

*A Cucina Antipasto:*

For Bob Giraldi, It's all about the Food

By George De Stefano

Gigino Trattoria, located on Greenwich Street in downtown Manhattan's Tribeca neighborhood, offers an appealing southern Italian menu created by a chef from the resort town of Positano, and a warm, casual ambience inspired by trattorias in Italy. Tribecans, as well as Italian food lovers from other parts of New York City and beyond, come to Gigino's to enjoy the inventive but unpretentious cuisine and the convivial atmosphere.

But it was the worst disaster in New York City's history that really showed just how much of a neighborhood institution Gigino Trattoria had become since it opened in 1994.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Gigino's owner Bob Giraldi was working out at a nearby health club. He rushed home to his wife and daughter – the Giraldis live a block away from the restaurant – shut the windows, and watched in stunned disbelief as the twin towers collapsed.

Gigino's, like many buildings in the vicinity of the World Trade Center, was covered in soot and debris. But just a week later, Giraldi re-opened it to serve free food to police, firemen, and other rescue workers.

“We were right near the barricades,” Giraldi recalls. “You could go north of Duane Street but you couldn’t go below” Greenwich and Duane, where Gigino’s is located. “I would sit outside and smell that smoke and hear the sirens all day long. Bodies were being removed. And every day cops and firemen would come in for lunch. So I would feed them, mostly pizza and pasta. Sometimes they’d applaud.”

Giraldi recalls that when word got out that he was feeding 9/11 rescue workers, some uptown restaurateurs followed his lead, hoping to garner similar favorable publicity. One was Jean Georges Vongerichten, a star of New York’s upscale restaurant scene.

“But the workers didn’t want uptown French sandwiches from Jean Georges,” Giraldi laughs. “They wanted our food.” The rescue workers were rough-edged men, mostly from the so-called outer boroughs of New York City and from New Jersey. Many were blue collar Italian Americans. “It was goombah time,” Giraldi says, using the slang term – derived from *compare*-- for a proletarian *paisan* who maybe lacks refinement but is a solid, salt of the earth kind of guy, a reliable friend and protector. These were the kind of men who were throwing themselves into the arduous and dangerous rescue work at the World Trade Center, with little concern for their own safety.

Bob Giraldi sat outside Gigino’s with a close friend who once was one of those men, the Teamster turned actor Danny Aiello. “We were having coffee and talking, and workers were coming up and greeting him, saying how great it was that he was there.”

Tribeca has recovered from the trauma of 9/11, which wreaked havoc on the economy of lower Manhattan. It’s now a much more expensive area than in 2001. A construction boom

has spawned luxury high-rises, there's a spate of trendy and high-priced restaurants, and upscale markets like Whole Foods have moved in. But Gigino Trattoria remains a neighborhood mainstay unchanged by all the new development. It continues to serve delicious and moderately-priced southern Italian fare to its loyal customers.

The loyalty hardly is surprising given what Gigino's has to offer. There's spaghetti del padrino, a harmonious marriage of sweet (beets), bitter (escarole), and salty (capers) concocted by chef Luigi Celentano. Cavatelli broccoli rabe e salsiccia -- rolled, bullet-shaped pasta dressed with sautéed bitter greens, garlic, and homemade veal and pork sausage -- evokes the hearty fare of Italian American Sunday family dinners. Zuppa di lenticchie e scarola (lentil and escarole soup) is southern Italian comfort food, dense and rich with rustic flavor. Celentano's excellent pizzas, ranging from a basic margherita to the lavish tartufata, with chicken, radicchio, endive, mushrooms, and asiago cheese, are as good as anything one can find in Italy.

Gigino Trattoria is one of eleven restaurants that Giraldi owns or has a stake in. Only two others, however, are Italian -- Gigino at Wagner Park, a tonier and more expensive cousin to the trattoria, in Battery Park City, and Bread, an informal Tuscan eatery specializing in panini (Italian grilled sandwiches), on the edge of Tribeca and Chinatown. He also owns Mexican, seafood, and burger restaurants.

But it is the Italian places that Giraldi loves best. "The only thing I always wanted to do was open an Italian restaurant," he says.

