



FAST CASUAL | June 2016 | By Daniel P. Smith

Italian on the Fast Track

These days, fast casuals are bringing authentic Italian cuisine to the masses.



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Growing up in Yonkers, New York, and later Greenwich, Connecticut, Rick Gencarelli enjoyed large homemade meals with his Italian family every Sunday. Back then, Gencarelli's mother, a first-generation American who learned the culinary trade from her Naples, Italy-born mother, prepared classic Italian dishes like Sunday Pork Ragu and Spaghetti Aglio Olio.

Now Gencarelli is leveraging those memories and re-creating those meals at Grassa, his Portland, Oregon-based fast casual that brings an assortment of forward-thinking pasta-based dishes to the masses.

"Italian is my wheelhouse. It's my personal background and my culinary background," says Gencarelli, who trained at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA).

In the two years before opening Grassa, Gencarelli studied the pasta market and arrived at an eye-opening conclusion. In the restaurant industry, pasta largely existed in two extremes: super low end or super high end. The middle—a spot where families could come or office workers could visit for a quick bite of high-quality homemade pasta at a reasonable price—was vacant.

Grassa, Gencarelli reasoned, could fill that void, though he wasn't quite sure how a fast-casual concept dishing handmade pasta, an admittedly novel idea, would be received.

"We were certainly worried that people would struggle to embrace this model, because consumers don't generally associate Italian with quick service," Gencarelli says. "It was a leap of faith."

Three years after its opening, however, Grassa has most certainly been embraced. Under exterior signage reading "Handcrafted Pasta," guests pour into Grassa each day to devour one of the dozen or so pastas Gencarelli's team produces daily from its visible pasta bar. The success has fueled a second Grassa unit, which Gencarelli opened in Portland in April.

Grassa isn't alone. Increasingly, authentic Italian cuisine is available across the U.S. not just in high-end eateries or family-style diners, but in fast casuals, as well.

Fast casuals break from the norm

Across the country, a number of ambitious chefs and restaurateurs have ditched "Americanized" versions of Italian dishes—the spaghetti and meatballs, garlic bread, and fried calamari that frequently dominates the space—for more tried-and-true Italian dishes prepared and served in a fast-casual environment.

There's Piada Italian Street Food, a 27-unit chain founded in 2010 by former Bravo Brio head Chris Doody that now has a presence in Ohio, Minnesota, and Texas. In San Diego, there's Biga, a new eatery launched last New Year's Eve by CIA-trained chef Tae Dickey.

In New York City, there's The Meatball Shop, a six-unit concept that bases its namesake dish on a classic Neapolitan meatball recipe. And in St. Louis, there's Porano Pasta, a fast-casual spot opened by James Beard Award winner Gerard Craft, the force behind the acclaimed Pastaria, a full-service spot that bills itself as "a taste of real Italy in St. Louis." Porano Pasta is no less ambitious in its mission, says Craft, who developed the fast casual over three years and numerous trips to Italy.

"In the United States, people think Italian is one way, but we're starting to see a lot of concepts prove otherwise," says Matt Harding, the director of culinary at Piada.

Though Italian is a beloved cuisine across the American landscape—a recent National Restaurant Association poll reported that 61 percent of consumers choose Italian food at least once a month for restaurant meals—the category has largely struggled to make deep inroads in the fast-casual marketplace, one that has seen other ethnic fare, principally Mexican and Asian, find solid footing with an assortment of independents, regional chains, and larger national players.

"With a lot of Italian food, less is more, and you're using time and patience to get it right," Gencarelli says.

The calamari at Piada is similarly straightforward. The squid is lightly breaded and then flashed in the pan before serving.

"We are not hiding it under aiolis and tartar sauce," Harding says.

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Such simplicity, Porano Pasta's Craft says, is central to Italian cuisine. "Simplicity and great ingredients is what Italian cooking is all about," he says.

Other emerging Italian fast casuals favor authentic preparation as well. At Biga, Dickey hesitated to put lasagna on the menu, fearing that his true Italian version would run askew of Americans' general perceptions of the popular dish.

"For many Americans, all they know about lasagna is that they have to stick it in the oven," he jokes.

Ultimately, however, Dickey decided to add lasagna to the menu and to do so in the true Italian style. He layers the pasta to the minute before adding a rich béchamel sauce and browning the dish in the oven.

At Piada, Harding says, the pasta is cooked "the Italian way" each day. Kitchen staff use a dry pasta and refrain from "shocking" it with cool water after boiling it. Employees simply shake the pasta and place it on trays to cool. This classic process, he adds, allows sauce to better adhere to the noodle.

