

Lifestyle & Culture



maie d. *Diary*



The Accademia Italiana della Cucina at La Vela

After five weeks in Jersey City, visiting one of my darlings, I went up a size - 1X - or perhaps it is two sizes. Too much cooking which I so enjoy doing for the family and excessive eating out have taken their toll. I don't dare climb on my weighing scales for they might collapse under my weight.

On top of breakfast, lunch and supper, tea with slices of figolla or ottijiet (the latter 'from Busy Bee please Ma'), always on the 'American wishlist', and voilà the markings on the scales soon creep up.

I so agree with Mr Fearn's campaign to tackle obesity in Malta. I find this encouraging. I want to try once again, for the umpteenth time, since I was born, to get back to my size 16 which seems so desirable after 1X. I look at my clothes and cannot believe that I am that fat. It will be 2X and 3X before you know it if I don't persist and give up carbs altogether and move more than I do at present.

I came back with all kinds of excellent intentions. But one of my first invitations came from the Accademia Italiana della Cucina which is now firmly established in Malta. I was asked to 'save the date' by the genial Massimiliana Tomaselli, who is the President of the local branch, well before I left for the Big Apple.

Dinner this time round was to be at La Vela in Pietà and the patron

there is Michelle Muscat - not the PM's wife but another genial lady who has an enormous passion for what she is doing although she is nowhere near size 1X and doesn't share my weakness for food. She likes to watch her patrons enjoy it rather than eat copious amounts herself.

Comparisons may be odious but I have to say that this is by far the best meal I have had so far in Malta held under the auspices of the Accademia. Michelle studied Accounting after Sixth Form and for some 25 years practiced her profession in the private sector. But a few years ago she decided to open her own business. "My mother's family owned several cafés and restaurants in Valletta so I was brought up in the world of catering. It's in my blood. So, when I was deciding on a new chapter in my life - a new beginning as it were - I thought of running my own restaurant and La Vela was born."

Michelle loves meeting, hosting clients and watching them enjoy meals at La Vela. "Wine is my passion," she tells me, "I love learning about wine and obviously drinking it, too. It's a way of life and I can think of a different wine for each dish or, indeed, every mood."

That night's Cena Conviviale was attended by local members and also Italians living here and others who had come from Italy especially for the occasion. The wines were sponsored by the multi-awarded Volpe Pasini es-



Sig. Mauro Tomaselli and Signora Rotolo



Sig. Nunzio Mancini and Mrs Ina Cassar



Sig. Marcio Vargas and Mr & Mrs John Ripard

tate. The owner of this estate Dr Emilio Rotolo is a *gasterologo* and in his interesting talk about wine in general and his vineyards he quipped that now he practices only the *gastro* part of his profession and has for quite a number of years dedicated his life to wine and his 52 hectares of vineyards.

"Half yield white grapes and half red," he said. "These vineyards are on the hills of Togliano and Prepetto in the best wine growing areas of the Colli Orientali del Friuli. In the fields the soil, the subsoil, the topography and the microclimate make each vine a unique one. In the cellar ancient traditions and modern technology enhance and transform grapes so special into extraordinary wines. In each bottle one can find a world of flavours, of land, of tradition..." All the seven wines which accompanied the seven courses were witness to this.

The Sicilian chef at La Vela, Enrico Alecci is only 25 years old. Each course served was a work of art and absolutely delicious. I left my diet in my car promising myself to start it again on the morrow. Parking was wonderfully easy, always a consideration wherever we go these days.

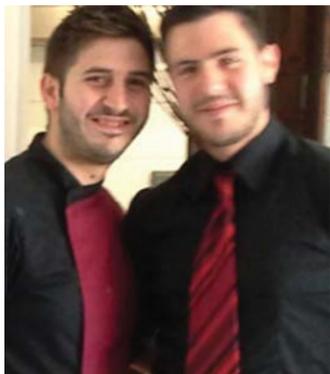
I am not going to give you details of every course but will list my absolute favourites. In the antipasto the *mezzo calamario ripieno di ricotta, mandorla e miele su crema di piselli* was different to any other calamario I had eaten before. The Paccheri or Neapolitan pasta of the first course stuffed with salmon and olives on a *vellutata di patate* and asparagus were exquisite. Second course was tuna served with *caponatina siciliana* - surely the best caponata in the world is Sicilian. Our darling friend Lianna used to bring jars of it when she came to visit. It was made by her Zia Maria and finally, one holiday there, under duress, Zia Maria taught me how to make it from scratch. In fact in

New Jersey I left quite a stash of *caponata* for them to enjoy and to make sure they think of me with every mouthful consumed. It takes time to make and has to be made with love, as Zia Maria used to insist. I make it here occasionally, accompanied by the music of Peppino di Capri or Carlo Buti, what else?

The purée of beetroot which formed part of this dish, with pine nuts and sultanas, was a truly fine combination. Cheese was a Pecorino Stagionato and for dessert the gifted chef produced a *tortino al cioccolato dal cuore morbido con crema di ricotta e fragole*. I loved the soft centre of this dessert and it wasn't too sweet as many desserts often are. It reminded me of *gateau la boue au chocolat* which a student of mine used to make in Mauritius.

Present at this convivial dinner were Mr and Mrs John Ripard who had just visited Mauritius which they loved and who met one of the families I knew who send their love, this after 25 years absence, and a chapter in my life which came to an end so suddenly.

The perfectly-mannered and attired, Marino Paolucci, secretary of the Accademia who lives and works here, read a poem by Jorge Luis Borges and Michelle Muscat was presented with a well-deserved certificate from the Accademia saying that the meal at La Vela had reached the required standard. This was definitely a Memorable Meal. And after eating out in New York, that is saying something.



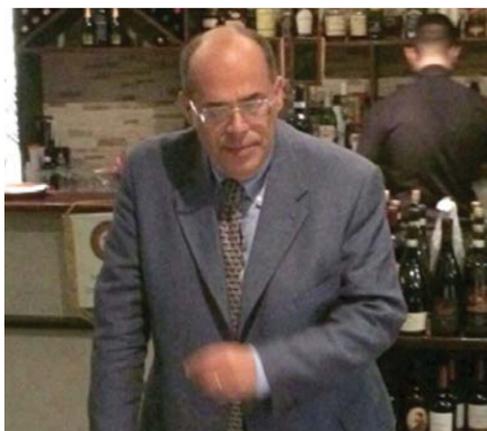
Chef Enrico Alecci and one of the waiters, Giancarlo



The menu



Ms Michelle Muscat and President M. Tomaselli



Dott. Emilio Rotolo



Sig. Marino Paolucci, Siga M. Tomaselli and Dott. Emilio Rotolo