

PROFILE

BY AMY SPECTOR

Culinary R&D

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Chef's Tips:

- To make tender gnocchi, process the potatoes with a ricer. If you mash the potatoes or put them through a meat grinder, you beat up the potato and beat out the starch.
- Ingredients in a great dish are like people in a marriage: if too many are involved, it doesn't work.

GIUSEPPE NACCARELLI

TITLE: director of kitchen operations, Il Fornaio, Corte Madera, Calif.

BIRTH DATE: Feb. 21, 1967

HOMETOWN: Palombaro, Abruzzo, Italy

EDUCATION: five years of training at the Istituto Professionale di Stato in Abruzzo

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS: learning from and teaching 24 chefs every day and being a part of Il Fornaio's success

For lovers of regional Italian food on the West Coast, the temples of their worship are the 23 Il Fornaio restaurants, where each month under the 10-year-old Festa Regionale program, the promotional menu shifts to a different region of Italian cuisine.

The high priests of the operation are corporate executive chef Maurizio Mazzon, who hails from Venice, in northeastern Italy, and corporate director of kitchen operations Giuseppe Naccarelli, a native of Abruzzo, the region on the Adriatic Coast across from Rome. Together, they guide the individual units' chef-partners — many of them native-born Italians — to create the promotional selections of breads, appetizers, main courses, desserts and wines from the featured areas in Italy.

Naccarelli shared his insights on why Italian regional foods have gained popularity at the Il Fornaio restaurants.

Q: How do you define Italian regional cuisine?

A: Italian food is not even regional; it's town by town. In one town, you eat spaghetti with seafood in a certain way, then five minutes away, it's prepared differently.

Q: So how do you come up with the menus from each region for the Festa Regionale?

A: Deciding the menu is very democratic. There is a lot of coaching there. As a chef, you want to do the most authentic menu. We try to make each dish two or three different ways without touching the authenticity.

All of us worked 10 years or more in Italy and probably in all 20 regions. For example, when I was 14, I did my second season in Calabria, three regions down [from Abruzzo]. You work first in the area where you are from, then you move around. So for me, it would be easy to do a menu from Calabria.

In 10 years, we've done each region two, three or four times. Each year you get better and better with each region.

Q: How many of the products you use must be imported?

A: We get a lot of products [from Italy]: dried pasta, some cheeses, fish, like the branzino from the Mediterranean, flown in twice each week. We can get almost everything else locally. Productwise, there is no comparison with produce you can use fresh. Using fresh produce is what is authentic.

Unique cheeses we import from Italy — pecorino Sardo takes hundreds of years of tradition to make. But we have such great cheese makers in California, with a passion to do boutique items. Nine or 10 years ago, when we were doing my region, I tried to find the cheese called Crescenza. The next time we did the menu, I needed the cheese. My broker brought the cheese to a cheese maker in Napa, and now it's [the cheese maker's] No. 1 selling cheese.

Q: What regions are the most popular in the Festa Regionale?

A: Tuscany. Everybody knows it and wants it. Emilia-Romagna — you can't go wrong there. Right now we're featuring Sardinia, and pretty much everything is selling. Spaghetti sells a lot, so does sea bass.

Americans like Italian food. With all the carb-free diets, pasta is still our No. 1 seller. What I see and what I'm happy about is that people are discovering the south of Italy. Before, no one was going south of Rome.

Q: With your customers' familiarity with regional food, are they ready for items like the cured lard known as lardo?

A: People in California are very into all the fat-free, diet kind of things. We try, once in a while, dishes with lardo. We call it Prosciutto bianco [white Prosciutto]. There are some things we do that are not successful.