

'We phone or Skype 10 to 15 times a day'

In conversation with Frances O'Rourke

MAURIZIO MASTRANGELO

45, is co-founder of Flavour of Italy, flavourofitaly.net with Marco Giannantonio. Originally a consultant to food businesses in Italy, he co-founded the Dublin firm in 2005. He now divides his time between Ireland and Italy where he lives with his wife, Rita, and two daughters Flavia and Alessia.

Marco and I met in 2004: my wife is from the village of Ripalimosani, about 5km from Campobasso and so is Marco. It's very easy to meet people in a village, you start to talk to everyone and then discover you have a passion in common. Ours was to travel abroad to discover new places and people. When we would go out to dinner, we started to say we could do something together. And that's why we decided in 2005 to come to Ireland.

I had never been to Ireland: his suggestion of setting up a business in Ireland was a bit surprising. I didn't know if it would be okay, but we started to do research and discovered that Ireland was a very good place to do business.

I was a consultant, doing research for companies in Italy that were starting to export. My father was an entrepreneur, a builder. I grew up with this idea of building a company myself – where you can see the growth of your business year after year.

Marco and I think the same way, there is a great feeling between me and him, even though we are a lot different. I used to say he is the public version of the company, I am the inside version. But in the way we think, it's the same. It's difficult to explain.

Obviously being in business together there were some periods where it's like a marriage, there are difficulties. But because we trust each other and have good faith, even if someone makes mistakes, we'd say, "for the interests of the company, not for the interests of Maurizio or Marco". The key is to have really good communication.

Really, I don't know where I live now: my family is in Italy but I come to Ireland very often because my business activities are there. My family is not happy about this, but my wife works here in Italy and my daughters are 14 and 12.

We often say we would like to move to Ireland, but it is a critical age for school. I say to my daughters that for sure, university will be in Ireland. My daughters come in summer. But they can see what I'm doing and they are very proud.

Marco and I have a lot of laughs, we discover new things all the time; I think it's the strength of our friendship and our company. Speaking about Italy for us is a pleasure. Irish people make life easier because Irish people love Italy.

Maurizio and I met each other in Campobasso, a town in the Molise region of Italy. I had finished university and came to Dublin in 2001 with the intention to stay just a couple of months to study English – but then I stayed a couple of years. I met Maurizio when I came back to Italy.

We had been friends a very short time when I told him I would love to go back to Ireland to set up an organisation to promote Italy in Ireland. He was working in sales for a food company at the time. My plan had been to become a lawyer. I had studied law in the University of Rome and was a lawyer in Rome for three or four months. But my nature was driving me in a different direction. I didn't want to spend my life in court. After doing my final solicitor exams I had to choose what to do and that's why I came back to Ireland. Maurizio and I started our business in 2005. The idea was to sell Italian products but that was not easy, because of competition.

The most important moment of our history was setting up the Italian cookery school. That was in 2005. Lots of people liked the idea and after a year we had to move to bigger premises. In 2006, we opened a catering company and in 2008, we set up our restaurant, Pinocchio, in Ranelagh. The cookery school had a lot of requests from Irish people wanting to go to Italy and in 2007, we opened our tour operation. We bring people to vineyards to pick grapes, make wine – the idea is to do something different.

Now, I live in Ireland while Maurizio spends his time in Italy and Ireland. We phone or Skype 10 to 15 times a day when he's in Campobasso. We talk to discuss strategy, but we're not all the time talking about food and wine but about culture, history, philosophy. These things are very important to me.

