

letter from new york

JOHN DOIG IS SEDUCED BY A LITTLE ITALIAN TRATTORIA IN BROOKLYN KNOWN TO FEW

I've munched major amounts of manicotti in Milan, I've chugged countless kinds of Chianti at the annual festival on the banks of Lake Como, I've ruminated on rafts of ravioli in Rome. What's more, I've attacked literally thousands of pounds of pasta at hundreds of Italian restaurants in New York, including a few where they gouge you more than 40 bucks for a bowl of fancy spaghetti with olive oil and a few razor-thin slices of dry white truffle.

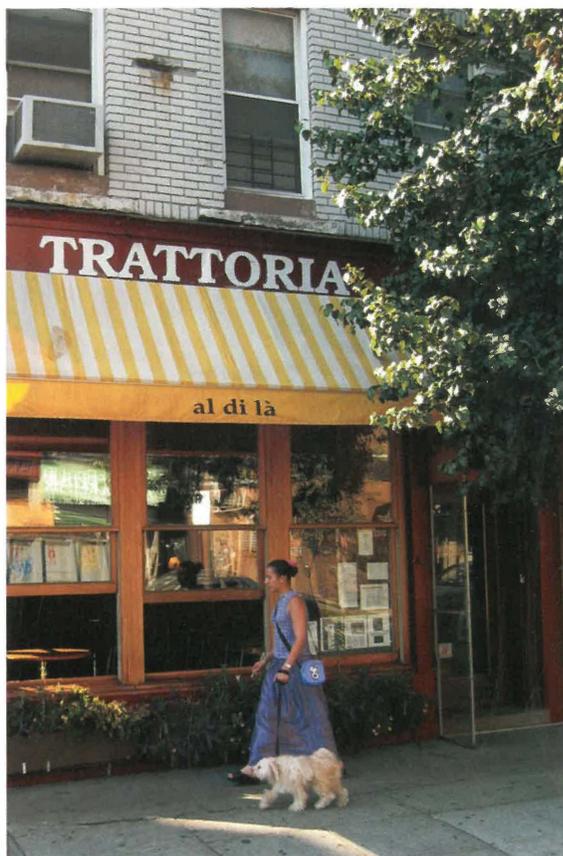
But not once has the food of Italy ever come within a baguette crumb of the French food that I've worshipped for more than 30 years.

For decades I've snickered at all those New Yorkers who make their annual pilgrimage to Tuscany. In my mind it's no bad thing. For those of us lucky enough to endure the awful rigours of life in Provence [John Doig is now living in France but still commutes to New York on a regular basis] the last thing we need is having to park two miles or so from the village on an August market day and suffer choruses of 'what a darling little town'. Let's be thankful they're sashaying around Sienna.

But just a few months ago my comestible world was turned upside down. As the lads on the dole in silicone valley might phrase it, I was confronted with 'a new paradigm'.

What I'm about to share with you is a fairly closely guarded secret known for the most part to only a small neighbourhood in Brooklyn, New York.

Al di là means literally 'on the other side'. It's a place with food that is



Above: Al di là; opposite page: Restaurateurs Emiliano Coppa and Anna Klinger.

elemental in its simplicity, intense and long-lasting in its range of flavours, where dishes have a gusto usually only accomplished by ancient aunts and grandmothers, and where I became completely silenced by the food of Italy.

Consider *tortelli di piselli*. For a Kiwi it's as close to paradise as you pack into a small pasta parcel. Nothing but fresh peas, pecorino and mint. The first bite explodes with the peas themselves, picked in childhood, sweet and luscious. Then the mint kicks in gently with the cheese lying delicately underneath it all. No heavy-handed parmesan here, no cloying sauce. Simple flavours, perfectly

balanced, contained in pasta purses so fragile a resting fork breaks through.

The first night, the dinner that stole my heart, saw me with a table loaded with more dishes than the three of us could reasonably manage. In the centre of my recollection rests the perfect risotto, cooked to order as every risotto is at al di là, and offering nothing more than the simple combination of *risotto al limone*. Every grain was an individual, separate from its friends, just a smidgen away from being completely cooked, and scented with what seemed to me to be a combination of lemon zest, lemon leaves and some wine that was surely made under the shade of a lemon tree. All I could think at the time was that the chef must have had balls to offer something so basic. Lemon rice!

As it happens, nothing could be further from the truth. Anna

Klinger is the chef who makes all this happen. A quietly spoken American beauty, the offspring of a South African mum and an Israeli dad, she's half of the reason that al di là is the best Italian restaurant in the United States, and perhaps more. The other half is her husband, Emiliano Coppa, a Venetian who has guided his wife's culinary direction and, in her words, "is an exceptional chef himself". Hardly surprising since they met six years ago when he was running a professional cooking school in Verona.

The mantra that drives this attractive and modest couple is one of the reasons al di là has been successful since it opened back in November 1998.