That's a surprising admission coming from someone who didn't begin his professional life as a restaurateur. A graduate of Pratt Institute, the prestigious Brooklyn art college, Giraldi

has enjoyed a successful career in advertising with two of New York's most prominent agencies, first as an art director at Young & Rubicam and then as creative director at Della Femina and Partners. In 1973, he formed his own company, Giraldi Productions, which has made hundreds of television commercials, as well as short films and music videos. Michael Jackson's "Beat It" is his best-known production; the video won an American Music Award, the Billboard Video Award, a People's Choice Award, and is included in Rolling Stone's top ten examples of video art installation at New York's Museum of Modern Art. In 2000, he made his debut as a feature film director with "Dinner Rush," starring his friend Danny Aiello.

But Italian food is his first and most enduring passion.

Born in 1939 to an immigrant family in Paterson, New Jersey, Bob Giraldi grew up in a home where "it was always about the food." As with so many Italian American households, the Giraldi family culture centered around cooking and eating.

"On Sundays we would travel from Paterson to Port Chester [New York] to visit relatives. Their house was like a museum upstairs, you couldn't sit anywhere in the living and dining room, but downstairs, the basement --that was where the heart and soul was. There was a long table with chairs and we just spent all day Sunday around food. We didn't discuss topics like sports or politics or sex. It was all about what we were eating that day and what we were looking forward to eating next. Then when your body was totally sated from eating, it was time to go home. That's how it was every Sunday for as long as I can remember when I was a kid. And I would imagine that was a defining experience in most Italian Americans' lives."

To non-Italians, this might sound like gluttony. But since so many Italian Americans came from impoverished peasant or urban laborer backgrounds, the family feasts were an occasion for celebrating the abundance they had found in America. The fabled Sunday dinners also brought together several generations, from immigrant grandparents to their American-born children to their grandchildren, establishing continuity between the old and new worlds.

“Just about everybody in my neighborhood in Paterson, was a southern Italian immigrant or descended from them,” he recalls. “Mostly from Naples and other parts of southern Italy. There weren’t too many Milanese or other northern Italians!” His late mother Minnie De Lucia Giraldi was from Naples, his father from Calabria. “My grandfather on my mother’s side was a butcher, so the quality of the food was important. And my mother turned out to be quite an accomplished chef. All Italian Americans say their mothers are great cooks, but my mother really was gifted. One of my regrets in life was that I never had a chance to open a restaurant with her.”

“Christmas Eve was my favorite,” Giraldi says. On that occasion his family enjoyed the seafood-based feast known as *sette pesci* (seven fishes), a tradition of abundant eating established by southern Italians “under the flimsy excuse that God wanted it that way.” Though the *sette pesci* always included fried smelts, sardines, and baccala (codfish), he favored his mother’s *linguine alle vongole* – linguine with fresh clams. Giraldi says that even Gigino Trattoria’s chef Luigi Celentano always praised her version of the classic dish as the best he’d ever tasted.

In the Giraldi home, the love of *cucina italiana* infused the very atmosphere of domestic life.

“I used to bring friends home from high school, and they were impressed by the atmosphere – the food aromas and the warmth of our home. My non-Italian friends’ homes were cold by comparison. I remember a Polish friend’s house as being so gray and uninviting. But the Italian home was warm, the colors were like a palette, and there were the wonderful smells.”

I know what Giraldi’s talking about. His recollections trigger my own chauvinistic nostalgia. I was born in a blue collar, predominantly Italian American neighborhood in Bridgeport, Connecticut. But we later moved to a mixed “white ethnic” area and my best friend was a Jewish boy who lived next door. Visiting me one afternoon Henry remarked, “Your house smells different.” Thinking he meant that I lived in an odoriferous home, I was a bit offended. “No,” Henry hastened to assure me, “It’s great, it smells like Italian food.”

“My house,” he said, “doesn’t smell like anything.”

The day Giraldi left home to attend college, his mother and sister stood in the driveway crying. “I remember saying, ‘don’t cry, I’m only going to Brooklyn. I’ll be back in a few months.’ But I came home the very next weekend. ‘I can’t eat there,’ I told my mother. There was nothing to eat at college.”

Minnie Giraldi didn’t only feed her son’s appetite; she nurtured his career aspirations. “My mother pushed me to go to Pratt,” he says. “She would insist that I should go to an art

school. I managed to get an athletic scholarship to Pratt, the best art school in the area. I'd go to all my art classes carrying my duffle bag with my jock and sneakers in it."

When he graduated in 1960, he chose commercial art, not fine art or industrial design. "I came out of Pratt and became an ad guy, an art director in the advertising business."

