

Lifestyle & Culture



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A 'Ecumenical' dinner at Villa Arrigo

We're back in business with receptions, concerts, plays, launches and meals taking over our very lives, if we let them. There's so much happening in Malta and Gozo throughout the year, except for three or so hot summer months, that those who are gregarious, enjoy music and the arts, are kept constantly on the move.

The energetic Massimiliana Tomaselli last month invited me to the *Accademia Italiana Della Cucina's Cena Conviviale Ecumenica*. Alarmed at the prospect of landing at a dinner surrounded by a whole lot of people of different religions who would try to convert me, she assured me that this was a secular event organized on the same day, in those countries where the *Accademia* is established. (In a way the same idea of the *Gout de France* event held on 19 March.) On the night of 15 October Academicians in the world will ideally be seated at the same table, sharing a meal based on the same menu. "Every year there is a different theme, this year the chosen one is *I Condimenti: Le salse e I sughi che caratterizzano la cucina del territorio*," Massimiliana explained.

So on 15 October, upon arriving at the gracious Villa Arrigo I found quite a few people already drinking Prosecco and chatting away. Two couples had come from Italy and combined the dinner to a stay of a few days in Malta. They were not the only ones either who had travelled for this special occasion.

As we took our places at the long, refectory like table which was napped in white damask, I had a look at the menu and my heart almost stopped. I counted ten, yes *ten*, courses with an intermezzo: *Granita al limone e melagrana*.

I had Joe Grioli on my right. He was appointed Chairman of *Fondazioni Patrimoniu Malti* in June and whatever he touches seems to turn into gold. His partner Jeanne Borg is also very successful and a tax consultant in her own right. And yes, a darling. When it comes to food Joe and Jeanne are no slouches and know so much about it. As is well known they have a home in Todi too and we know how particular the Italians are about their food.

I have to say at once that I was not the only one who simply had to come to a stop after several courses. Joe too, had to stop. It was simply too much. Chef Luca Selvaggi is extraordinarily gifted and there must have been quite a team in that kitchen for so many delicious dishes to emerge so beautifully pre-



1. Signora Tomaselli trying out the Accademia's tie on Commendatore Adriano Bonazzoli

2. Mrs Mariella Zarb, Chef Luca Selvaggi on the right and Salvatore Cuneo

3. Mr Grioli and Ms Jeanne Borg

4. A short introductory speech from Sig. Tomaselli

5. Food glorious food

sented.

On the table Massimiliana had put a book on *Condimenti* published by the *Accademia* in which there were contributions from all the delegations.

In the usual few witty words before we started eating she explained that the word *salsa* comes from the Latin word '*salus*' meaning 'salty,' "salt being the basic ingredient not only of sauces but of food in general," she told diners. (This of course is slowly changing and we are constantly being asked to lessen our intake of salt in order to avoid high blood pressure.) She further explained that "in the past it was thought that spices and especially salt, might stimulate and facilitate digestion. As a consequence these condiments called by the Latins '*conditura*'

and then, during medieval times '*savori*' had a very strong taste." With the passing of time and the amelioration of the methods of preserving food, condiments have become lighter and lighter. But the big change in the use of sauces, she informed us, was brought about by the so called '*Nouvelle Cuisine*' whose merit was to impose new methods in the making of these preparations since their motto was 'lightness, fine and delicate combinations and great respect for the taste of the basic food.' So, as a result of this one can enjoy dishes in which the condiments do not cover the taste of the food but instead, enhance its flavour.

I am certainly not going to give you details of every dish as I know that like me, you are on

a lifelong diet and I really do not wish to ruin your efforts by whetting your appetite. However the *Carpaccio di fegato caramelizzato e prosciutto cotto d'Anatra* served with *crostini al tartufo* was excellent and 'different.' The *Frittelle di Neonati e Branzino* served with sweet potatoes, aubergines and mint and an aioli of peperoncini and yes, sambuca for good measure, again brought different tastes to the *Frittelle di Neonati* - what we call locally *makku*. Most of us have eaten these since childhood. I remember my mother frying them beautifully but this dish at the Ecumenical dinner really had that special taste because of the various additions.

I had never come across the name of the chef before but really, his impeccable performance

that evening is worthy of note: Luca Selvaggi. Alright for Ottolenghi, Jamie Oliver and company about whom my children and their generation rave. But we too, have our own excellent chefs.

At the end of dinner the title of Academician was conferred on Commander Adriano Bonazzoli "in recognition of his love for good genuine food and his sensitivity to the historical values of Italian cuisine."

So, back to my eternal diet even if I never see any results and my weight either remains the same or invariably climbs a kilo, or two, or three.

This was a most enjoyable evening and thank goodness no one tried to convert me.

mbernoit@independent.com.mt