

FOOD

Mezzaluna, the Little Restaurant That Started a Revolution

By BRYAN MILLER MARCH 21, 2016

An urbane, soft-spoken former auto executive, Aldo Bozzi does not fit the mold of a driven Manhattan restaurateur — much less one who almost single-handedly, if inadvertently, set off a restaurant revolution in the United States and beyond.

And Mezzaluna, his colorful and cacophonous little trattoria on the Upper East Side, hardly seems the setting for any kind of upheaval. Yet in a fresh and unassuming way, it introduced a style of modern Italian dining that still informs restaurants today, from Mario Batali's new *La Sirena* in Manhattan to the much lauded *Poggio Trattoria* in Sausalito, Calif.

"I never imagined I would be doing this, and 30 years later," Mr. Bozzi, 75, said recently over lunch at Mezzaluna. "When I started, I simply wanted to have a place that served the kind of food I was accustomed to growing up in Italy."

That kind of food was found in classic trattorias, which are ubiquitous today. But in 1984, when Mezzaluna opened, they were all but unknown in this country.

"When I first visited Mezzaluna, I felt so excited that New York at last had a genuine Milanese trattoria," said Danny Meyer, the president of Union Square Hospitality Group and a crusader for authentic Italian cooking at *Maialino*, *Marta* and other restaurants. This was a year before Mr. Meyer started his company with the debut of Union Square Cafe. "The success of Mezzaluna reinforced my confidence in the direction we were heading."

Back then, most Italian restaurants in Manhattan came in two flavors: old-style red sauce spots, and fancy Frenchified salons sporting tuxedoed captains, leather banquettes, elegant flatware and menus the size of a small-town phone book. Il Monello, Il Nido, Tre Scalini, Barbetta — all are gone except Barbetta.

The cooking at many of these high-end dining rooms focused largely on the classics, embracing gastronomic barbells like béchamel-bound lasagna, fettuccine Alfredo and spaghetti alla carbonara in bounteous portions.

A traditional trattoria, on the other hand, is small, family-run, assiduously local, inexpensive and features exceptional ingredients served by authentic Italian people not wearing tuxedos. Attempting to define today's urban iteration is like trying to describe the average automobile: It can be sleek, stylish and fast; modest, dependable and leisurely; or even homey.

Several reputable restaurateurs took a stab at the trattoria format in the early days: at Trattoria da Alfredo, Nanni and, most notably, the celebrity clubhouse Da Silvano, which opened in 1975 and still thrives. But none rallied a culinary uprising the way Mezzaluna did.

“Aldo succeeded because he saw that there was a fundamental transformation going on in our society at the time,” said Piero Selvaggio, owner of the luxurious Valentino restaurant in Santa Monica, Calif. Mr. Selvaggio pointed to the new wave of Italian immigrants in the early 1980s.

“They were better educated,” he said. “They had a different lifestyle, different tastes, and Mezzaluna captured that.” (In 1985, Mr. Selvaggio opened a trattoria called Primi, in Santa Monica, which he sold in 2001.)

With a degree from one of Milan's elite business schools, Mr. Bozzi joined the Alfa Romeo company in 1965. Three years later, he was dispatched to New York, where he rose to president of North American operations. During this time, he traveled the country extensively. Being a worldly epicure, he spent much time seeking out authentic Italian restaurants, a challenge akin to finding Alpine skiing in Delaware.

“They called everything northern Italian or southern Italian, which meant white or red,” he said.

In 1980, Mr. Bozzi was summoned back to the home office in Milan, a move that, if nothing else, represented a lucrative gastronomic promotion. “But I never really wanted to be in the car business,” he said. “So I didn’t go.”

During a two-year stint running a Manhattan-based Italian gold company, he nurtured a crazy notion that had been building for almost a decade: Why not open a restaurant?

Using part of his \$250,000 severance from Alfa Romeo, he assumed a lease on a 1,100-square-foot storefront on Third Avenue. With little experience but much grit, he went to work channeling the spirit of his two favorite trattorias in Milan: the fashionable Ristorante la Briciola and Paper Moon. Thus arrived a four-seat antique wood bar; elbow-to-elbow marble tables (“It creates a party atmosphere every night”); special terra-cotta floor tiles from Florence; and a muraled ceiling of a cerulean sky and puffy white clouds.

