

The Man Who Invented Tiramisù! (Or So He Says.....)

Culinary “History” Before My Eyes In Baltimore?

How “L’Affaire Tiramisù”Has Led to the Best One Ever!

April, 2006. It was a Sunday morning, in Baltimore, Maryland.....a morning that started out for me like any Sunday morning in any town I visit: I was walking around a foodie neighborhood, trying to learn something new.

This particular morning, I had no idea what kind of educational bombshell was lying in wait for me.

The neighborhood was Baltimore’s Little Italy, in which I had never spent much time before—because when I come to this town, I’m normally in a crab-feeding frenzy. But this was Easter Sunday, which is a great time to think Italian thoughts—and my path led right by a sweet-looking little *pasticceria* on South Central Avenue called *Piedigrotta* .

The window had the apposite old-world clutter, which drew me in, and the store itself was pure time travel: cross that threshold and you’re in the kind of atmosphere-laden shop that Don Corleone might have run before he found work elsewhere.

Breads were all around me—classic Italian bread, semolina bread, olive bread, tomato bread, focaccia, many more. Crostate, or Italian tarts, glistened with apples, peaches, blueberries and other fruits. There were giant Italian sticky buns, small Neapoli-

tan pastries, rum tortas, chocolate cakes, and cookies of all kinds, especially biscotti.

The lovely Italian lady with the fairly thick accent who was standing behind the counter was busy packing boxes of cookies for Easter celebrations—but still seemed happy

to chat with me. I found out a little about the store’s history from her—she and her husband opened it in 2002—and about their bakery, just behind the shop, which turns out *all* of the baked goods they sell.

“My name is Bruna,” she offered. “Do you want to see the bakery?” “Sure,” I said, “I’d love to.” “Okay.

I’ll take you back. You can meet my husband.” Her voice was suddenly toneless, even flat. “He invented tiramisù.”

He.....inven.....he.....what? My brain was slightly scrambled by her words. “You mean.....he was the first to.....make it in Baltimore?”

“No,” she said, matter-of-factly. “He was the first one who ever made tiramisù.”

I’d had too many pitchers of beer with my spicy crabs the night before. But the thought arose in my reptilian brain: Is this what I think this is? Could I have stumbled upon the confectionery missing link?

While waiting for the introduction, I quickly gathered my thoughts on tiramisù. Of course.....no authority or no book ever tells you exactly where it was first made. No one

knows! But the better accounts all say that it was probably invented sometime in the 1960s or 1970s, probably near Venice. Some accounts speculatively pinpoint a bakery or a restaurant that first served it; the place that comes up more than any other is *Le Beccherie* , in Treviso, near Venice.

“This is my husband, Carminantonio Iannaccone,” the friendly lady said. “Piacere,” said Carminantonio over his shoulder, a late-middle-age Mediterranean man in baker’s whites feeding *pastiera* , the Neapolitan Easter specialty, into the cavernous oven.

“So.....you’re making.....a specialty of Naples?” I began.

“Si.”

“Are you from Naples?”

“Si.”

“Aha,” I said. “Not Venice?”

“No. But I worked near Venice in the 1960s. In Treviso.”

Click.

“I see. Home of the long red lettuce. Radicchio.”

“Si, si.”

“And.....some people say.....home of tiramisù.”

“Si,” he said. I held my breath. “I invented tiramisù.”

There it was again. These people were either crazy, or serious, or both.

“You know,” I said tentatively, “I’ve looked a bit into the history of tiramisù. No one seems to know who invented it exactly.”

“Of course not!” Carminantonio said, finally turning away from the *pastiera* . “A lot of different people cause confusion, because they all want to take credit for tiramisù.”

“Si,” he said.
I held my breath.
“I invented tiramisù.”

He seemed a little emotional, but willing to talk.

"Yes," I said. "I've heard that a restaurant named 'Le Beccherie' is most often associated with tiramisù."

"Aaah," he said, as if stabbed in the heart by a pastry spatula. "Le Beccherie. They sold lots of tiramisù. *My tiramisù!*"

"You mean.....they stole your recipe?"

"No!!! *I mean I made their tiramisù at my bakery in Treviso!* Then, my brother, who was a dessert distributor, he delivered it to them, and others. We had special trucks to keep up with the demand. Nobody made tiramisù before I did. That was my tiramisù! I invented it.....on December 24, 1969!"

"I see." The oven seemed to get hotter. "Could I possibly talk to your brother.....?"

"He's dead."

"Aha. Do you possibly have any of the invoices that....."

"They're lost. Gone. They went with my brother."

And, verification-wise, that was that.

