

Lifestyle & Culture



maie d. Diary



'Cena Conviviale degli Auguri' at Palazzo de Piro

The last dinner of 2015 of the *Accademia Italiana della Cucina* was held last month, just before Christmas, at Palazzo de Piro in Mdina. Now, much as I love Mdina there is the problem of parking for those who do not live there. The carpark outside is invariably full and the other, further away means a considerable walk on high heels, not much fun if it is raining. So, I ventured into Mdina and parked inside the piazza, in front of the cathedral since I have a journalist's card which allows me to park where others cannot if I am on duty, which I was. Just because a duty is pleasant doesn't make it less of a duty. However, once I arrived at Palazzo de Piro a kind gentleman warned me that there are cameras and that unless I have special permission from the Mdina Local Council I would be fined. So another dash to get out of Mdina and try and find a parking space where I would not be fined and finally I managed and just in time to arrive back in time before the start of dinner. (Can you hear me puffing and panting... still!)

There were some 40 of us gathered round a refectory style table that evening and Massimiliana, Master of Ceremonies, told me that there were more requests to attend the dinner but they had to be turned down. There simply was no more space. In the hall next door there were around 100 diners – members of a wine club, so the kitchen team had quite a challenge on their hands that evening.

I sat next to Mauro Tomaselli, Massimiliana's genteel husband – I believe he was a general before retiring – and Jeremy Cassar who has been chairman of the Marsovin group for some years now. Since I last saw him he has married a lovely Hungarian girl and they have two children. Later on he spoke to us about the company's wines in an excellent Italian and seeing that his mother is Irish, I was impressed. Next to Jeremy sat Louie Camilleri of the Master Group. In 2013 his company and Marsovin inaugurated a joint-venture to optimize the synergies of both companies. I gathered from our conversation that this company, CassarCamilleri, is investing in the production of Maltese certified D.O.K. and I.G.T. wines to encourage the long term stability of the local wines market. This is just one of their objectives.

That evening, we drank Champagne Drappier and Marsovin's Blanc de Cheval and Primus, both among the best of local wines.



Joe Grioli being presented with his Diploma di Accademico by Massimiliana with Marino Paolucci looking on. Sitting down are HE the Italian ambassador and Signora de Vito and Dott. Schrimo

As to the menu we started off with smoked sea bass, fried calamari and tuna in a pepper crust with an *insalatina*. This was followed by Risotto all'Amatriciana which I had never eaten before as it is normally spaghetti all'Amatriciana which is popular in eateries here. I enjoyed it very much, it was creamy and tasty.

I had opted for lamb rather than beef and together with the accompanying Ratatouille, mashed potatoes, asparagus and, surprisingly, baby pak choi which I am used to being served with Chinese dishes, it was a pleasant entrée.

My dessert was perfect especially the rum baba with Calvados,

succo di mela e cannella and the gelato alla mela verde.

The Accademia Christmas dinner is held to celebrate what is perhaps the most moving of festivities in our Christian culture.

Massimiliana reminded me that the organisation works to safeguard Italian culinary traditions and encourage their diffusion both in Italy and abroad. These traditions are passed down from generation to generation through the repetition of rites and customs. "Christmas is a rite and the food we eat is always the same, year after year, thus becoming a rite in itself. It is also through food



The Cena Conviviale degli Auguri is about to start

that we find our identity. This is where the activities of the Accademia differ from any other gastronomical association," she explained. It is not just about food tasting but also about the promotion and making known the values linked to the food we eat; food that narrates our history which evolves with us and that is representative of our country beyond its borders. "The Accademia's Christmas dinner means all this," she told me. "Remembering who we are and where we come from. This is what the Accademia believes in and works for. Food, too, is a vehicle to culture."

Italians have impressively filled Europe and most of the world with the fame of their larger-than-life famous men. Italian architects and masons built part of the Kremlin in Moscow and the Winter Palace in Leningrad; Italian artists have em-

bellished the Capitol in Washington. They have strewn churches, princely palaces, and stately villas all over Catholic Europe. They filled South America with ornate monuments to the local heroes. Their contribution to our island is also immense. Italy's smaller contributions to everyday life are so numerous as to go unnoticed. I am certainly not going to list them here. The list of the famous Italians is awe-inspiring. There are so many names of first magnitude in all spheres. Those of second or third magnitude could easily fill a small city's telephone directory. It is indeed a gifted nation. We have never stopped going to Italy. We all love their attitude to food, too. Their simplest meal is always delicious and travelling through Italy and indeed Sicily it is hard to come across a meal which is not prepared with care and attention to detail. Indeed with pride. Unlike most of us Maltese, they prefer quality to quantity: a small, perfectly made plate of pasta rather than a huge amount which tastes indifferent; they savour every mouthful. They analyse what they eat and recall previous meals and compare them. As to us Maltese, we overeat. For most of us food is nothing more than fodder. We have retained the Great Siege mentality in our subconscious.

That evening it was interesting to listen to some of those present who stood up to comment on some of the dishes on the menu. To the Italians eating is not only pleasurable but a serious business as well.

Towards the end of dinner Mr Grioli was presented with a Diploma di Accademico by the Accademia's Delegazione di Malta. He is well known for the cultivation of olive trees in his property in Italy and his olive oil but he is apparently also a formidable cook and a great foodie. One paternal grandmother was Italian after all.

Marino Paolucci who is the Poet in Residence of the Accademia read us a poem in his own gracious manner. An interesting evening indeed.



Joe Grioli, Louie Camilleri of Master wines and Jeremy Cassar of Marsovin



Vanessa Bonazzoli, Maria Luisa Catrambone and Regina Egle and her husband Christopher Catrambone of MOAS



Nicola Gervasi analyses one of the dishes



Dessert: Baba caldo al Calvados & Company