

Hospitality from the Heart



The Leopard at des Artistes



Il Gattopardo

An Interview with
Gianfranco Sorrentino and Paula Bolla-Sorrentino,
Owners, Il Gattopardo, The Leopard at des Artistes, and Mozzarella & Vino

EDITORS' NOTE Originally from Naples, Italy, Gianfranco Sorrentino carries over 44 years of experience in restaurant management at properties including Quisitana Hotel in Capri, Dorchester Hotel in London, Four Seasons Hotel in Tokyo, Bice Restaurant in New York, Sette MoMA Restaurant at The Museum of Modern Art of New York (1990/2002), Union Bar and Grill in Great Barrington, Massachusetts (2001/2006), and The Leopard at des Artistes (opened 05/02/2011), his restaurant in the New York landmark the Hotel des Artistes. In September 2001, he opened Il Gattopardo, just across the street from MoMA, along with his wife Paula Bolla and his talented Executive Chef Vito Gnazzo.

Prior to assuming her current role, Paula Bolla-Sorrentino was a designer at Pentagram Design and handled special events at Sette MoMA. She is a graduate of the Fashion Institute of Technology with a B.F.A. in graphic design.

RESTAURANT BRIEFS Il Gattopardo (ilgattopardonyc.com) serves traditional Southern Italian comfort food that has been adapted for the contemporary palate without compromising the authenticity of the cuisine. Il Gattopardo is committed to producing top quality Southern Italian gastronomy, from using authentic ingredients to keeping the tradition of Italian culture and hospitality vibrant and passionate. After 12 years at its original location, the restaurant has a new home at The Rockefeller Townhouses.

The Leopard at des Artistes (theleopardnyc.com) is located in one of the most iconic spaces in New York City, the Hotel des Artistes. The Leopard finds its roots in the area once known as "The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies" and in the culinary traditions of the regions of Campania, Basilicata, Calabria, Apulia, Sardinia, and Sicily. The dishes are a balance of rural elements from these regions and include pasta, vegetables, cheese, and seafood ingredients from the Costiera.

Mozzarella & Vino (mozzarellaevino.com), located in the former space of Il Gattopardo, across from MoMA on 54th Street, is the more rustic and casual sibling. Its concept reflects the simplicity of authentic Italian ingredients, with a heavy emphasis on the Mozzarella di bufala Campana, Italian cheeses, and affettati. The enoteca style bar focuses on showcasing rather smaller family estates and independent Italian winemakers with history, quality, and good value.



Gianfranco Sorrentino



Paula Bolla-Sorrentino

How important has the new space for Il Gattopardo been for your business?

Gianfranco: It's been even greater than we expected. We kept the restaurant with more or less the same number of guests that we could entertain at the old Il Gattopardo. What we have more of is the bar and the catering space, where we serve the same type of food as we serve in the restaurant.

Since 2014, we have had a very good catering director, who previously worked with Tribeca Grille and Nobu, as well as with Aquavita Group so he has a great knowledge of corporate catering.

This year, we focused a lot on catering for off-premise events for institutions such as the Italian Consulate, the Italian American Chamber of Commerce, and the Italian Cultural Institute, and private events for big firms such as Blackstone and Blackrock, and in fashion and design for Ferrari, Kiton, Cucinelli, and Buccellati.

How has the development gone at The Leopard?

Gianfranco: Central Park is one of the wealthiest areas of New York and we understood that the kind of clientele we call guests have particular needs. They like to be recognized, to sit at the same tables, to always eat the same things. Since we cater to this, we have had a great response.

Through October of last year, we were growing at 10 percent better than in 2014, which was our goal. The chef we hired a year ago is helping us to modify the menu to satisfy the needs of our customers but also to be more Italian.

Besides serving to our neighbors, we're targeting the outside hotels and promoting The Leopard like a destination because it's very unique. There are not so many places where one can eat surrounded by murals from 1924 in that kind of atmosphere. It's probably one of the oldest restaurants and, while we want to make it contemporary, we also want to keep the spirit of the old café.

We still have a lot of guests who have been going to the Café des Artistes for 40 years and they sit always at the same table, and they have the same dish. The challenge is to appeal to the new generation.

Would you touch on the Mozzarella & Vino concept and have you been happy with how that has grown?

Gianfranco: In a year and a half, we increased more than 47 percent, which is far above our expectations.

The good thing is we share a lot of the Il Gattopardo customers, when they're looking for something a bit more casual.

This isn't always an easy business. How do you balance it?

Paula: Gianfranco is always on the floor. He is always onstage, it's like showbiz. Without the people and our guests, there is no business. We can have the best cuisine and the best ambiance, but without them, there is nothing.

Gianfranco: For us, the most important thing is hospitality, and that has to come from our hearts and not from our brains. If we enjoy making people happy and we think about their interests, we're going to succeed.

We have a staff that we are very happy because they've been with us for 22 years. We have fathers who used to work with us and now the sons work with us, so we have done something good not only for our guests but also our staff.

Are you considering taking Il Gattopardo to other cities and, if so, can you maintain the same feel?

Paula: It's very difficult to extend the same spirit the way it is to other markets.

Gianfranco: We are not interested because we can't replicate something we have to be in 12 hours a day to make it. But we have been talking more seriously about growing Mozzarella & Vino, which has more of a chance to be replicated.

How do you define family?

Gianfranco: The guys that work with us spend more time with us and we with them than they spend with their own families, so it's important for me when they come to work that they are happy to work.

Paula: We're here together in the same business and it was one of the reasons why I joined the venture. Our kids too are always in the restaurant.

How hard is it to enjoy what you've built?

Paula: When we see clients smiling, that is the moment I feel that we're doing something right. ●