“We’re going to open an authentic Italian restaurant: no compromises. No cheese on the *vongole*. No cappuccino after 4pm. No red sauce. We will do what is correct without pretension.”

What this translates into is profound.

The cuisine is Venetian, not that I would have known until this was explained to me. To the *cognoscenti* this implies simplicity, of ingredients, presentation and Northern Italian style. To Anna Klinger it is in marked contrast to her background training in some of New York’s finest haute cuisine restaurants. In her own place she can keep things pure and unadulterated, without the increasing obsession with complexity, layers, height and esoteric ingredients that prevails in the viciously competitive arena of Italian food in America. She makes no bones about her priorities. “It has to be good and it has to be hot.”

Although you will find truffles from time to time on her menus, you are more likely to encounter *trippa alla Toscana*, as she describes it, “tripe stewed in white wine, *soffritto* (a simple sauce of celery, peppers, onion, garlic and herbs sautéed in olive oil) and a few tomatoes”. But to the locals it has become something more. Wary at first of broaching the world of cow stomachs, Brooklynites have embraced and adopted this dish and insisted it become a permanent item on the menu.

The same pioneer spirit has brought many in touch with rabbit (braised rabbit with black olives and polenta), calves’ liver and other simple peasant pleasures seldom seen in the world of elegant cuisine. *Baccalà mantecato*, for example, with grilled polenta offers a rich, fluffy cream of salt cod and olive oil served with an equally creamy triangle of grilled polenta. *Malfatti* blends silverbeet and ricotta in a melt-in-the-mouth gnocchi served with nutty brown butter and crisp fried sage leaves.

On my second visit I was seduced almost to the point of embarrassment by pork ribs that had been marinated in garlic and herbs, then grilled, then braised, and again grilled for a minute or two immediately before serving. Forget your Southern barbecues, your Cajun ketchup-smothered ribs. This is pork rib heaven. A sauce made with pickled cherries trickles down your chin as the

ribs demand you attack them with your fingers. If I could have eaten the bones themselves I would have done so.

As the evening progresses you might notice the plates bearing the wondrous delights coming from the kitchen. No two plates are the same. They’re gathered from jumble sales and boot fairs, an eccentric touch that works and feels appropriate. If you were to enter the kitchen you’d discover a level of calm



This is pork rib heaven. A sauce made with pickled cherries trickles down your chin as the ribs demand you attack them with your fingers.

and confidence seldom seen out the back of fine dining rooms. You’ll sense an obsession with cleanliness that is hard to find in a small restaurant. The pots and pans amazed me. A fanatical dishwasher polishes every pan until it gleams. Order rules.

Back to the table and the pasta, the stringy, familiar variety. Only you know it’s a long way from familiar. As basic as *tagliatelle al ragù* might sound, in the hands of al di là it becomes something you will not forget. The pasta’s home-made, a little rustic even, but it’s only a vehicle for a sauce that is a velvety, meaty, intensely satisfying and rich.

Casunsiei are delicate ravioli filled with beetroot and ricotta and served with nothing more than melted butter flavoured with a hint of parmesan and poppy seeds.

And there’s more. I haven’t even touched on the fish dishes, the mussel special I had one night, prepared with a simple tomato concassé and white wine sauce and perched on a bed of toasted country bread, the hanger steak or the *saltimbocca alla romana* made with pork

tenderloin escalopes, with sage leaves and prosciutto served on a bed of sautéed potatoes.

No matter how sated you might be after the antipasti, the *primi* and the *secondi*, you’d be a fool to ignore the desserts. Anna makes them all and they are as simple and satisfying as is all her food. Seasonal fruits baked into crumbles and crisps. Mousse and flans. With biscotti and shortbreads to fill that last tiny corner.

My enthusiasm for Italian wines outside of the super Tuscans was as chilly as my notion of Italian food. Then along comes Emiliano with a bundle of Northern Italian wines that are all surprises. Rich, fruity whites with a depth previously untasted. Reds as big as Aussies with a concentration that seems to match Anna’s food. An aperitif of Prosecco Bellinis made with

fresh peaches is a great way to start. Then let Emiliano guide you. You won’t be disappointed.

Indeed, the only disappointment about the entire al di là experience is its no-reservations policy. It means there’s always a wait for a table.

But then I’ve waited 30 years to find a great Italian restaurant. Half an hour on Fifth Avenue in Park Slope seems a small price to pay for an evening you’ll never forget.

Am I now a convert? Let’s put it this way: trattorias like al di là clearly don’t grow on trees, but I have to believe that tucked away ‘on the other side’ of somewhere else there has to be the Southern Italian equivalent of that sublime experience that al di là is. The baptism was brilliant. The search continues with a new vigour and a thoroughly whetted appetite. ●

al di là

248 Fifth Avenue (at Carroll St)
Brooklyn, NY 11215
Ph: 718-783-4565
No reservations