Allora. It was time to move on. I think we will never know whether Carminantonio Iannaccone invented tiramisù or not—but I think we can be damned sure that he was at least somewhere in the neighborhood.

Aside from purely historical interest, of course, all of this is important.....because Carminantonio may be just the man to tell us exactly what tiramisù is supposed to be.....either in its first incarnation, or in one of its earliest incarnations. If Carminantonio has great tiramisù insights, I'm happy with either version.

And he does.

As you know, tiramisù swept through Italian restaurants in America like a wave in the early 1980s. Why? Principally, as Piero Selvaggio, popular Los Angeles restaurateur, told me at that time when I interviewed him for a tiramisù article: "because restaurateurs can now offer a great, sophisticated-looking Italian dessert.....without actually needing a pastry chef! It is so easy to make!" And tiramisù, of course, has gone on to become a staple at virtually every Italian restaurant in America, and at all kinds of food service outlets—bakeries, catering places, gourmet shops, etc.

So what does Carminantonio think of the monster he purports to have invented?

"Ah.....most of it is not good. Most people who make it are into quantity, not quality."

"Of course," I said, trying to radiate good will and trust. "Carminantonio, let me ask you a question. Is it possible for me to get your original tiramisù recipe?"

This question brought the biggest reaction of all. "No!" Carminantonio said.

"Absolutely not. It is not possible!"

"Well.....why not?" I fearlessly went on.

"Because you cannot get the original ingredients."

"Aha. OK. But let's not worry about that. I know lots of people in Italy. I may be able to get them."

"No. The ingredients are too expensive."

"Right. But.....let's just say.....what if money were no object? What if I could get the ingredients and I were willing to pay anything for them?"

"You still cannot have the recipe."

"Why not?"

Pause. "Because I'm writing a book about the history of tiramisù. I will save the original recipe for that!"

Of course. I should have known. Marketing is usually the answer to everything. Allrighty then. I'd have to be crushed. But just as the disappointment was really setting in, just as I thought I was going have to walk out of that bakery without a tiramisù recipe in hand, Carminantonio made me an amazing offer.

"Listen," he said....."I could give you a recipe for the way I make tiramisù now."

And that's exactly what he did—delivering it over the phone, extemporaneously, to my office in New York, a jumble of ideas and European measurements. This recipe quite obviously did not exist *anywhere* in print. We got to work testing it, cleaning it up, making it reproduceable for any home chef. The biggest difference in it seemed to be this:

"The individual flavors of the four creamy mixtures stand up."

All tiramisù recipes call for espresso-dipped ladyfingers layered in a casserole dish with a creamy mascarpone mixture. That mascarpone mixture is usually mixed with sugar alone. Some fancier recipes do call for eggs to go into the mascarpone mix. But Carminantonio's recipe.....calls for zabaglione, an eggy custard, to go into the mix! In fact, he calls for a zabaglione.....*and* a pastry cream, which also includes eggs! Furthermore, he specifies that you should make these two items the day before making the tiramisù.....and that you should mix them together with the mascarpone only at the last minute! And.....to increase the dazzle.....just-whipped cream goes into the final mix as well! *Mamma mia!*

The change, I must confess, is brilliant. "When you do it this way," says Carminantonio, "the individual flavors of the four creamy mixtures stand up." Indeed, his recipe became the most complex-tasting tiramisù I've ever had.....as well as the most silky, velvety, and sumptuous in texture. It may not stand as tall as some, but the ooze of it is extraordinary.

Listen to me.....when you're ready to make your next party for 24 people or so.....you have got to find a way to work this thing in! This is a crazy discovery, like something leaping through time to affect your life today. I can tell you this.....I will never make a tiramisù recipe other than this one from Carminantonio again.

At least until his book comes out. ■

If You Go to Baltimore.....

I would strongly recommend a visit to Piedigrotta! I tasted quite a few things on my visit, and found the quality level high—pastries are generally not too sweet, and a lot of them have that authentically crumbly texture that is a hallmark of Neapolitan baking. I loved the biscotti, for example—crumbly and soft, simultaneously, not at all dry or hard.

But my two favorite things were not in the crumbly camp. I loved the strudel I tasted, with a gorgeous wine-soaked fruit filling. And, best of all.....was the *sfogliatelle!* This was one of the most skillful, flaky Italian pastries ever, so resilient in texture, so complicated, with a delicious custard inside. Bravo Carminantonio!