It wasn't until the 1980s that he would become an Italian restaurateur, his first venture being Positano, a midtown Manhattan establishment specializing in the food of the Amalfi Coast, one of Italy's most spectacularly beautiful locales.

In 1981, Giraldi and his then-wife Marian, and Giraldi's business partner Phil Suarez and his wife Lucy, went on vacation in Italy and ended up in Positano. For Giraldi, it was love at first sight, both for the picturesque town, built on a mountainside overlooking the sea, and for the local cuisine, especially the seafood and the pasta. When they returned to New York, Giraldi started thinking about a restaurant that would evoke the atmosphere and recreate the cuisine of the Amalfi Coast.

"At the time, New York Italian restaurants were mostly Northern Italian or Little Italy red sauce places," Giraldi says. "There were no restaurants specializing in Amalfitan seafood, Amalfitan cuisine."

He, Suarez and their wives returned to Positano in 1984 with the express purpose of finding a chef. After making inquiries among local hotels, they found Luigi Celentano, the young executive chef at Hotel Le Sirenuse. Celentano, a Positano native who began working in

resort hotel kitchens in 1962, was looking for a new challenge, and was receptive to the idea of relocating to New York.

But first there was the audition. Celentano's lasted for hours, during which he prepared dishes such as pasta fagioli, spaghetti with shrimp, and a cheese-based dessert that would become ubiquitous in New York Italian restaurants – tirami su. When it was over, "We knew we had our superstar," says Giraldi.

Celentano came to New York and became the chef of the new Giraldi-Suarez venture, creating the menu and running the kitchen. Positano opened in 1984 and was an immediate hit. The owners were well aware that sophisticated New Yorkers like their restaurants to have some dazzle, to offer a bit of a show as well as good food. They hired architect Randy Croxton to create a multilevel interior that evoked Positano's hillside setting. They brought in carpenters and other craftsmen who had worked on Giraldi's "Beat It" video to build the restaurant. Designer Milton Glaser came up with a pink, cream and green décor and designed plates with a mermaid logo.

Giraldi acknowledges that his high profile in the then-burgeoning music video industry helped bring in customers. But Celentano's cooking was the real draw.

"He's just a marvelous chef," Giraldi enthuses. "When we met him, he didn't speak English, and we only spoke basic Italian. But we found a way to communicate and became partners. He and I became like brothers, and today we're still partners."

Positano closed after a successful ten year run. Then, in August 1994, the team of Giraldi, Suarez, and Celentano opened Gigino Trattoria in Tribeca. (“Gigino,” the diminutive of “Luigi,” is Celentano’s nickname.) The idea was to offer a menu similar to Positano’s, but in a casual, trattoria setting and at lower prices. But between idea and execution, the relationship between Giraldi and Suarez began to fray. These days the two no longer are partners, and one can assume things did not end amicably from Giraldi’s referring to Suarez as “my ex-partner who shall go nameless.”

Suarez felt the new venture should cater to an adult clientele, without children.

“I said, excuse me, but this is an Italian trattoria,” Giraldi recalls. “I’d eaten in trattorias in Italy and loved them, the whole casual nature of them. You can’t have a trattoria without families and kids. What are we gonna have, just business people?”

“Besides,” Giraldi continues, “Tribeca is a neighborhood, where families live. It’s a very expensive one now, but it’s still a neighborhood. So I went out and got a half-dozen high chairs. And our place became one of the most popular family restaurants in the area. What other kind of restaurant can boast that it feeds adults and kids with same integrity as an Italian restaurant? The food appeals to adults’ and children’s palates.”

Five years after opening the trattoria, Giraldi and Celentano started Gigino at Wagner Park, in lower Manhattan’s Battery Park City. It’s a sleeker and higher-priced sibling of the rustic Tribeca eatery, with an eye-catching modern design in blue, cream, and pale pink hues. But its main selling point, ambiance-wise, is its superb panoramic view extending from the Statue of Liberty to the New Jersey skyline. There’s also a vast patio dining area that is predictably packed

during warm weather. The menu shares some of the same dishes as the trattoria, but it seems to have been designed to appeal to tourists as well as cucina cognoscenti, with such standard Italian American offerings as fried calamari and chicken parmigiana along with Celentano's signature dishes.

