

SAN FRANCISCO

Summer 2011

DININGOUT

the great restaurants of san francisco



Experience
Italy's Finest
only at FARINA

page 22

TASTES AND TRENDS TO FEED YOUR INNER FOODIE

A journey of sweat and frond 26 :: All of this food is driving us glad! 28 :: Beating the old rum drum 32 :: Why is water so wet? 98





Hand-Picked from Italy

Farina delivers the very best of the boot

by Alastair Bland photos by Vldas Girininkas, Studio Grazina





When Farina opened its doors in 2007, the Mission District restaurant became San Francisco's strongest, surest culinary link to Liguria, the provincial homeland of Farina's chef and the regional inspiration for his signature breads, pasta, seafood, and pesto.

Four years later, imported Italian ingredients and the seasonal flavors of Italy's northwestern coastal province remain the focal point at Farina, just as surely as Paolo Laboa remains its executive chef. Yet a thematic expansion is underway. It began

this spring when three new chefs took their places in the kitchen and joined Laboa—each man, like his predecessor, hand-plucked out of Italy. One hails from the south, one from the capital, and one from the north.

"We built a bridge in the beginning from Liguria to San Francisco with Paolo, and now the new chefs are connectors to their own regions

starting from the south," Luca Minna says, the Italian food devotee who co-founded Farina and who has since masterminded its evolution.

Salvatore Di Stefano, a master baker, he recruited from Sicily, Valerio Martorelli from Rome, and Davide Cogliati from Milan. Each, Minna says, will bring his influence and expertise to the kitchen while strengthening the Ligurian cuisine that Chef Laboa grew up preparing and eating.

... the Stoccafisso e Bacilli, a dish featuring dried and reconstituted cod, potatoes, fava beans, savory herbs, and tomatoes.

Laboa himself has also brought new flavors to the kitchen in recent months. This spring, he introduced the Stoccafisso e Bacilli, a dish featuring dried and reconstituted cod, potatoes, fava beans, savory herbs, and tomatoes. The fish comes from Norway while the preparation is Genovese—and in America, it has not been served before. Minna hopes Farina will bring renown to this Ligurian specialty and see it become another of Farina's growing list of



trademarks. Farina did much the same for the Focaccia di Recco, which in 2007 had never before been served in its authentic form in America. Laboa not only mastered the fluffy, cheese-laden bread but would turn it into one of Farina's best-known products.

Even *The New York Times* has praised Laboa's focaccia. In a January 30 piece about San Francisco's emerging Italian culinary scene, *The Times'* food critic Mark Bittman wrote, "I've never even seen focaccia di Recco tackled elsewhere, yet Farina has made it a staple here, and they do it well."

Bittman also congratulated Farina on its pasta.

"I have not had a pasta dish here that wasn't perfectly cooked and well worth eating," Bittman wrote, harmonizing with Farina's founding principle that only an Italian chef can perfectly replicate the food of his homeland.

An American chef, for instance, would be hard-pressed to perfectly replicate the handmade breads of Farina. These include loaves packed with olives, walnuts, and herbs, grissini breadsticks, and the esteemed focaccia, each of which showcases an artisanal craftsmanship endemic to the bakeries of Italy.

In 2008, it took the gold at Genoa Pesto World Championship, and today Laboa's pesto is still as perfect as it ever was. Made with Italian pinenuts, Genovese basil, Ligurian extra virgin olive oil, and select cheeses, the recipe was a simple family preparation which Laboa first learned at home. He used it throughout his years of work as a chef in Genoa and finally brought it to California four years ago, introducing San Franciscans to true Genovese pesto. The creamy, emerald sauce remains the soul of Farina's most popular pasta, the mandilli handkerchiefs.

"I have not had a pasta dish here that wasn't perfectly cooked and well worth eating." —Mark Bittman

Since Farina opened in 2007, other items have become fan favorites, notably the cappellacci pasta pillows stuffed with zucchini, eggplant, and marjoram and, on the dessert menu, the cestino, of local strawberries sliced onto a bed of mascarpone cheese and served in a delicate cup of tuille. Laboa and his national team have meanwhile added at least one new entrée to the menu—the Branzino al Sale, a labor-intensive dish that features the favored reef fish of the Italian coast crusted in a thick casing of salt and baked whole. The branzino, flown in fresh from Italy, receives no seasoning. Instead, the mass of salt cakes into a crust around the fish, allowing the oven's heat to enter but perfectly encasing the fish's moisture and, no less, the very essence of the Mediterranean Sea.

With Farina continuing to grow into its role as an ambassador to San Francisco for Liguria's regional and seasonal cuisine, Luca Minna and Laura Garrone have been quietly at work laying the groundwork for a new project scheduled to materialize this summer at the southwest corner of 18th and Valencia streets: a rustic pizzeria and trattoria founded on the same principles that underlie Farina. Just as Farina introduced the cuisine of Liguria to San Francisco, the pizza house will bring San Franciscans the regional foods and flavors of Naples and Italy's southern regions. And just as Farina became known for its verdant pestos, the new restaurant will showcase a regional range of rich red tomato sauces. And, just as Paolo Laboa left Genoa for San Francisco, Minna has already hired a team of Neapolitan pizza masters and an accomplished chef to direct operations—and, once more, Italy's loss is San Francisco's gain. 

