

## Bella Cucina, New York Style

*The Big Apple is a hotbed of good Italian restaurants.*

EDWARD AND MIREILLE GUILIANO

Two restaurant and dining trends closely aligned with the recent recession are a step downwards from the saintly luxe dining temples in both openings and popularity and an even bigger and associated step downwards toward greater casualness in dining. There are still plenty of people in Manhattan who don't blink at spending \$200 a person for a dinner, but in the summer, for example, they prefer a relaxed setting that defines casualness as wearing shorts to dinner when seated at the next table are tall blonds in five-inch heels or perhaps a mom and dad with their two kids, one of whom is playing a computer game.

It is no surprise then that currently the most dynamic restaurant sector in New York is *mangia italiano*. More diversity and experimentation and more openings and, yes, casualness, are telltale signs of New York Italian restaurants today.

No restaurant or phenomena better defines the current state of Italian fare in New York than the crazy highly successful-to-the-eye **Eataly** (200 Fifth Ave.), which opened a year ago. Think Harrods' food hall in London with a heavy seasoning of Italian anarchy, chaos, and appetites. This mega food emporium set in what was once the Toy Center of the U.S., if not the world, sells all things Italian and boasts a dozen eating-and-drinking restaurants or food stands, eleven of which set a new standard for casual dining. Walk the floors looking for fresh vegetables or olive oil or cookware, and you will constantly be amid people who are eating, drinking, buying while eating with glass in hand! Often you'd be walking past and around and between restaurant tables laden with diners eating mounds of food standing up. Not only are the portions big, but the appetites surely are. This is all too often sloppy, mindless, fattening eating to us. Savoring

anyone? But people are having a good time. And how mindless can it be to be number 22 in line for gelato?

**Manzo** (200 Fifth Ave., tel. 212-229-2180, [www.eatalymy.com](http://www.eatalymy.com)) is the one seemingly "normal" restaurant inside Eataly. Normal in the sense that you can eat in a semi-secluded dining room, you can make reservations, you can eat sitting down alone at the big, handsome marble bar and you can order a traditional and balanced meal from a long list of offerings. Manzo is supposed to be the meat restaurant within Eataly, but we've eaten well with no meat at all. Most of the appetizers are not meat. Try the crispy zucchini flowers with scamorza, marinated anchovies and chicory. Next agnolotti with brown butter and Parmigiano is a filling and lovely pasta, and then you can decide if you actually want some meat ... or salmon, or lobster ... or bass ... or dessert. The wine list is long and impressive — supposedly 750 offerings, mostly Italian but with around-the-world selections, though the bottle we ordered wasn't in stock. No matter, there is an extensive selection of by-the-glass choices, and staff who can speak about the wines with passion and intelligence.

### SOPHISTICATED DINING

Indicative of the downward trends toward casualness and less than ultra-cuisine are the dual facts that there are no Italian restaurants in New York that merit top shelf positioning alongside some sublime French, Japanese and American eateries, and that our three top restaurants for fine Italian dining are not new: Chef Mario Batali's upscale **Del Posto** (85 10th Ave., 212-497-8090, [www.delposto.com](http://www.delposto.com)), where the pre-fixe lunch is a steal; Michael White's fine fish **Marea** (240 Central Park





Chef Michael White; Left and right: Marea Main and Private Dining Rooms

South, 212-582-5100, [www.marea-nyc.com](http://www.marea-nyc.com)), where we often enjoy the spaghetti with crab and sea urchin; and Chef Michael Cetrulo's TriBeCa Northern Italian **Scalini Fedeli** (165 Duane St., 212-528-0400, [www.scalinifedeli.com](http://www.scalinifedeli.com)), where the porcini ravioli from Piedmont often starts a meal and the mascarpone sorbet ends it. The settings for each is serious and refined, and what is on the plates is well thought out and executed. We have written about all of them before in the pages of the *QRW*. These are tops for food. You cannot go wrong going to these restaurants, except perhaps when it comes to the steep accounting.

#### ON THE NEWER SIDE

**Lincoln Ristorante** (142 W. 65th St., 212-359-6500, [www.lincolnristorante.com](http://www.lincolnristorante.com)) is a bit of a wonder: a huge, slanted glass box amid the white of the plaza and buildings of Lincoln Center, with an open kitchen and even outdoor tables in season. Chef Jonathan Benno ran the kitchen daily at nearby Per Se, so it is both a surprise and pleasure to find him at a not-too-fancy Italian eatery that is open for lunch and dinner seven days a week. And it has been busy for lunch

and dinner since the day it opened a year ago. Talk about a pre-theater/performance location. And the food is good, though we wish we could say it is better than that. Fine pasta, as in a *linguine alle vongole* that has a bit of personality, a choice of five fish and four meats, and a variety of tempting antipasti and verdure. We especially liked the *funghi misti*. What is distinguished is the 400 bottles on the Italian-only wine list. Plus the sommeliers here know their business. As a bar and a good pre-theater restaurant, this is a welcome addition to what is becoming a hot restaurant neighborhood.

