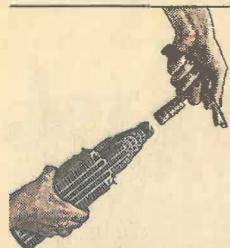


CITY NEWS



UNCORKING THE CITY | By Lettie Teague

Tiny Restaurant's Far Reach

How does a restaurant become much beloved? It helps to name it after a famous song.

In fact, "Al di la" the love song wasn't the genesis of Al di la the trattoria, according to the restaurant's owner Emiliano Coppa, although "a lot of people assume that it was." The name Al di la, which means "beyond" or "beyond the beyond" in Italian, came about as a way to describe the restaurant's food, said Mr. Coppa, who said it was meant to convey something "beyond Italy—an ocean away."

The Al di la menu, created by Anna Klinger, Mr. Coppa's partner and wife, may be an ocean away from its inspiration but it's kept the restaurant in business for 15 years. Al di la diners have been known to wait on line for hours, awaiting the opportunity to eat the same Northern Italian dishes over and over again. And while the restaurant is far from new, the lines still form on weekends. Sometimes customers will even

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dine at 4:30 in the afternoon on weekends "just to get in," according to my Park Slope friend who lives around the corner from Al di la. (She and her husband have eaten at the restaurant a dozen times.)

My friend and her neighbors (and diners from other boroughs and cities) come to sit on worn wooden chairs in a faded, bohemian-elegant room and eat Ms. Klinger's homemade ravioli, saltimbocca, hanger steak and tripe—washed down by the wines that Mr. Coppa, a native of Veneto has chosen.

The Al di la list—a narrow, folded piece of paper—features about 60 wines selected by Mr. Coppa in part to please his own palate as well as keep his customers happy. With so many

regulars, they look to him for guidance as well as a bit of a adventure, said Mr. Coppa.

They also look for some (fairly) cheap bottles. "Nobody in the neighborhood likes to spend more than \$40 on wine," explained Mr. Coppa, who said this was also true of himself. And because Mr. Coppa also likes to drink "Italian wine with Italian food" the Al di la list is an all-Italian list as well. (He toyed briefly with offering wines from elsewhere—in fact, he said that "France makes the best cheap wine"—but nevertheless he went back to an all-Italian list.)

The wines on the Al di la list aren't typical trattoria fare; instead of Chianti or Barbera, there is Bonarda, Erbaluce and Piano Maltese Bianco—the latter a white wine from Sicily. They are wines that offer a challenge—"a bit of a puzzle," according to Mr. Coppa.

I can personally testify that this is true. I visited Al di la for the first time last week (in the company of friends who had been many times) and ordered what looked like an interesting wine: the 2012 Tre Monti Albana Vigna Rocca Sec from Emilia Romagna for \$40 a bottle. Its aroma was appealing but its color—a deep-gold—was vaguely alarming. Was it oxidized? It tasted a bit sweet and definitely odd. Was this how it was meant to taste? We asked Elia, who had been identified as the most wine-knowledgeable member of the staff. (Mr. Coppa wasn't present that night.)

All of the bottles that he'd served looked and tasted like ours, replied Elia. Didn't we like it? I wondered. We did not. In fact, we hated it, asserted one of my friends. In that case, we should drink something else, said Elia, who removed the offending bottle. What would we like? Elia asked.

Perhaps this is another reason why Al di la has lasted so long; they're responsive to their customers—even the ones who don't like their wines odd. We told Elia to select something, else so he chose another \$40 bottle: the 2012 Masseria Altemura Fiano from Puglia. A light, attractive wine, it wasn't exactly intellectually challenging but it was decidedly pleasurable.



Emiliano Coppa, owner of Al di la trattoria, and two bottles from his wine list: Castello di Luzzano Bonarda, left, and Tre Monti Albana Vigna Rocca

We ordered an array of dishes my friends identified as the Al di la classics: beet ravioli (which was superb), the malfatti (which was almost as good) and the hanger steak. Only the saltimbocca disappointed, as it was a bit overcooked. When it was time to order a red; we consulted with Elia.

My friend—the one who hated the Albana—wanted something from Tuscany, perhaps a Vino Nobile, he said. But Elia suggested something more adventurous (and \$5 cheaper): the 2011 Castello di Luzzano Bonarda "Carlino" from Lombardia. A soft, uncomplicated red with notes of dark red fruit and a lively acidity, it went well with the food. And it cost \$40 a bottle as well.

As we watched Elia sell yet another bottle of Bonarda to a

neighboring table, my Albana-hating friend called him "sweet" and my Park Slope friend said she wanted to fix him up with a friend.

It turned out that Elia was already married (to a woman in the wine business in fact), but this kind of exchange is something that Al di la seems to inspire. Perhaps that's why it's lasted so long. It's not just a neighborhood restaurant with great homemade pasta and interesting (if odd) \$40 bottles of wine, it's also a place that inspires emotion—just like the song:

Al di la means you are far above me, very far
Al di la, as distant as the lovely evening star

Where you walk flowers bloom
When you smile all the gloom turns to sunshine

And my heart opens wide

