

Immigration Law \cong Foodservice

Immigrant Profile: Roberto Donna

by **Becki L. Young**

This month I spoke with one of DC's favorite immigrant restaurateurs, Roberto Donna, who will soon open Galileo III, the latest iteration of his famous Italian fine dining restaurant, in the former Butterfield 9 space on 14th Street. Galileo III is slated to launch in October, featuring an open kitchen led by Paolo Boffa, formerly of Salute! in New York. It will offer a 75-seat dining room as well as a weekend "Laboratorio."

Roberto first arrived in DC nearly three decades ago. At that time in Italy, most restaurants were "only Italian, only serving regional cuisine." When he came to DC with its diversity of international restaurants, Roberto thought "oh wow - I'm in the mecca of cooking," and he made up his mind to stay.

Roberto came from Torino, in the Piedmont region of northwest Italy. He graduated from the city's Culinary Institute in 1979. At that time Enzo De Chiara of DC's Romeo & Julieta restaurant on K Street had come to the Culinary Institute looking for a sous chef, and the school asked Roberto if he wanted to go. Roberto had "the highest grade in cooking, but a zero in English," so he was off to England for a six month stint at a castle hotel in the Lake District near Scotland, before embarking for the US.

He arrived in DC on November 3, 1979 with a copy of La Stampa (Turin's daily newspaper) under his arm. He cut his teeth in the US restaurant world at Romeo & Julieta, and the restaurant sponsored him for a green card which he received in 1983.

In 1984 Roberto partnered with Savino Recine to open the first Galileo on P Street in Dupont Circle (the current location of Tiramisu). Two years later he established Primi Piatti with Savino; the pair later parted ways, with Savino keeping Primi Piatti and Roberto retaining Galileo.

His next venture was I Matti, a

trattoria that operated for 10 years in DC's multi-ethnic Adams Morgan neighborhood.

By 1991 Roberto had outgrown the 55-seat Galileo on P Street; on the other hand, Il Giardino, an Italian restaurant on 21st Street, was looking for a smaller space, so the two arranged a swap. The new Galileo offered triple the space of its predecessor, with a 110-seat dining room and additional seating for 45 in the bar and private dining rooms.

Roberto continued to expand his culinary empire throughout the 90's, with spaghetteria/ pizzeria Il Raddichio, as well as several other restaurants.

Roberto said that from the start, good management was always difficult to find; in the early years being a "real Italian" was important. He also noted that "back then" it was easier to sponsor an employee for a green card than a work permit (and the green card process only took 2 - 3 years); now the opposite is true (and the green card process takes much longer).

In 2006 Galileo was forced to close due to building renovations after a very successful 24-year run, and Roberto opened Bebo Trattoria in Crystal City, Va.

Over the years Roberto has trained many top US chefs, including local favorites Enzo Fargione of Teatro Goldoni, Cesare Lanfranconi of Spezie and Daniele Catalani (who will soon open a restaurant on Capitol Hill), as well as Carmine Marzano of BOVA Ristorante in Boca Raton, Fla., Fabrizio Aielli of Sea Salt in Naples, Fla., and Marco Nocco of Il Fornaio in San Francisco.

Roberto's advice to future immigrants: "You need to come and try the work life and the non-work life and see if you like it and see if you can adapt. I see a lot of people who come here and cannot really adapt, even though they are good workers."

How the Italian restaurant scene has changed in DC since 1979: When Roberto arrived, few restaurants ventured



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Roberto Donna

far from traditional dishes such as fettuccine and scaloppini; the most "advanced" Italian restaurant in terms of the originality of its cuisine was a place called Cantina d'Italia. Over the years Roberto studied and traveled extensively throughout the various regions of Italy, gradually introducing various Italian regional cuisines to the DC dining public through his restaurants. With the original Laboratorio di Galileo Roberto reached a new level of creativity in Italian cooking on the DC restaurant scene, concocting an original menu each evening, and he plans to carry on this tradition at Galileo III, where 95 percent of the dishes will be brand new creations.

Becki L. Young has been working in the field of immigration law since 1995. Ms. Young's practice focuses on employment-based immigration law. She has represented employers in a variety of industries, including investment banking and securities, information technology, health care, and hospitality, providing advice on work permits and related immigration issues, and is the co-editor of *Immigration Options for Essential Workers* published by the American Immigration Lawyers Association. To learn more or to schedule a personal consultation, call 202-232-0983 or e-mail becki.young@blylaw.com.