**Maialino** (2 Lexington Ave. in the Gramercy Park Hotel, 212-777-2410, [www.maialinonyc.com](http://www.maialinonyc.com)) is Danny Meyer's take on Italian, and you can see its Union Square Restaurant lineage everywhere — in the perky waiters and waitresses, the good wine offerings, the casually elegant but not fussy setting, and the good, good food. No wonder it can be a difficult dinner reservation to come by, though you can, like Union Square, wait for a no-reservation bar/lounge seat. And as a hotel restaurant, it serves breakfast, lunch and dinner non-stop, seven days a week. We love the fried artichokes and

anchovy bread sauce antipasti and the Malfatti al Maialino (pasta with suckling pig ragu and arugula) is something of a signature pasta on a list of pleasing pastas. And while maialino (little pig) is well represented, you don't have to choose it among the variety of fish and meat main courses. The excellent pine nut tart is an almost obligatory closure. The wine list is not enormous but well chosen and with many refreshingly affordable bottles, plus about 20 wines by the glass or *quartino*. This big restaurant composed of a series of comfortable dining rooms falling into comfortable dining rooms is an excellent addition to New York.

**Ai Fiori** (400 Fifth Ave. in the Setai Hotel, 212-613-8660, [www.aifiorinyc.com](http://www.aifiorinyc.com)) is our favorite of the new Italian restaurants (measured in part by our number of repeat visits), even though it is a second floor hotel restaurant that serves breakfast, lunch and dinner daily. Here Chef Michael White, also of Marea, gives us the full range of his Italian repertoire with Italian-French coastal overtones. We very much enjoy the Mediterranean sardines with tomato confit and chickpea salad appetizer, each of the pastas we have tasted, and the memorable gnocchetti with crab, and both



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Ai Fiori



the branzino and the Amish veal chop as main courses. This is a place to save room for desserts as in the Ligurian olive oil cake with ricotta, rhubarb and chamomile gelato or *sformato di cioccolato* (chocolate mousse, devil's food, maraschino cherry and stracciatella gelato). This upscale eatery has a New York feel and is a most welcome addition to the Empire State restaurant-barren neighborhood. And just the place to sit down for a good read of a pricey 800-bottle wine list!

**Eolo** (190 Seventh Ave., tel. 646-225-6606, [www.eolonewyork.com](http://www.eolonewyork.com)) is in many ways representative of a huge class of New York Italian restaurants — more neighborhood eatery than destination, basic décor, and good enough food to invite a return visit. So why recommend this one in place of the many others seemingly in the same class, indeed on every block in some neighborhoods, and the half dozen within 1000 yards of this one? True, the dark wood floors and many dark wood chairs and tables of this storefront are not inviting, though the funky Sicilian music adds atmosphere and the bar area is nice, but what this has is focus and distinctiveness on the menu. It is a modern take on Sicilian

fare by a young American Chef, Melisa Muller Daka, who obviously is trying very hard and is sourcing fine and seasonal ingredients. The homemade pastas are the highlight of the fairly extensive menu, and the overly ambitious desserts currently a mild disappointment. But what also distinguishes this restaurant is its wine list, which is deep and 80 percent Sicilian ... and this is a wine magazine after all. This is the place to open a bottle or taste a glass of good wines you will not easily encounter. A nearby equally new Italian restaurant that we hear good things about, especially about the wines and wine policy, but have yet to visit is **Ciano** (45 E. 22nd St., 212-982-8422, [www.cianonyc.com](http://www.cianonyc.com)).

#### RECOMMENDED ... AND BY NEIGHBORHOOD

New York's famed Upper East Side is home to many Italian restaurants of the neighborhood variety, and many are fully satisfying, though none worthy of a detour. You will find them catering in club-like fashion to regulars, who call each other by name (including waitstaff) and wave to neighbors. These are the places with average décor and mature owners and waiters of mostly Italian extraction who

have a gift for making a classic dish on the mostly Northern Italian menu sound oh so appetizing.

If you find yourself in the neighborhood, here are two interesting and safe picks: **Elio** (1621 Second Ave., 212-772-2242) where socialites and moguls relax and where no website says a lot, and its neighbor in the East 80s **Sistena** (1555 Second Ave., 212-861-7660), where the Northern Italian food and the restaurant décor are a tad better, and regulars of the same class.

