

There's a saying in Italy - borrowed recently by a butter commercial - that goes 'at the table, no-one grows old' ['A tavola non si invecchia']. But who really has the time to sit down for dinner any more? Working on getting people 'back to the dinner table' is just one of the many goals of Marco Giannantonio, who along with business partner Maurizio Mastrangelo have set up Flavour of Italy, a many branched company that includes the Italian School of Cooking, an entry level approach to Italian-style dining located in the leafy suburb of Rathgar.

"The culture is different in Italy than it is here," Giannantonio explains. "Our aim is not to train people for a restaurant, but to talk about our culture of food and wine, and to explain the main techniques of Italian cuisine. The cooking is important, but so is the eating. It's important to share a meal, together."

Gianantonio first came to Ireland in 2001 as a would-be solicitor, keen to improve his English. "I stayed here for 2 to 3 months and really enjoyed it; I came back a few times after that over the next couple of years. Once I became a fully-fledged solicitor I realised very quickly that life is too short to work at something you don't feel passionately about - I loved Ireland and I felt I had to move there. Plus it would give me the opportunity to work in food, one of my first loves.

"When we set up Flavour of Italy, originally, we wanted to use it to import quality products from Italy. We saw there wasn't a great culture of quality Italian food in Ireland. As time went on, we felt that the best way to communicate about quality Italian food was to create an Italian school of cooking - a place that would give us the opportunity to talk to people about cooking and prepare the foods that we imported from Italy."

Hailing from the small town of Campobasso in central Italy - the kind of place where the obligatory 'mama' is the doyen of the kitchen - Giannantonio was surprised at the quality of food on offer in Ireland, especially in restaurants purporting to be Italian. "I think most of

Italian Job

There are those that believe that in order to sample 'real' Italian food, you need to hop on a cheap flight to Rimini and hit the local trattoria. They're right - to a point - but they could just as easily have headed off to Rathgar in south Dublin, where an ex-solicitor is cooking up a storm. **Stephen Wynne-Jones** headed along.





Above: Marco Giannantonio alongside some of the Italian wines supplied by FindlaterGrants

them weren't - and still aren't in some cases - doing an honest job of conveying what Italian food is about. You see recipes on certain menus that a lot of Italians have never heard of, with ingredients that seem very strange to native Italians. Naturally, if it looks Italian, or smells Italian, Irish diners trust what the restaurant offers them and believe it's the right recipe and the right food. A lot of people that open restaurants may be good businessmen, but they don't have the same professional attitude to food. To be a

restaurateur in charge of an Italian restaurant you need to know the importance of the ingredients, how to



work them together, and have real passion in what you do."

Flavour of Italy was established in 2003 to fill an Italy-shaped hole in the supply market, with the need for

quality ingredients a must if Ireland was to get back on track, food wise. "When I came to Ireland for the first time, most people I met didn't know the elementary differences between two products, two brands. They didn't know how to use balsamic vinegar or extra virgin olive oil properly, how to cook pasta properly. That's all changed, and we'd like to think we were a part of that change. Now more Irish people are travelling, there's a whole host of suppliers, and it's easier to source the ingredients."

"I think there is still a lot of work to do - there are one or two restaurants that you can eat a really good risotto, for example, but only one or two. It's a pity, in a way, because we have a million different recipes to offer to the customer, and they're not expensive, but there's no demand for them. There are a few restaurants that are really going about it the right way - there's a really good restaurant in Bray, Campo de Fiori; the owner, Marco Roccasalvo, is also the head chef of our school. All the Italians think it's the best Italian restaurant in Ireland - it's so busy to book a table, you need to call one month in advance."

As well as the school, located in a converted electrical store, which scooped the duo an Emerging Ethnic Entrepreneur of the Year award at the recent Permanent TSB Ethnic Entrepreneur of the Year Awards, Giannantonio and his team also

run CaterItaly, an Italian-themed catering company that has catered for everything from product launches to state visits; "and not just Italian companies either." At the moment, Giannantonio is also really getting behind the promotion of Italian wines, as important to the Italian dining experience as pasta or tomatoes.

"When I first came here, I noticed that Irish people had different habits with wine; you could have a meal without wine, which to us seems incredible! Italian wines are really grabbing attention in Ireland at the moment and there is a lot to do in the year ahead to keep it that way. From our experience, it's very important to explain the wine as you are drinking it. Wine in a bottle means nothing - when you taste the wine with an explanation and how it goes with the food, it becomes a real experience. If you don't drink a good wine with your meal, you waste your meal.

"I feel lucky that we're in a position with the school to partner with a company, FindlaterGrants, that allows us to teach people about the really good Italian wines. It gives us an added value - for example, we didn't know who imported wines from the Masi and Antinori families when we started. We knew and loved the wines, but didn't know how to get hold of them in Ireland. We met Noel Tymlin at FindlaterGrants and talked to him about our ideas - we didn't know how it was going to go. They trusted us and supported us from the beginning. Nowadays it seems that lots of companies want to be associated with us, but they were there from the start."

But all of this of course begs the question, is the food actually any good? Don't take my word for it. As Marco explains, "in Italy, food is the perfect synthesis of our history. What you eat is our work, our passion, for centuries." And you thought it was all just about pasta? 🍷