The cynosure of the room, however, was the artwork. Mr. Bozzi commissioned a renowned Florentine architect, Roberto Magris, who enlisted dozens of artists to interpret the restaurant’s logo: a crescent-shaped, two-handed chopping tool called a mezzaluna. The result is a captivating collage of framed images — some whimsical, some alluringly enigmatic. In one corner, behind the bar, is a wood-fired pizza oven in the shape of a beehive, perhaps the first of its kind in the city.

Mr. Bozzi laughed as he recalled the day the fire department conducted its preopening inspection. “They didn’t know what to make of it,” he said. “So they wrote on the report: fireplace.”

Along with his chef (and now partner), Paolo Casagrande, Mr. Bozzi built a menu around innovative pizzas, 17 in all. While they may not seem so groundbreaking today, in 1985 many were eye-opening: speck smoked with juniper or pine wood, imported broccoli rabe marinated in garlic vinegar, burrata, wild mushrooms. Many of the pastas were made with imported gragnano, a handmade dried pasta from Naples.

Portions were modest, to encourage a variety of tastings. Among other firsts, Mezzaluna placed cruets of excellent olive oil on dining tables, from his small family estate outside Florence. There were no main courses, only carpacci; bright, composed salads with seafood and meats cooked in the wood oven; pastas with roasted vegetables; shellfish; and one dessert, tiramisù. (The current menu is larger.)

“This was the forerunner of lighter and smaller plates,” said Nick Valenti, the chief executive of the hospitality company Patina Restaurant Group, who was so impressed by Mezzaluna that he enlisted Mr. Bozzi as a consultant, an arrangement that continues.

A savvy oenophile, Mr. Bozzi was dismayed by the poor quality of house wines in most American restaurants. With Mr. Casagrande’s input, he mounted a blackboard and presented six whites and six reds by the glass from quality producers like Gaja, Antinori and Mastroberardino.

Mezzaluna opened in June 1984. In characteristic New York fashion, the moment the news media ebulliently broadcast its arrival, a Pamplona scene ensued. Its 45 neighborly tables turned more than 10 times a day, while the overtaxed pizza oven devoured more wood than a paper plant in Maine.

In 1987, Mr. Bozzi and a partner opened a larger trattoria, Mezzogiorno, in SoHo. It quickly became a haunt of the downtown art world. The art dealer Leo Castelli dined there seven days a week. (Mezzogiorno closed last fall, owing to a lease issue, and reopened on the Upper West Side.)

The outward trek of the American trattoria gained traction in 1988, when three Mezzaluna employees fashioned a snazzy replica, just a calzone’s toss up Third Avenue, called Ciao Bella. Several years later, they opened Bella Blu, on Lexington Avenue, followed by others. By then, numerous trattorias of all stripes were sprouting in Manhattan with names like Le Madri, Cent’Anni, Coco Pazzo, Serafina and Mediterraneo.

Riding on the prevailing culinary winds, trattoria spores drifted far and wide. Mr. Bozzi dabbled in licensing the Mezzaluna brand in Aspen, Colo.; Beverly Hills,

Calif.; and the Brentwood neighborhood of Los Angeles — the scene of Nicole Brown Simpson’s last meal. (The latter two have closed, and Mr. Bozzi is no longer involved in the Aspen restaurant.) His biggest licensing success, and the most unlikely, has been in Turkey, where a dozen Mezzalunas are slicing up carpacci.

Today, the Manhattan original thrives as a low-key favorite of chefs like Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Daniel Boulud, Thomas Keller and Bobby Flay.

When Mr. Bozzi is not overseeing Mezzaluna with Mr. Casagrande, or conceiving Italian projects for Patina Restaurant Group, he spends more than a third of the year in Italy with his wife, Chiara, a retired pediatrician.

At the conclusion of a long interview over tiramisù and espresso, one critical question remained for this improbable pioneer: “Do you drive an Alfa Romeo?”

“I am not driving one at present,” Mr. Bozzi said, pausing for the punch line. “But in two weeks I will have a new nephew. His name is Romeo.”

Correction: March 21, 2016

An earlier version of this article misstated the status of Mezzaluna in Aspen, Colo.

It is still open; it has not closed.

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