Piedigrotta

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410.522.6900 (tel)

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THE UR-TIRAMISÙ



Carminantonio's a detail man. Lots of details. You *could* make this recipe in a simpler way—but you wouldn't get the same monumental layering of texture and flavor, the same sumptuous result. For example, you could make the *zabaglione* and the *crema pasticcera* with a whisk—but using an electric hand mixer or an immersion blender brings out a much silkier texture. Then, you could prepare these things all on the same day, and serve the tiramisù on that day. But.....prepping some of the items on, say, Monday.....then assembling the tiramisù on, say, Tuesday.....then waiting until Saturday to serve it, when it's jelled and standing tall.....those would be the keys to tiramisù heaven. Also.....this recipe works best in exactly the right-sized pan; I used an enameled cast-iron baking pan that's approximately 13 ½" long, 10" wide, and 2 ½" deep. Please come as close as you can to these dimensions.

serves 16-24 people

DAY ONE

for the zabaglione filling

yolks of 10 large eggs
1 ¾ cups sugar
1 ½ cups sweet Marsala
½ tablespoon vanilla extract
zest of one large lemon

1. Place egg yolks, sugar, Marsala, vanilla, and lemon zest in a large mixing bowl. Working with an electric hand mixer, or an immersion blender, beat until the yolks have been fully blended and the mixture is smooth, about one minute.
2. Pour mixture into top of double boiler, and fill the bottom pot with room temperature water. Place the top pot on the bottom pot, turn heat on to low, and cook the egg mixture, stirring constantly, for about 5 minutes all together. It's ready when the egg mixture resembles a thick custard sauce; it may bubble and boil a bit as it reaches that texture.
3. Remove top pot from heat, and pour the zabaglione into a bowl. Let sit on a counter until the mixture reaches room temperature. Then cover it, and reserve in the refrigerator overnight.

for the crema pasticcera (pastry cream)

1 cup sugar
¾ cup all-purpose flour
zest of one large lemon
½ tablespoon vanilla extract
yolks of 6 large eggs
4 cups whole milk

1. Place sugar, flour, lemon and vanilla in a medium-large, heavy bottomed sauce pan. Add the egg yolks and one cup of the milk, blending well with an electric hand mixer or an immersion blender. Blend until smooth, about half a minute.
2. Place saucepan over very low heat and cook the mixture, stirring constantly to prevent curdling. While stirring, incorporate the

remaining 3 cups of milk, one cup at a time. After about 10 minutes of constant stirring, the mixture should be thick (twice as thick as the zabaglione), free of lumps, and beginning to bubble. Remove from heat and transfer to a bowl. Let sit on a counter until the mixture reaches room temperature. Cover it, and reserve in the refrigerator overnight.

DAY TWO

for the whipped cream

4 cups heavy whipping cream
1 ¼ cups granulated sugar
1 tablespoon vanilla extract

1. Place the whipping cream in a large mixing bowl. Add the sugar and vanilla extract. Beat with a large whisk until the whipped cream holds stiff peaks. Reserve.

for the assembly

2 cups mascarpone
5 cups espresso, cooled
½ tablespoon of rum extract
1 cup granulated sugar
50 savoiardi (ladyfingers)
¾ cup unsweetened cocoa powder

1. In a very large bowl, combine reserved zabaglione and crema pasticcera, blending with a wooden spoon until just mixed together. Fold in mascarpone and whipped cream, working with a wide spatula. Mix gently but well, until mixture is smooth. Reserve egg-and-cream mixture in refrigerator.
2. Place espresso in a large, shallow pan or serving dish. Whisk in rum extract and sugar.
3. Quickly dunk 25 ladyfingers in espresso, about one second for each side. The cookies should be moistened, but not soggy. Right after dunking, place each of the ladyfingers on the bottom of a 13 ½" long, 10" wide, and 2 ½" deep baking pan/serving dish; the 25 ladyfingers should fit in a single layer. Cover them with half of the reserved egg-and-cream mixture.
4. Repeat the process with the remaining 25 ladyfingers, building a second ladyfinger layer on top of the first. Top with the remaining egg-and-cream mixture. Working with a spatula, smooth the cream over the top so it looks even.
5. Place cocoa powder in a fine mesh strainer. Sprinkle it over the top of the tiramisù, evenly distributing a layer of powdered cocoa.
6. Cover tiramisù carefully, and refrigerate immediately—preferably in the rear of a very cold refrigerator. It will start to set after a few hours—but I think it stands up best, and tastes best, after 4-5 days in the fridge.

SERVING DAY

(DAY THREE, FOUR, FIVE, SIX OR SEVEN)

Remove chilled tiramisù from the refrigerator, and serve immediately. You may scoop it out of the baking pan with a spoon, and serve it in bowls—but I far prefer, working with a knife and a very large spoon, to remove squar-ish portions of tiramisù and place them, free-standing, on dessert plates. Tiramisù looks best and tastes best when each individual piece is standing up, like a piece of cake.