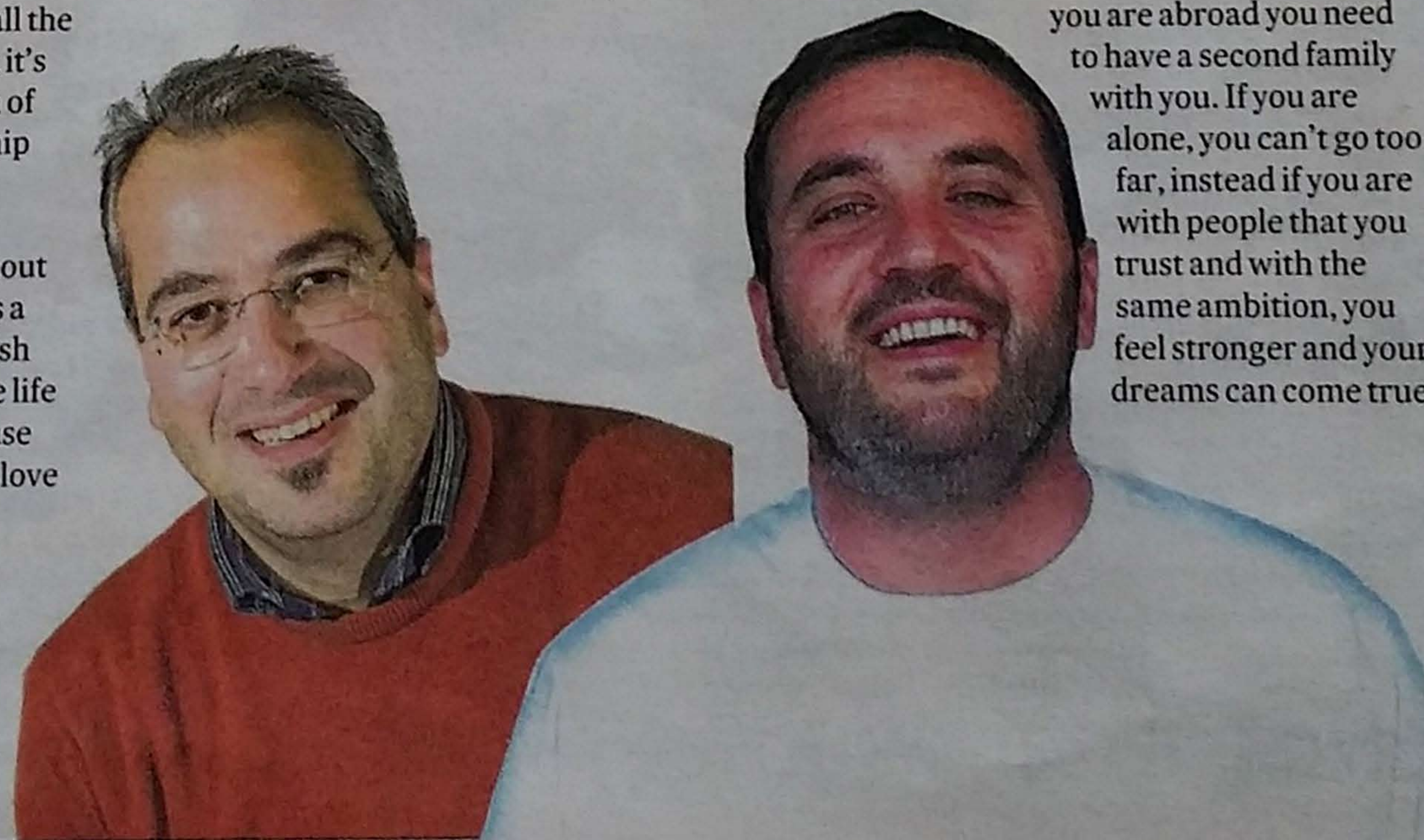
Maurizio and I are very different people. I look after promotion, deal with customers, do PR. He is more shy, reserved, but very passionate.

There is a genuine relationship between Maurizio and me; every time we talk, our points of view are really close. Our friendship was a key factor to build our business. In fact I think especially when

you are abroad you need to have a second family with you. If you are alone, you can't go too far, instead if you are with people that you trust and with the same ambition, you feel stronger and your dreams can come true.

MARCO GIANNANTONIO

37, is a co-founder of Flavour of Italy, an Italian food business with offices in Dublin and Campobasso, Italy. The business includes a restaurant, a catering company, a cooking school, a travel firm. He and his wife, Isabella Cavarretta, live in Dublin with their daughters, Viola, two months, and Valeria, 18 months



■ Friends Maurizio Mastrangelo and Marco Giannantonio