

# RUBEE'S RESTAURANT SPOTLIGHT

## FRANCO'S ITALIAN CAFFE: A VERY SPECIAL RESTAURANT

ARTICLE BY CHRISTINA BARRUETA / PHOTOS BY MICHELLJONASPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

No mention of Franco's Caffè can be told without the story of Franco Fazzuoli himself. Born in Florence, Italy, Franco's first foray into a restaurant kitchen was as a youngster. Getting caught one too many times playing hooky, his father thought spending the summer working hard as a dishwasher would be a lesson learned by the 14-year-old. However, the lesson Franco learned was not quite what his father had in mind.

A smart student, he loved being in the kitchen and learning new skills, and surprised his father when he informed him he would be returning the following summer. Thus, a career was born. Franco eventually co-founded a trattoria in Florence before leaving Italy at the age of 25 to carve out a new adventure in New York City.

While in New York, he showcased his talent, passion and authentic Tuscan recipes by opening Il Ponte Vecchio. As his success grew, he opened a larger spot, Zinno in Greenwich Village, before moving onto Centa' Anni, all to critical acclaim. At one point, Mayor Koch had police in place to direct traffic in front of the restaurant because of its long lines of limousines.

Those in Arizona got lucky when Franco moved to the Valley of the



*You'll often be warmly welcomed by Franco himself...*

Sun in 1987 and opened up Franco's Trattoria with Chef Steve Martin and 45 seats. Once again, Franco received numerous accolades, including a New York Times mention. His 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. dinner slots were booked up three months in advance. This led to the need for a larger restaurant and a move in 1995, then again in 2003 to the Camelback Esplanade. In 2007, Franco, along with his family and Chef Martin, returned to Manhattan when his daughter was accepted into the prestigious School of American Ballet. New York was delighted to have him back, and Trattoria Toscana in the West Village was another success.

Happily for us, Franco is back and has said he's back for good. I never had a chance to dine at the Franco's incarnations, but after one visit to Franco's Caffè (which opened in November of 2012), I instantly understood why his restaurants are so beloved. Franco runs the front of the house and once again Chef Martin is at the kitchen helm. Loyalty is synonymous with Franco, and this year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary that he has worked with Chef Martin and 15 years he has known his manager David.

You'll often be warmly welcomed by Franco himself and, as you are led to your table, you will notice how cozy this 54-seat trattoria is with its dark wood, white tablecloths, and walls lined with sepia prints of Sophia Loren, Florence, and Franco himself. Take a peek at the



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with one of his personal favorites, such as lamb polpettini —savory lamb meatballs scented with garlic and oregano in a fragrant tomato sauce.

The calamari arrives as curls of squid perfectly grilled to tenderness with a touch of char, lemon and chile heat. The antipasto special is a beautiful array of imported burrata, fagioli e tonno (Tuscan tuna salad with white beans and tomatoes), marinated white anchovies layered with sweet roasted peppers, sopressata, nutty Parmigiano-Reggiano and juicy melon wrapped with prosciutto di Parma.

Pasta delights such as hearty, flavorful lasagna, fettuccine tartufo in a creamy sauce flecked with truffle, or spaghetti vongole piled high with sweet briny clams are offered. I find it hard to stray from the unique pasta erbe aromatiche, a secret recipe gifted to Franco from a Capalbio native. Twists of strozzapreti pasta are lightly

coated in an elegant sauce of rosemary and other aromatic herbs with the salty richness of minced prosciutto. I'm in love.

The Tuscan classic, bistecca fiorentina, double-cut and made to share, anchors the secondi menu. Dry-aged and finished on the grill, this juicy 28-ounce porterhouse needs nothing but the adornment of salt and peppery olive oil. Filet mignon, chicken, pork and seafood round out the entrees, although orrechie elephante is the dish that most often finds its way to our table. Once your plate draped in a pounded, breadcrumb-coated, bone-in veal chop appears, it's easy to see why this translates as "ear of the elephant."

Order a delicious Negroni from David.

picture on the left upon your entry to the restaurant, and you'll see Franco sipping wine with friends in Livorno (he's the handsome young man on the right).

Peruse the menu and order the classic Italian aperitivo, a Negroni (Campari, vermouth rosso and gin), or a bottle of Argiano Brunello di Montalcino from the hills of Tuscany (one of Franco's favorites). The menu is divided into antipasti, salad, pasta, secondi and dolce, in addition to nightly specials. Franco has said that there is no dish listed that he doesn't love himself, and you can't go wrong



Grilled Calamari



Antipasti Special



Orrechie Elephante



*Linguini Frutti di Mare*

In addition to the 30 plus choices on the menu, specials might include Tuscan favorites such as rich wild boar or rabbit ragu over homemade pasta, duck ravioli glazed with a brandy and mushroom sauce, or slow-braised fork-tender osso buco. Seafood is treated lovingly, especially in linguini frutti di mare. What wows is a bowl of squid ink pasta piled high with fresh tuna, squid, shrimp and clams nestled in a light garlic, tomato and seafood broth. A Franco special—veal scallopini picante—is another favorite. Thin cutlets are cloaked in his tangy reduction of capers, anchovy, cherry peppers, tomato and garlic.

Be sure to save room for an indulgent finale. Enjoy perhaps a creamy mascarpone cheesecake, velvety Callebaut chocolate cake, decadent tiramisu or the merenghata. Another secret recipe, this is Franco's grandmother's legacy and it's

wonderful—a delicate assembly of meringue layers encasing luscious semifreddo, a semi-frozen Italian custard graced with amaretto.

As in the food, details show from beginning to end, such as the generous bread basket with four varieties baked by a friend – ciabatta, pane Toscano, Italian baguette and whole wheat – or the coffee and espresso. Custom-blended locally, Franco has said guests visit just to have his coffee, and he's justly proud. His espresso is the best I've had, with all Arabica beans contributing to its rich dark crema.

As you dine, you'll notice Franco bustling about, welcoming returning guests with a warm hug or hand shake, visiting tables and recommending wine. If you're lucky, you may have a chance to be regaled with stories such as drinking champagne with Anthony Quinn and going out dancing with Gina Lollobrigida. Six-month-old Franco's Caffè is another success. In fact, it's often completely booked and there are plans to open up an adjacent breezeway to add more tables and a space for larger parties. With warm-hearted Franco, talented Chef Martin, delicious, unfussy regional Italian and an engaging staff, Franco's is truly special.



*Merenghata*



*Franco and his excellent staff will take great care of you from start to finish.*

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