

TASTE

Food

By LYN DOBRIN



In Italy, panini is a way of life, say Giuseppe and Marisa Ruta, the owners of six popular panini cafes in Nassau County. In Italy, the panino is the meal you pick up at the salumeria on the way to school, for lunch in busy cities or as a late night snack with friends. While some might think panino is just a sandwich, Giuseppe says that's like saying a Lamborghini is just a car. Panino, he asserts, is the perfect sandwich, where great ingredients can be combined to make a meal that is memorable. "We Italians are passionate about food; we savor each meal in search of the right combinations," he says.

Giuseppe and Marisa grew up in Ispica, in the south-east part of Sicily, six kilometers from the Mediterranean. His father had a bar in town where Giuseppe worked making espresso

before going to school at the young age of six. "A bar in Italy is a place where you go for coffee, for an aperitif, maybe a gelato, pizzetta, pastries and, of course, panini," says Giuseppe. The two met when they were 16.

No one knows who made the first panino. Surely Italians have been putting meat and cheese on bread since bread was first baked. But who was the first to warm the ingredients or to press the bread and fillings together? One story has it that in 1896, in Italy's Puglia region, Nunzio Panini created the first panino when he laid some grilled eggplant and fresh goat cheese between two slices of focaccia bread he had just pulled from the oven.

Whatever the history, panini is

becoming an American institution. Giuseppe and Marisa opened their first La Bottega, which means "the store" in Italian, in March of 2003. Both lovers of traditional food, their dream was to create a store where customers would come and shop for specialty items from a small simple food selection with a strong focus on panini.

Within the first year as their clientele grew and expanded, so too did the panini and food menu. Today La Bottega offers a dine-in and take-out menu of 60 panini and 25 salads, weekly special menus and over 250 imported

Italian wines.

What was once known as the Italian gourmet "store" is now a fun-cozy-romantic Italian trattoria, with a warm, welcoming atmosphere in which the guests feel "at home."

Here are two of the customers' favorites: Foggia, which is fried eggplant, smoked mozzarella, black olive paste and sun-dried tomato on kripina bread; and Cotoletta—chicken cutlet, red onions, herb mayonnaise sauce, fresh tomato and fresh mozzarella on ciabatta.

For Giuseppe, there are no rules in creating your own panino. Some of the best panini can be discovered by opening the fridge and seeing what you have, he says. Maybe it's a piece of veal cutlet from the night before, some leftover marinated salad and perhaps some fresh tomato. Put it together with Italian bread, dress it up with a condiment, warm it up in a toaster and enjoy. Ciao.

PANINI: More Than A Sandwich

LA BOTTEGA

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516-408-3190

234C Merrick Rd., Rockville Centre
516-593-4930

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516-543-4540

2012 Merrick Rd., Merrick
516-223-0800

Caffe Barocco, 13 Nassau Blvd., Garden City South
516-292-0144

www.ilovepanini.com

BLACK OLIVE PASTE

9 ounces black olives
2 anchovies
1 piece fresh garlic
1 Tablespoon capers
2 Tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste

Wash, dry, pit and chop the olives. Wash the capers and anchovies with water until free of salt, dry and chop. Put the olives, anchovies, capers and the garlic in a mortar, add salt and pepper. While beating slowly, add the oil until you obtain a creamy paste.



Marisa and Giuseppe

HERB GOAT CHEESE

1/2 lb. free-range goat cheese (if you don't find free range, any goat cheese will do)
1 tsp. tarragon (dry)
1 tsp. oregano (dry)
1 tsp. basil (dry)
1 1/2 tsp. sage (dry)
1 tsp. parsley (dry)
Salt and pepper
3 Tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

In a clear bowl add the cheese, then add the herbs one at a time; while doing so add the oil as needed. Add salt and pepper and mix until the cheese is soft and almost creamy.