wind on that promontory can be very vicious. I understand that it is to be officially inaugurated soon. The idea is to use just half the room, for a selected clientele of 30.

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After canapés and Prosecco we found our seats at table - that evening there were 47 of us. It is



Delegate Federico Maisano, Siga Tomaselli, the new Academician Signor Enea Ceccoli and Signor Marino Paolucci



Signor Paolucci and Signor Luciano Del Frate



The chef Claudio Schiavone commenting on the food



Raviolini di Cacciocavallo



The glass dish with a variety of antipasti



The delicious dessert



Mr & Mrs Joseph Mizzi, Delegate Federico Maisano and Siga Tomaselli

no easy task for a chef and his kitchen brigade to prepare food for so many at once. The Academicians that evening came from Lodi, in Lombardy. The *Lodigiani* were very happy both with the cuisine enjoyed at the Marquis Terrace and of the warm welcome they received during their three-day stay. "They didn't expect so much from Malta," Massimiliana told me. They visited Valletta, Mdina and Gozo.

The chef, Claudio Schiavone attended the Scuola Alberghiera of Syracuse. He is constantly researching and creating and Massimiliana thinks he is a good candidate for one Michelin Star.

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The antipasti were numerous and served in an interesting glass dish with eight small compartments, one dish for each diner. The fish was prepared in eight different ways - cooked and raw; a varied and interesting combination. Signor Schiavone is ex-

perimenting with fish which has always been considered second class and combining it with fresh ingredients and condiments so that he produced a dish which was delicious and varied. This was followed by Raviolini di Cacciocavallo Ragusano con pomodoro ciliegino e pistacchio. The raviolini were handmade, small and delicate with a tender heart of Ragusano cheese.

Zuppa di Pesce with Finocchietto e Cumino came next. It was made with seven different fish and not really a soup at all.

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Two poems by Ada Negri who was from Lodi were read the first by one of the female delegates from Lodi and another by Marino Egisto Paolucci, our resident poet. Ada Negri was the first woman to be elected a member of the Italian Academy in 1940 and the famous actress Paola Negri adopted the stage surname 'Negri' in emulation of the poet she so admired.

Signora Tomaselli made a

short speech which was all about the significance of the presence of the Lodi delegation as a clear sign of the precious bonds that exist between the delegations and the academicians who share the same values and objectives, thus creating a network of friendship and solidarity. "Proof of this was also the presence of young Enrico, son of the Delegate of San Paolo del Brasile, in Malta to attend a course of English and immediately welcomed into the family of the Accademia." Indeed young Enrico was sitting in front of me throughout dinner and kept us amused throughout the evening with his stories of Brazil and Brazilian food and politicians.

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The Dolce looked very interesting and was delicious: Parfait Cioccolato Bianco e Lavanda,

Gelato Fiordilatte, Ragu di Frutta e Arancia Croccante. As to the wines we enjoyed four of them including Donna Fugata which is very popular here. We were very well looked after by the staff too. I did try to practice self-restraint that evening and it was not difficult as the emphasis was on quality rather than quantity.

With World Cup fever and its lachrymose, lager-fuelled role models now upon us there is a danger of exalting the physical far about the cerebral; that we will forget that humankind's privileged place on the evolutionary ladder is not the result of powerful physique but entirely down to our massive mental power, unique in human creation. So for a little while I decided to forget about diets altogether and perhaps do more crosswords! The eating had to go on to feed the brain. They did us proud at the Marquis Terrace, they did.