In 2000, Bob Giraldi embarked on a new venture that combined the visual artistry he'd honed as an art and video director with his life-long love of Italian food. With "Dinner Rush," Giraldi made his debut as a feature film maker. The film, which actually was shot in Gigino Trattoria, centers on the conflict between Italian American restaurateur Louis Cropa (Danny Aiello) and his chef, who happens to be his son, Udo (Eduardo Ballerini). Louis, says Giraldi, "is a traditional guy, and he's based on me." The son Udo is a talented and creative chef, but he's also egocentric, selfish, obsessed with the bottom line, and contemptuous of what he sees as his father's antiquated attitudes. If his father would rather eat sausage and peppers and hang out with his old friends, Udo favors *nuova cucina* creations like rabbit Piemontese with wine reduction and chocolate and chatting up models and art critics.

The generational war between father and son isn't the only conflict in "Dinner Rush." Two gangsters named "Black" and "Blue" are trying to shake down Louis. They want a piece of the restaurant, as well as earnings from the bookmaking business that Louis and his longtime partner Enrico have run as a sideline. Louis resists the thugs' demands, but when they kill Enrico, he retaliates by putting out a contract on them. The identity of the hit man turns out to be the film's biggest surprise.

But before the surprising and satisfying denouement, there are a number of entertaining and well-observed vignettes of the restaurant business, downtown Manhattan nightlife, and the characters that populate both worlds. Giraldi has a great ear for how certain types of New Yorkers talk and a satirical eye for their foibles and insecurities. The film skewers egomaniacal chefs, insufferable art critics, demanding restaurant reviewers and “foodies” who are perpetually searching for the next hot restaurant.

“Dinner Rush” immerses the viewer in the business of cooking and serving food. In one long take the camera moves from the controlled chaos of the basement kitchen, where the temperamental Udo rages and berates his harried staff while the kitchen workers whip up the food and slap it onto plates and the waiters rush it up the stairs to the hungry customers. The movie as a whole is fast and lively, deftly mixing comedy and drama.

In the original script, which Giraldi’s agent brought to him, the setting was Chicago, and the story was what Giraldi calls “a sophomoric look at the restaurant business.”

“It was a social commentary on young people who work in restaurants: the type that has sex in the kitchen or smokes dope in the hallway.” Giraldi bought the script but re-wrote it, setting the story “in New York, where I know the business, and where I have a restaurant I’d like to tell people about. It turned out to be a film that mirrors my life, my culture and my business.”

“That movie is pretty autobiographical, with the exception of the whacking at the end,” Giraldi says. “It’s based on things that I’ve experienced in my life.”

Gangsters have been involved in the restaurant business – as owners, investors, and suppliers – for as long as there has been organized crime in America. Though no one was ever whacked in Gigino Trattoria, a mobster did lean on Giraldi before the restaurant opened. “This thug-looking guy used to pull up in his Cadillac. He’d just stare at what was going on for a while and then drive on,” Giraldi says. “This went on for a week and then he finally came in and told Luigi [Celentano] that he wished us luck. He was opening his own place about ten blocks north in Tribeca and he was going to be the first in the neighborhood to have a wood-burning brick oven.”

These ovens, now more common in New York than they were in 1994, produce a better pizza than the industrial-type gas or electric ones, and they add a touch of Italian tradition to a restaurant’s ambiance.

The problem was that Giraldi was already installing such an oven at Gigino’s.

“He told Luigi that he would be happy for us to be the second place with a brick oven, and that we had no choice because he was, as he said, ‘from the street.’ He was definitely trying to strong-arm us.

“I agreed to talk with him. He looked like Al Pacino in ‘Donnie Brasco’ [the 1997 mafia movie starring Pacino and Johnny Depp] in his grey track suit.” Giraldi says that while the two walked around the neighborhood talking, the thug repeated his threat. “I said, look, we’re far enough away that we’re not going to take each other’s business. And there’s certainly enough

of a market for Italian food and pizza for both of us.” But the thug insisted that his restaurant would be the first in the area to offer brick oven pizza.

“I said that I’d think about it and get back to him. Growing up in New Jersey around his kind I knew how to talk to him, how to posture a bit.”

Giraldi and Suarez called their attorney, who, Giraldi says, was a “mob lawyer” who had defended such Cosa Nostra figures as Gambino family boss Paul Castellano. Two days later, the lawyer called Giraldi to say “Don’t worry. He’ll never bother you again.” Giraldi says the attorney contacted “some people” who were higher up in the local mob hierarchy and they told the “street” guy to back off. “We saw him watching us from his car a few times but he never bothered us any more,” Giraldi says.

