

Hospitality



A Taste of Italy

An Interview with Michele Mazza,
Executive Chef, Il Mulino New York Restaurant Group



Il Mulino New York Uptown on East 60th Street (left);
Trattoria Il Mulino on East 20th Street (above)

EDITORS' NOTE When he was just 15, Michele Mazza knew he wanted to deepen his technique and knowledge, so he did three years of culinary school in Italy. After school, he worked on a prestigious Italian coastal liner for 10 years, doing 130 day cruises around the world, which enhanced his cooking skills with different recipes and variants to cook with. In 1980, he moved to the U.S. and opened a couple of restaurants of his own, the first called Giovannella. Around 12 years ago, he started working for Il Mulino New York. Since then, he has opened about 10 restaurants for Il Mulino New York as Executive Chef.



Michele Mazza

COMPANY BRIEF Founded in Greenwich Village in 1981, Il Mulino New York (ilmulino.com) was originally an intimate and esteemed eatery that served local foodies in the know. Today, Il Mulino New York has blossomed into a culinary empire with nine luxury outposts across the globe that cater to tastemakers, celebrities, and dignitaries as far flung as Tokyo, Japan and San Juan, Puerto Rico. It has also expanded to include two innovative dining concepts, Trattoria Il Mulino and Il Mulino Prime. The Il Mulino New York gourmet product line offers exquisite sauces, pastas, infused olive oils, and more (ilmulino.com/shop/).

What is it that makes Il Mulino so special?

The quality of the food – we use only the finest of ingredients and the most cherished traditions from Italy. In addition, we are constantly training our staff, both in the kitchen and in the dining room. At Il Mulino, we pride ourselves on providing a truly luxurious dining experience in every aspect, from the moment a team of waiters in tuxedos presents the table with beautiful complimentary antipasti throughout our service of elegantly crafted dishes. We also have many locations and I make sure I'm on the road at least once every few weeks to visit our teams. Constant contact and collaboration helps ensure the integrity of the Il Mulino New York experience.

When customers walk into an Il Mulino, are there certain consistencies or is each oriented for its specific market?

Service and cuisine are always consistent across our outposts; it is what our global clientele counts on and craves. When people

walk into the Miami restaurant, they feel like they could be in New York enjoying the bruschetta, our big parmesan cheese, which is presented and shaved at each table, spiced zucchini, and signature dishes like our Porcini Ravioli in a Champagne Truffle Cream Sauce. However, we also try to capture the elements of local culture so our patrons feel at home, whether it is in the decor or in our daily specials.

Has it been challenging to remain consistent as you've grown and to bring in people and train them to your standards??

Training is the most important contributor to success, especially in the restaurant business. After we train and we open a new restaurant, it's like a little baby – we have to teach everyone how to walk. I am there all the time to provide guidance and ensure the team executes on their responsibilities with confidence and grace.

With all of the good food you serve, how do you find the balance with also being healthy as customers expect today?

We try to be very mindful of the various dietary restrictions and lifestyles of our patrons. We offer a lot of gluten-free options, and meats, like all of our chicken, are organic. I have also done special parties for vegans. It's a challenge, but I like a challenge. At Il Mulino New York, we never sacrifice flavor.

You now have a Trattoria Il Mulino and an Il Mulino Prime in New York City. Do you anticipate growth for those brands and how do you describe those experiences as part of Il Mulino group?

Il Mulino Prime is our newest concept. It is a modern steakhouse in SoHo that also serves Italian specialties. We created prime because as a brand, we spend a lot of time choosing the best cuts of meat. We spent a lot of time before we opened Prime to make sure we would have only the best dry-aged meats, perfectly marbled, irresistibly tender. It took me six months to buy the best broiler and make sure it was what we wanted. It required doing a lot of homework but I'm happy with the result.

Trattoria Il Mulino is our younger, casual-chic concept. We gave everybody a

chance to come in with the kids and we created famous, gourmet pizza – it's amazing. It is more of a family style.

How significant is your takeout business and at Trattoria how do you utilize its wine cellar?

Yes, we do a lot of takeout and offer off-site catering as well. The wine cellar is a private room that can fit 38 to 40 people and can be customized for any occasion, be it a birthday, rehearsal dinner, or corporate event. We offer a range of services as needed by our guests: flat-screen TVs, music, flowers, etc. We do a lot of parties down there.

With your growth, is it more difficult to find time to be in the kitchen?

I like the dynamic aspects of my role. I still spend a lot of time in the kitchen. I like to create new dishes and to smell what the team is cooking around me. I enjoy talking about food or meeting a new fish guy to try different fish.

Last year, I created an organization in New York. I'm the Vice President of the Italian Chef Association in New York City. Members have to be Italian, and need to have completed culinary school in Italy. We have grown to 180 members in one year. We meet at different restaurants and we talk about different products.

We are very fortunate to get a lot of new product in from Italy. I call all the chefs in my organization and we sit down, try things, talk about them, and provide feedback. It's very inspiring and it creates a wonderful community.

Are you thinking about other concepts to broaden the brand?

We're not finished yet. We want to do just fish, for example. We're focused on Mediterranean fish, and would love to showcase all of the delicious possibilities.

With all of your success, are there times when you can stop and enjoy it?

Yes. I try to go once a year to Italy, especially when the truffles come. I like to be out with the pig looking for truffles.

What keeps a restaurant relevant today?

We have to constantly stay on top and have the right product. It can't change too much – we don't follow trends; we honor traditions. We also have to make sure we have good people; employees have to be happy as well, as that's a very important part of the business. ●