

GIANNI'S BACK IN TOWN: ANDREOLI ITALIAN GROCER

BY ELIOT WEXLER



When Chef Joel Robuchon, basketball wizard Michael Jordan, pitcher Roger Clemens and Chef Giovanni Scorzo announced their retirements for the “first time,” their fans were devastated as each of those luminaries had so much more to give. Fortunately, retirement was brief and each returned to perform again at the level that made him famous.

Perhaps Chef Giovanni Scorzo’s name is not as widely known to the Phoenix diner as the other talents in that group, but it should be. He serves the most authentic Italian cuisine in the Valley—and some attest he serves the *only* authentic Italian cuisine in the Valley.

As Chris Bianco, owner of Pizzeria Bianco, told me, “In my opinion, Giovanni is the most underrated chef in the country.”

Giovanni, or Gianni as his friends and devout fans call him, was the original owner of Leccabaffi and Galileo Bread Emporio. After selling both of these places a few years ago, he’s now returned to the kitchen with Andreoli Italian Grocer.

Located a few lengths of sausage from the corner of Via Linda and 90th Street in Scottsdale, the business is definitely a family affair. At any time you can find Gianni, his wife Linda or daughter Francesca (who makes a mean pasta amatriciana) taking orders at the counter. Gianni compares it to what would

be called a “pizzicheria” in Italy.

“Pizzicheria means *little bite*,” he says, “where you can get a little bit of everything: cheese, salami, prosciutto, wine, little oil, little coffee. It’s not a full grocery store.... For an Italian who comes here, you can find everything.”

When you go to Andreoli you’re in for a bit of a culture shock because English is not the primary language spoken... parla Italiano, anyone? There is the old

saying: “To eat well, go where the truck drivers go.” If you apply it to Andreoli, you’re following Italians who go to the restaurant in droves.

Gianni was born in Calabria, Italy, into a family that loved food. From an early age, Gianni learned an unusual respect for ingredients from his family. When it was time for the family pig to become dinner, he witnessed every part of the pig used to create something, from salumi to soap (oh, dip me in that kind of bacon grease).

In the first grade he was already displaying skill in putting together a feast. According to Gianni, he would organize what his little crew of friends would bring for lunch.

He’d ask each of them, “What are you bringing tomorrow for lunch? Your father went mushroom hunting—bring

Photos by Eliot Wexler

porcini. Your father made some fresh ricotta. You, bring peppers. You have salami from your grandma? No? OK, you bring some filled eggplant. And on and on. Then the next day we would lay it all out and it was beautiful.”

Growing up in Calabria there was no refrigeration in Gianni’s home so everything was fresh. Nothing canned or frozen was kept in his home. Every day his mother went to the market. She was extremely picky and would not settle for anything but the best quality from the vendors.

When Gianni was young, she would send him to the market to pick something up. If it did not meet her standard, then the next day she would take him back to the market and let the vendor have it for taking advantage of her little boy. These lessons were not lost on Gianni.

His mother and aunt both cooked professionally at different restaurants, so his lessons at home were taught by skilled chefs. All his memories of food are punctuated by aromas, rather than touch or sight. When he describes a dish with his eyes closed and head rolled back, every dominant detail revolves around the smell.

Gianni tells me, “When I smell something, I know. If you put veal in front of my nose, I know it is veal, not beef. I don’t need to see, I don’t taste food ... I smell.”

Instead of a traditional high school in Italy, following eighth grade Gianni decided to attend cooking school. This decision allowed him to travel to Piedmont, Liguria, Florence, Calabria and many other parts of Italy to learn their regional cuisines, an experience he brought with him when he moved to the United States in 1985.

Gianni arrived in Phoenix in 1986 after spending some time in California and working in New York for Pino Luongo.

However, our first preview of his cuisine was in 1988 with the opening of La Bruschetta at Camelback and Scottsdale.

According to Gianni, “Food for me—any place that I would do, even in America when my wife and I first opened—my intention was always: only my way or I would shut down. I don’t have any marinara; in Italy marinara is a pizza, not a sauce. No alfredo, no chicken Parmigiana. The food has to be original or I don’t do it. If I had to cook that food, then I would become a mechanic.”

It was during this time that Chris Bianco first met Gianni. Chris says, “Gianni is very knowledgeable not only from a culinary perspective but also a cultural one. As a kid coming from the Bronx, [I realized that] most of the [popular] dishes at that point were from the Italian-American perspective, not good or bad, but from the importance of a sub-culture, first you have to learn the classics before you can expand on anything new. The thing with Gianni is that he would not play the game. He was revolutionary in his unwillingness not to compromise and just give people what they wanted.”