“Dinner Rush” was well received by critics, ending up on a number of Top Ten film lists for 2001. It also was selected for the prestigious New Directors/New Films Series presented by the Film Society of Lincoln Center. The New Yorker praised its “Maileresque texture of appetite and hustle.” Giraldi’s movie, with its volatile chef and eruptive kitchen dramas, clearly influenced reality television series like “The Restaurant” and “Hell’s Kitchen.”

But “Dinner Rush” died at the box office, a victim of bad timing. Shot in 2000, it was released just a month after the destruction of the World Trade Center. Giraldi calls his film a “prewar movie,” made when “the mood and the attitude was entirely different.” Right after 9/11, Giraldi discussed with his distributors the advisability of releasing it so soon. He felt it

wouldn't be "strategically smart," given that the film was shot "in the heart of the war zone, with three shots of the World Trade Center."

The distributors and Giraldi ended up going with their original release date. "'Dinner Rush' was one of the few films to come out right after 9/11, which was a reason for its early demise," Giraldi says. "It was successful in Europe, Asia and elsewhere but not here. It hung on for a few weeks but no movie that came out at that time stayed on. We miscalculated, we thought America was ready to smile a bit, but they were not, we were off by months."

The fate of "Dinner Rush" hasn't put Giraldi off filmmaking. In late 2008, he was developing his second feature, "Isola delle Femmine." The film's title is the name of the tiny island off the northern coast of Sicily where Joe Di Maggio's family originated. The script is based on a true story, the Yankee Clipper's ill-fated trip to the place where generations of Di Maggios had been fishermen.

It's a very Italian story, and one can expect, given the island setting and the director's predilections, that food – glorious, fresh Sicilian seafood -- will figure in the narrative. The people of Isola delle Femmine would hardly welcome the island's most famous son without preparing a feast in his honor.

Filmmaking, advertising, and music videos consume much of Bob Giraldi's time and considerable energy. (He's tall and still trim of physique, as in his long-ago student athlete days.) But he's most passionate about Italian food, and his Italian restaurants. His pride in the quality of their cuisine comes through loud and clear when I ask about the "authenticity" of

American Italian restaurants. In the 90s, I interviewed the Florentine cooking teacher and cookbook author Giuliano Bugialli, who told me that New York Italian restaurants fared poorly when compared to establishments in Italy. He criticized everything from the un-Italian practice of serving butter with bread to excessive saucing and cheese on pasta. One could find good individual dishes in New York restaurants, but he insisted that an authentic Italian meal was hard to come by.

Giraldi smiles when I recount Bugialli's comments, but there's an edge in his voice. "I knew him," he says. "My mother studied with him for a while. But he was being a little precious when he told you that. In my restaurants there's nothing we do that is not what I would see or get in Italy. Nothing!" The baby clams chef Celentano uses for pasta sauce -- *vongole veraci* in Italian -- are flown in from Italy. Pasta is either handmade or imported from Italy. Olive oil and other condiments and ingredients also come straight from *la madrepatria*.

"The one thing we do different from Italians in Italy," he says, "is we use more ingredients. For example, in an Italian sandwich the bread is the thing. You get one or two slices of Parma prosciutto, but here you get more. Americans expect more meat, Italians expect flavor."

"But," he insists, "We are as authentic as restaurants in Italy."

He does offer, however, an item not readily found in restaurants in Italy. "My grandfather would turn over in his grave, but I have whole wheat pasta at my places," he says. He also serves whole wheat pizza at Bread. At that restaurant, Wednesday is "il giorno del

salute” – healthy day – with lighter, vegetable-based cuisine. Giraldi says that fare goes down well with Bread’s “more looks- and health-conscious crowd.” Those customers include employees of RAI, the Italian broadcasting company, whose New York offices are in the same building as Bread. “We’re popular with the people from RAI,” Giraldi says. “They feel at home there.”

Bob Giraldi, nearly 70 at the time he and I met, says that his life has come full circle since his early years in New Jersey, when he liked nothing better than to eat his mother’s cooking and enjoy the abundance and sociability of *la tavola*, the Italian table. “I started out in a home full of love and food,” he fondly recalls. “And now here in Tribeca, with my family and my restaurants, it’s the same.”