Piada's meatballs also favor "the Italian way." With no mixer in the restaurant, cooks handcraft each meatball, rolling the blended ingredients together into loose balls rather than packing them together like "tight rubber," the all-too-frequent practice in America, Harding says. "It's a soft meatball because that's what is commonplace in Italy," he says.

In addition, Piada's namesake item—the piada, which resembles a burrito—similarly favors Italian authenticity. Piadini dough, Harding says, dates back more than seven centuries.

Historically, the dough was cooked on a hot stone using flour, water, salt, and, if the household had some extra money, lard. Piada's piadini dough follows this age-old process closely. The dough is handcrafted in each restaurant using flour, water, salt, a touch of garlic powder, and extra virgin olive oil before being cooked on a stone.

Meanwhile, from the Neapolitan pizzas to the locally sourced vegetables, everything on Biga's menu revolves around a pair of wood-fired ovens, the type of equipment rooted in Italian culinary history. Though the menu is not singularly Italian, Dickey says, the high-temperature, Italian-made ovens allow him to bring a taste of Italy to each and every dish.

"The delicate part is learning the ovens and what they do to the food," he says. "In the end, we put a touch of the oven on everything we cook."

Many of the emerging fast casuals also adhere to another time-honored tradition: If it grows together, it goes together. Though seasonal dishes using local ingredients are now commonplace in the U.S., The Meatball Shop's Daniel Holzman says it is "a way of life in most other countries where irrigation is limited and shipping and storage less common."

At The Meatball Shop, Holzman's seasonal vegetable recipes, for instance, are concoctions he encountered during his travels throughout Italy, and the recipes observe Italian culinary history's long-standing devotion to local sourcing.

At Biga, Dickey also mimics the Italians' venerable use of locally sourced products. He grabs heirloom carrots at a local farm near his home and has also traveled to the docks to secure fresh squid, later cleaning and lightly marinating the product for the grill.

"Even if heirloom carrots aren't commonplace in Italy, the use of what's around you is similar to what would be done in Italy," Dickey says.

Some goods just can't be grabbed from local sources, though, and in fact are better sourced directly from Italy to ensure a dish features a truly authentic edge. Dickey scores Biga's Parmesan and salami directly from Italy. Grassa's Gencarelli purchases imported San Marzano tomatoes and Parmigiano-Reggiano. "There are certain things we won't budge on," Gencarelli says.

Craft says Italian-sourced cheese is critical for the menu at Porano Pasta, which is why he leans on imported Grana Padano from northern Italy and Pecorino Romano, a Roman staple made from sheep's milk.

"As great as some American producers are, Italians do cheese amazingly well," Craft says.

Adapting for the U.S. masses

Though authenticity is prized among many of these emerging Italian fast casuals, so, too, are touches of culinary flair, particularly given the practical concerns, such as product availability, consumer acceptance, and staff training.

Undeterred by the hard regional lines present in Italian culinary culture, Gencarelli is not afraid to push authenticity aside to please his guests. At Grassa, he offers a hugely popular Pork Belly Mac & Cheese.

"True Italians would probably cry to see this," Gencarelli acknowledges.

At Porano Pasta, Craft similarly says he is not necessarily trying to be wholly authentic. "There's always a personal flair to the menu, and that comes from being a chef," Craft says, something evident in offerings at Porano such as spicy tofu and a pumpkin seed and lime pesto sauce.

At The Meatball Shop, Holzman says, authenticity is important as a starting point. Before he can ever evolve a recipe for his New York-based concept, he first needs to understand a recipe's origins.

"We like to learn what the original idea and taste profile is or was, then decide whether to tweak it based on the availability of ingredients and the taste of our guests," Holzman says.

Furthermore, crafting authentic Italian cuisine takes time and training, something that could conflict with the fast-casual model. Creating handmade pasta, for example, is a learned skill—if not art form, some would argue—that requires a kitchen skill set that transcends a sandwich build or grilling a burger.

"You're not just shipping in pasta, boiling it, and tossing it on a plate," Craft says.

Honoring authentic preparation methods create a challenge for these rising fast casuals, particularly those with growth on the mind.

"Training needs to be paramount, and we focus on the big things every day," Piada's Harding says. "We know we can't develop a menu that outstrips the ability of our team to execute it, so there's a tight relationship between operations and culinary."

As important as authenticity is to many of these fast-casual leaders, they understand they need to walk the line between Italian authenticity and U.S. reality. "Ultimately, people are smart, and you have to be proud of what you build," Harding says.