A Tale of Two Cultures

There is no separating Gaetano Nardulli, the owner and chef of NEAR, from his Italian roots. Although born and raised in the United States, Italy is in his DNA. As a child, he spent countless hours cooking with his grandmother. She taught him by example, not recipes. He sized, tasted, and bided. To this day, he goes to his nonna’s every Sunday for dinner. Four daughters help cook the meal. Chef Nardulli is never allowed in the kitchen. Typical? I remember seeing an interview of Francis Ford Coppola who said he had the run of the estate, except for the kitchen. That was his grandmother’s domain, and she guarded it fiercely.

Nardulli grew up in Addison, III. As a boy, he and his family often made the drive out to Grandpa’s Deli in the Barrington Commons. After high school, he went to DePaul University in Chicago where he majored in finance. He had excellent grades, but knew this field was not for him. With his culinary degree, he worked the line for some of Chicago’s best-known restaurants. He spent a year with Tony Mantuano at Spiaggia on Michigan Avenue. This was an Italian kitchen, sophisticated and refined in nature. There were no red checkered tablecloths, no raffia-wrapped bottles of Chianti. Italy beckoned. Nardulli took off for Abruzzo and Puglia for a year. His taste buds sang. The sauces, the pastas – they all left their mark.

When he returned home, he took a job at Butter restaurant where he worked for two years. Before, he learned from the chef and the line cooks. As he said, “There’s not a day in this business where you can’t learn something new.” After Butter, Nardulli worked at Schwa, a restaurant in Chicago that in his opinion, defies description. A tiny kitchen permeates everything he creates. This chef teaches by example, creating dishes with clean, assertive flavors. There are no histrionics in the kitchen. His demands focus on the integrity of his dishes. As he said, “I never take food for granted.”

You can’t demand inspiration. It steals into your thoughts, sometimes in the wee hours of the morning, or the dead of night. But it’s tied up with you, with your family, with your family’s blessing, he went in search of it. The first stop was Kendall College, then housed in Evanston. With

He knew he didn’t want to be in the city. Memories flooded in from his trips to Barrington. Remarkably coincidental – the Grandpa’s Deli space was available. Scared, but determined, Nardulli opened NEAR, a distillation of his grandmother’s and mother’s names, Nina Elena and Angela Rosa. This would be a restaurant that was warm, welcoming, open to young and old and families with kids, because that’s how he grew up. He was interviewing Chef Nardulli at his restaurant when a woman walked in the door. He went to talk to her. She spoke Italian, he answered in English. Occasionally he spoke Italian. She responded in English. She gesticulated with her hands pointing into the dining room. He followed her gaze, nodding and taking notes in his head. After about 10 minutes, they hugged, kissed each other on both cheeks. Ciao, he said. She, goodbye.

He came back to me, saying that was his aunt, and he was cooking for her daughter’s shower which would be at the restaurant. I laughed, saying that they spoke Italian and English, but never answered a question in the same language that it was asked. He said it was that way when they all got together on weekends. They slip easily from Italian to English, often in the same sentence.

Nardulli opened NEAR with no fanfare, no advertising. He had a driving desire to serve the very best regional food, using seasonal ingredients, locally sourced, if possible. This was his calling card. People flocked to his dining room through word of mouth. The food is fresh and modern – simple yet authentic flavors. There are no histrionics in the kitchen! Typical? I remember seeing an interview of Francis Ford Coppola who said he never took food for granted. “There’s not a day in this business where you can’t learn something new.” After Butter, Nardulli worked at Schwa, a restaurant in Chicago that in his opinion, defies description. A tiny kitchen permeates everything he creates. This chef teaches by example, creating dishes with clean, assertive flavors. There are no histrionics in the kitchen. His demands focus on the integrity of his dishes. As he said, “I never take food for granted.”

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