And speaking about not going out of your way to dine, we must say there are plenty of Italian restaurants in Brooklyn and the Bronx, and certainly they are much better than their predecessors of a decade or two ago. But despite our periodic attempts at consciousness raising pilgrimages to Brooklyn, we still find the best spots to be good neighborhood restaurants.

Nothing in either borough in our minds is as tempting as our old mid-town friend **Osteria del Circo** (120 W. 55th, 212-265-3636, [www.circonyc.com](http://www.circonyc.com)), where ravioli di Mamma Egi Maccioni is a siren's call. A little pizza and a glass of wine while contemplating the long list of Tuscan offerings and life is good. A recent revisit to



... to eat exceptionally well in the neighborhood or in Manhattan for that matter, head for *Scarpetta* ...



Scarpetta Dining Room; Chef Scott Conant

*Esca* (402 W. 43rd. St., 212-564-7272, [www.esca-nyc.com](http://www.esca-nyc.com)), the Southern Italian trattoria with garlic in the air and on the plate to prove it and with fish as a specialty is as good as ever and a fine pre-theater choice. Relatively new to the midtown dining scene is *A Voce* (10 Columbus Circle in the Time-Warner Building, 212-823-2523, [www.avoceresrestaurant.com](http://www.avoceresrestaurant.com)), where the food is okay, the view superb, and the corporate parties a big part of business.

*A Voce's* downtown sister restaurant by the same name (41 Madison Ave. 212-545-8555, [www.avoceresrestaurant.com](http://www.avoceresrestaurant.com)) is older and a bit better and has more of a neighborhood feel, even though it is not small. But in the Flatiron/Gramercy Park/Madison Park area, our favorite remains *SD 26* (19 E. 26th St., 212-265-5959, [www.sd26ny.com](http://www.sd26ny.com)), Marisa and Tony May's soaring and modern "downtown" remake of *San Domenico* that we've written about before in *QRW*. The spacious wine bar/lounge up front with the city's first hand-held computerized wine list still wows, and the transition in the past year from Chef Odette Fada to Chef Matteo Bergamini went without skipping a beat. The *uovo in ravioli* is a must.

You'd think that as populated with

restaurants the Meatpacking District is there would be one or two eateries that earn high marks for food. Not really. There are a couple of famous ones we can recommend, but for food on the plate, curiously *Valbella* (421 W. 13th St. 212-645-7777, [www.valbellanyc.com](http://www.valbellanyc.com)) seems to be getting the attention, and each of our three meals there were satisfactory but not much more, but obviously we went back. The restaurant has a somewhat split personality with suburban roots to its post-modern hip. The food is classic, effectively done, the waiters are old guard, the owner and maitre'd patrol the big industrial-space restaurant aiming to please. And the wine list is extensive. On a recent Saturday night, the place was packed: three tables were there for a special occasion — happy birthday to them — three tables had locals with kids — and then there was the parade of tall models and wannabes and escorts dressed for a night of clubbing in the neighborhood.

If you really want to eat exceptionally well in the neighborhood or in Manhattan for that matter, head for *Scarpetta* (355 W. 14th St., 212-691-0555, [www.scarpettanyc.com](http://www.scarpettanyc.com)), where Chelsea meets Greenwich Village and the Meatpacking

District. Another favorite we have mentioned before in the *QRW*, this is a destination for refined cooking in a comfortable, classy setting, and highly recommended ... and not just for its wonderful spaghetti pomodoro.

You cannot mention Italian and Greenwich Village without mentioning *Babbo* (110 Waverly Pl., 212-777-0303, [www.babbonyc.com](http://www.babbonyc.com)), a long-time and pleasing favorite of many and to many Mario Batali's 1998 and still best restaurant. The carriage house setting is worth seeing, and how about a little rabbit with peas and pancetta? Or *Il Mulino* (86 W. Third St., 212-673-3783, [www.ilmulino.com](http://www.ilmulino.com)), which year-after-year gets great reviews for its food that we simply don't know why. As nice as the people at this nondescript storefront restaurant are, and for all the good not great food and extras they serve (and charge as if it were the best of the best), it just doesn't do it for us. We'd rather eat at our neighborhood Italian restaurant of choice, *Gradisca* (126 W. 13th St., 212-677-0695, [www.gradiscanyc.com](http://www.gradiscanyc.com)), where Italian is spoken by Italians and mama from Bologna comes regularly to make her pasta ... and what homemade pasta it is. *Buon appetito!* ♀