In 1990 Gianni was presented with an opportunity to open a restaurant in Santa Fe. He hired Chris to move to Santa Fe to work with him on the opening of Babbo Ganzo. The restaurant was well received, getting positive reviews from a number of magazines including *Bon Appetit* and *Travel + Leisure*. Gianni was then presented with the opportunity to revive Zingari restaurant in the venerable Donatello Hotel in San Francisco. When this opportunity presented itself, he wound down his other ventures and moved with his wife to San Francisco.

After four years there, Gianni moved his family back to Phoenix in 1997 and opened Leccabaffi and, soon thereafter, the Galileo Bread Emporio. Leccabaffi was highly touted as the



best Italian restaurant in Phoenix, further cementing Gianni as the *capo* of Italian cuisine in town.

After a great run at Leccabaffi, Gianni grew tired of the day-to-day operations of running a restaurant and elected to sell the restaurant and bread shop in 2003 to spend more time helping to raise his children. I can only imagine his kids' friends angling to come over for dinner when Dad was cooking. Then in 2007 Andreoli Italian Grocer was opened.

I approach my visits to Andreoli a little differently during the day than when I go at night. During the day, make sure to check the board at the door to see if there are any specials and then make your way towards the counter.

The first display case has sweets made by Gianni including, but not limited to, tiramisu, meringata, zuccotto, zuppa inglese, baci, cookies, truffles and torta pistachio—so good. The next display case contains all the cheeses—Italian of course: house-made mozzarella, house-made ricotta (the best in town, it puts store-bought to shame), buffalo mozzarella from Italy and a bunch of other choices that you may not have heard of, so ask for a recommendation (stracchino is great).

The salumi in the next case are the commercial brands that Gianni likes but if you fancy salumi, make sure you ask for his house-made salumi that is curing in the cooler (wild boar salumi, culatello, pancetta, salami Calabrese). His salumi is the closest to the way salumi tastes in Europe that you will ever be able to sample in Phoenix. I highly recommend buying some and leaving it out of the refrigerator until it reaches room temperature so the flavors cold temperature tends to mask can bloom.

The final display case holds his house-marinated olives, frittatas and arancini (fried rice balls filled with meat sauce). Gianni also sells various meats including huge prime aged T-bone steaks for Bistecca alla Fiorentina (he will dress them for you to grill at home), veal chops, lamb chops, oxtail, rabbit, venison, house-made sausage and tripe.

The regular menu has an array of panini that make perfect lunch sandwiches. My favorites are porchetta, and the sausage, pepper and onion combo. *Warning:* Please do not ask for tomato sauce or you will upset Gianni. He wants you to taste and savor the flavor of the sausage.

The Stuzzichini Mozzafiato (antipasto) part of the menu contains two preparations of calamari that are

both fantastic. The calamaretti di suora celeste is fried and is served with only a wedge of lemon because Gianni does not believe in masking the flavor of a quality ingredient. The calamaretti del sacrestano is the version that is marinated and grilled. It is *sooooo* delicate and clearly my favorite.

Nighttime at Andreoli feels like an Italian social club, not so different than Satriales Pork Shop with all of the Sopranos sitting around (with the clear distinction that this family is all and only about the food.) Gianni says that at night people feel like they are having dinner at home and they all talk together.

The specials on the board change nightly and some are more pricey than you would expect in a deli/grocery setting but his food cost is high and Gianni says he will not “cheat the customers on quality—I can't do it.”

Be sure to order one of the handmade pasta specials (especially any that are dressed with Gianni's Bolognese sauce) so you can sample how pasta is supposed to taste. After you finish the pasta, grab a slice of his fresh-baked bread to wipe the plate clean.

If you are a fan of calamari, ask for Gianni's pasta with calamari. This is spaghetti tossed with tender calamari in an addictive tangy tomato sauce. When baby-back ribs are in the case, then it is almost impossible to pass up the Italian ribs that are dry rubbed and grilled.

The Bistecca alla Fiorentina with grilled radicchio and scamorza can easily feed two with some leftovers to spare.

Gianni says, “Italian is the most beautiful food in the world if it is made in the right way. It is the best but it has to be respected. There are certain things that are made in certain ways—there is no short cut.”

Chris Bianco adds, “Phoenix is lucky to have Gianni” and I could not agree more. Go and visit before Gianni's second retirement. ☼

Andreoli Italian Grocer, 8880 E. Via Linda, Scottsdale, (NW corner of 90th Street and Via Linda, in the Fry's Marketplace shopping center); www.andreoli-grocer.com; (480) 614-1980.

Like all true foodies, Eliot Wexler was born one, not made. Growing up in Chicago, he experienced a broad spectrum of culinary offerings from Italian beef to some of the city's finest restaurants. He's traveled the world to augment his comprehensive culinary research and has finally decided to bring a novel restaurant concept to the Phoenix area.

