

Southern Italian Gastronomy

An Interview with Paula Bolla-Sorrentino, Managing Partner, Il Gattopardo Group

EDITORS' NOTE Paula Bolla-Sorrentino, a Brazilian native with Italian roots from Veneto, exudes a deep passion for Italian culture, cuisine, and hospitality. Drawing from her background in fashion and design, she has traversed the globe with renowned designers and honed her craft as a Graphic Designer at Pentagram Design in New York. Currently, as the co-founder and Managing Partner of the esteemed Il Gattopardo Group, which includes Il Gattopardo Restaurant, Il Gattopardo Catering, and Mozzarella & Vino, Bolla-Sorrentino brings her unique blend of international experiences and creative expertise to the forefront of the culinary world. Her commitment to excellence and dedication to showcasing the best of Italian cuisine and hospitality shines through in every aspect of the dining experience at each establishment under the Il Gattopardo Group umbrella.



Paula Bolla-Sorrentino

my career journey in the fashion industry where I worked for ten very fulfilling years as a model, and had the incredible opportunity to travel the world and to work with some of the most relevant names in that industry. During my early twenties, while pursuing a graphic design college degree in New York City, and to bridge my financial gaps, I worked as a hostess at the Museum of Modern Art fine dining restaurant called Sette MoMA, where I met my soon-to-be future husband and life-partner,

Gianfranco Sorrentino, and fell in love with the fascinating world of the restaurant industry. When MoMA closed for their massive renovation, so did the restaurant, and at that point Gianfranco, our very talented executive chef from Felitto, Vito Gnazzo, and I, found a house

that perhaps at the table next to them we were serving dignitaries, celebrities and/or neighbors. Things evolved over the years, and what started as a good midtown upscale trattoria became a serious restaurant beloved by well-traveled New Yorkers, solidifying our name as synonymous of Southern Italian quality, service, and above all, hospitality in New York City.

What was the vision for creating Il Gattopardo?

Il Gattopardo opened on September 18, 2001 – a few days after 9/11 – which we all know was one of the most difficult moments in the history of New York and this country. A sense of uncertainty took over the city. The streets were empty, and the restaurant scene was dead. However, the resilient spirit of New York, the energy of this city, propelled us on the pursuit of bringing the simplicity of the authentic Southern Italian dishes to the next level, and most importantly, to keep the tradition of Italian culinary culture and hospitality passionate.

How do you describe the Il Gattopardo experience?

Il Gattopardo is about people, and the dedication to our craft and guests. It is a marriage

Will you discuss your career journey?

I am Brazilian born and raised, with an Italian father from the Veneto region. I began



Il Gattopardo at the Rockefeller Townhouses (above and center)



across the street from the Museum on 54th Street, and a hand full of loyal customers who were crazy enough to lend us some money to start our own business, Il Gattopardo restaurant. The months and years that followed that decision were not exactly easy, with periods of very tight belts and extremely long work hours, but never a sense of disbelief or regret. Those years also brought the most incredible joys of my life, our two children Eduardo and Sophia. The kids grew up napping on restaurant tablecloths and doing their homework on one of the tables in the dining room – despite the fact



Mozzarella & Vino



of all things, big and small, around the table. Italian food and wine is the center of what we do, of course, but it is much more than that. It's about relationships, Italian culture, family, friendships and shared moments. It's about feelings, sounds, tastes, scents and memories. It is about the tremendous respect our team carries on the day-to-day operation, serving and preserving the authenticity of the Italian cuisine and hospitality.

How critical is it to continue to invest in the best products and ingredients available?

The continuous search for genuine Italian ingredients is a vital part of what we do. It is our deepest belief that we must pay attention to what we nurture our bodies with; the food we eat and the origins of its ingredients, the soil in which they are produced, and people that dedicate their lives to the pursuit of excellence. In this age of globalization, where everything is always available, it is crucial to understand and respect seasons and traditions in order to offer a unique and trustworthy product.

Will you highlight Il Gattopardo's catering business?

At our restaurants – Il Gattopardo and Mozzarella & Vino – we take great pride in preparing everything in-house “a la minute,” from breadsticks to pastas, and everything in between, and are proud to cook everything from scratch using nothing short of quality ingredients. Absolutely nothing is prepared beforehand to then merely be heated to rush out to our tables (with very few exceptions like dishes requiring prohibitory longer periods of time to cook). Our catering services maintain the same philosophy and attention to detail that we feel are pillars in our restaurants, showcasing the best of Italian cuisine. We reflect this approach as well in our genuine style of hospitality, and the full support of our guests' unique event profiles and needs.

The catering industry has evolved dramatically in the past decade or so. Many companies realized the opportunities of exclusive experiences, and some developed very interesting concepts. Our focus is to provide the Il Gattopardo experience on a personalized level with great care, service and the made-in-Italy quality. Over the years we served Presidents and CEOs, brides and brands, distinguished organizations and private clients, government institutions, cultural life, prestigious business and entertainment world – such as the Italian Consulate of New York, Italian Cultural Institute, The Museum of Modern Art, Brunello Cucinelli, Kiton, Gucci, Knoll, Tiffany, Ferrari, Rolex, Moelis Bank, Centerview, Jefferies, Bank of America, Evercore Bank, Marian Goodman Gallery, Pace Gallery, Marlborough Gallery, among many others. To be able to bring the Il Gattopardo experience to our clients, on and off premises, can be very challenging, but is appealing and extremely rewarding in many levels. There is so much more to explore in the catering field, and it is fascinating.



You are regularly seen on the floor of the restaurant, interacting with guests. How important is it for you to find the time to be in the restaurant, talking and listening to your guests?

People go out to eat for several reasons: for life milestones, business relations, social celebrations, entertainment, convenience, exploration of something new, and sometimes, for loneliness. Real human connection has the



A few of Chef Vito Gnazzo's culinary creations



power to unite people, and I cannot think of a better place to be than among our guests. Our success over the years has been an unspoken endorsement of “our way,” based on the philosophy of a true sense of hospitality; to exchange ideas and experiences with our guests, while providing an amazing culinary experience, and to feel that energy is what makes it all so special.

You refer to your employees as being part of your family. How critical is it to maintain a family feel and culture?

I was so very fortunate to embark on this journey with one of the most significant ambassadors and defenders of the Italian culture in the United States, my late husband and company co-founder, Gianfranco Sorrentino. Along with our incredible Chef Vito Gnazzo, we created a family called “Il Gattopardo.” Over the years, many people came along – some stayed for decades, some are still here, some were tourists – each of them marked an important chapter in our history, a bite at a time. A vast majority of us are either immigrants, or sons and daughters of immigrants. We've worked with entire families, with fathers and sons, with cousins and brothers, and with strangers that became life-long friends. To maintain a family-feel doesn't mean a lack of structure by any means. When dealing with family or friends, sometimes we need extra discipline and focus, but it means that we take care of each other. I'm very grateful for our team.

Il Gattopardo is celebrating its 25th anniversary. What does this milestone mean to you?

In the fast-paced New York market, where sometimes it is easy to feel that things are disposable and trends are unpredictable, the realization that the seeds we plant each and every day, creating deep roots and strong branches, feels that we must be doing something right. There are so many more miles to explore, but for now, it is remarkable to reach the first quarter. ●