

A True Italian Experience



The Leopard at des Artistes at Manhattan's historically landmarked Hotel des Artistes

An Interview with Gianfranco Sorrentino,
Owner, 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 Quisisana Hotel in Capri, Dorchester Hotel in London, Four Seasons Hotel in Tokyo, and Bice Restaurant in New York. In 1990, he opened Sette MoMA Restaurant at The Museum of Modern Art of New York (1990-2002). In 2002 he opened Union Bar and Grill in Great Barrington, Massachusetts (2002-2006), and in September 2001, he opened Il Gattopardo, across the street from MoMA, along with his wife Paula Bolla and his Executive Chef Vito Gnazzo. In May 2011, he opened The Leopard at des Artistes, his restaurant in the New York landmark Hotel des Artiste and, in 2014, his newest restaurant Mozzarella & Vino opened in the old Il Gattopardo space, directly across from MoMA. Il Gattopardo moved down the block to its current location in the historically landmarked Rockefeller Townhouses.



Gianfranco Sorrentino

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. The restaurant 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.

Lunch and dinner are both served at Il Gattopardo, and a "Brunch Italiano" is served on the weekends in the beautiful, lushly planted 6-story Atrium (with live jazz and bossa nova on Saturdays).

The Leopard at des Artistes (theleopardnyc.com) is located in one of the most iconic spaces in New York City, the historically landmarked 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.

The restaurant serves dinner seven nights a week, along with "Brunch at des Artistes" on weekends. On Sunday evenings, The Leopard

offers a "BYOB Italian Sunday Supper," with waived corkage fees and exceptional staff pairing recommendations. A three-course tasting menu is also offered 7 days a week.

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.

How important are fresh, quality ingredients when it comes to making your restaurants special?

The Italian cuisine is a cuisine of original product. Without the fresh ingredients and the original products, one cannot do Italian cuisine.

We spend a great amount of time and energy trying to source the best product we can. I go to Italy two or three times a year and I always visit the farms, a pasta factory, and winemakers that are more artisanal. It's the same thing with our chef – he went to Italy recently for several ingredients that he will bring back.

Our concept is to be artisanal in what we do and choose the right product. It has to be the freshest possible but without spending an incredible amount of money for it.

How innovative can you be when you're making Italian food and how does Il Gattopardo define Italian cuisine?

I have many guests who go to Italy and ask me for dining suggestions. I try to avoid giving them the Michelin-starred restaurants because, when they go to Italy, they want to feel they're having a true Italian experience, in food, wine, and hospitality.

This is the same thing we try to offer here. When one enters the restaurant, I want my maître d to say "Buongiorno, Buona Sera," and smile with his heart.

When the guests leave and we return their coats, we say, "Buona Notte, Grazie, Arrivederci." It's not only about the cuisine, but about the guest experience and the ambience in the restaurant.

In New York, we have a new wave of great American chefs that are cooking Italian

food. They know the ingredients better than any Italian chef, and they have a great cooking technique because they've trained at the best restaurants, and they present incredible dishes. But when I'm done eating, I know from the bottom of my heart it wasn't Italian. One cannot substitute the history, culture, and tradition of that country. For me, living in Italy for 30 years of my life, waking up with the smell of the ragout in the house on Sunday, I remember these things, and they're not something that can be taught. One has to be born with that.

How do you define The Leopard's space?

The Leopard at des Artistes is probably one of the most beautiful rooms in New York.

It had been French for 48 years and was really a classic old hotelier style French. When we opened up, we tried to bring some Italian influence to the restaurant, not only with the construction, which is more modern, but also by respecting what the Café Des Artistes was and restoring its beautiful murals.

With the menu, we try to provide classic, traditional Italian cuisine but, at the same time, we include certain contemporary elements on the menu. Il Gattopardo is more southern, and more regional, because we are really from Campania and specifically from Napoli. At The Leopard at des Artistes, it's like being on a trip to the South of Italy. Each of the dishes speaks of the southern tradition.

Every time we discover an old dish or recipe, it's like an incredible journey to the past; for me and the chef, as well.

Did you know the Mozzarella & Vino concept would work in the space and is there opportunity to expand it?

I knew the concept would work because we had the same quality but at a much lower average per person price, and in a very comfortable and casual setting. Businesswise, we are increasing at 28 percent per year, which is incredible.

The concept we started with was to create a place where we choose the ingredients and we had people in the back of the house who mainly assemble it.

However, while some customers come to this restaurant to be more informal, they still want the same quality they had at Il Gattopardo. We had to include a few hot dishes for them. It's a concept we are looking to expand because, Mozzarella & Vino is something we can replicate, especially in a high traffic area where we can serve a good but quick lunch. ●