

Chef's love of food started early in northern Italy

BY KAREN KRAMER

Some say that geography is everything — that where you are born determines what will influence you for the rest of your life.

Pietro Mosconi — owner of Villa Mosconi and Monte's restaurants on MacDougal St. — was born in the Emilia-Romagna region of northern Italy. Bordered by the Apennine Mountains, the Po River and the Adriatic Sea, this fertile triangle is ideal for growing potatoes, grains and grapes for wine. Some of the best pasta in Italy comes from this region.

It was here that Pietro Mosconi grew up with his six siblings. As a young boy in rural Italy he never imagined that he would achieve the quintessential immigrant's dream — coming to America and owning two successful restaurants in Greenwich Village. His first challenge was to learn English — a language he speaks with a heavy Italian accent.

"I grew up in the province of Vincenza, which is the Emilia Romagna region," Mosconi said. "It's near Rome and Venice. My childhood in Italy, I don't change it for anything. I love the countryside, everything about it. The church was very close by. So was the school. Sometimes when we had to go to the market we would get up very early with my father and would walk easily 15 kilometers."

Mosconi's father served in World War II, was captured as a prisoner of war in Sicily and then was transferred to England, leaving the young Mosconi to spend a lot of time with his mother, his brother, Giovanni, and five sisters. Without the patriarch of the family around, some of the more labor-intensive tasks of the cooking — such as kneading the dough into bread — fell to Pietro.

"Growing up in the countryside all these peasant specialties were like normal. Everyday we had a soup, sometimes two soups in one day," he recalled. "When I started getting strong I had to help my mother knead the bread, help doing the noodle, the ravioli, the cappelletti. And a lot of time I would have flour all over myself but my mom she didn't care because I would learn to prepare this. We make potato but we flavor it with such a good flavor of cheese and eggs and a little nutmeg, that became like an hors d'oeuvres. Then we made a lot of things with fruit because we had fruit there. Many orchards."

Mosconi's father did a bit of farming, supplementing the income by doing work on the roadway. When a friend of Pietro's father opened a restaurant and needed some help, the friend called on the senior Mosconi to enlist his five healthy daughters and two sons in the harvesting. His oldest sister and his brother, Giovanni, went to help, while Pietro Mosconi stayed home to help his mother. He was always around the freshest, homemade food.

It was Pietro's aunt, Domenica, who inspired the rest of the family to come to the United States, thinking that they could have a better life here, perhaps connected to the food industry. She came first, followed by Pietro Mosconi's father.

"I came over in 1966," said Mosconi. "We left from Genoa on a beautiful new ship called the Michelangelo. I wasn't used to the sea. I was a little bit shaken up by the rough water. We arrived in New York seven days later."

Domenica, however, wasn't the first in the family to come to New York. Mosconi's grandparents had arrived at the beginning of the century and gotten married on the Lower East Side near Chinatown.

"My grandparents were into music," Mosconi recalled. "They would play at weddings. They went all over. At that time they played a lot of organ. If they had stayed here and hadn't moved back to Italy I would have been a third-generation American."

Once in New York, Mosconi — along with his father — worked in some top restaurants, such as Romeo Salta and Giambelli.

"My priority was to gain experience in the kitchen, because the kitchen to me is very important," he said. "I had the luck to work with some of the great ones and they inspired me to be strong in the kitchen."

Like many cooks, it was Mosconi's goal to have his own restaurant. The Mona Lisa was a long-established restaurant on MacDougal St. that had opened in the 1940s and catered to a loyal clientele from the Italian section of Greenwich Village. Mosconi bought the restaurant, and the building, in 1976, just 10 years after coming to America. He wanted to find partners to join with him, but his father insisted on keeping it all in the family.

"My father always prevented me from joining a partnership that was not in the family," Mosconi said. "He said, 'The family is so big, why don't we try to put something together for the family?' I understood very much, because a father always want



Villager photo by Elizabeth Robert

Pietro Mosconi, chef and owner of Villa Mosconi and Monte's restaurants on MacDougal St., cooking at Monte's

to include everyone. When we went to the lawyer to make the papers for Villa Mosconi, the lawyer said, 'Why you want to share everything the same? You're the chef.' I said, 'Listen, I know Italian families. I want this to be successful. Let's everyone share together.' At the time we started we had five sisters and myself."

Giovanni — whom everyone started calling John — was the last of the siblings to come to New York. With the family's help, he took over another Italian restaurant called Monte's that was a half block away from Villa Mosconi. This place had also been a former Italian restaurant called Razzazzo. Pietro

well known for its pasta. Bologna is very well known for the tortellini and Parma for the cheeses. So I thought we could exchange that idea to New York."

Keeping alive the tradition of involving the family in the business, Mosconi's two children work with him on the weekends.

"My son comes in the nighttime and we look to work together because he's young and has some great ideas. And my daughter wants to help with things too. By myself it would be impossible."

Mosconi went over to a table and placed a plate of cheesecake surrounded by a sauce of raspberry swirls and plump strawberries. The customer complimented him: "Pietro you are an artist."

Mosconi beamed broadly. "Yes, yes, that's right. I am an artist."

Philosophical for a moment, the restaurant owner said, "You come from overseas and you make a dream, and my dream to come to the United States was huge. I had a lot of time to start it and I wasn't happy the first year. Every year after I kind of got acquainted to living in New York City. Every chef, I would say, would love to have their own restaurant one day. Besides owning the restaurant I got very lucky to own the property. That's very important because without the property it would be very difficult to pay the rent. Nowadays the rent is going up too much."

When asked what kind of food an Italian chef cooks for himself when he goes home at night, Mosconi said, "My son and daughter are always watching me, what I eat. They're into the health, into the physical. They watch me. I eat a fruit, maybe. I eat light. But never just a can of soup."

Mosconi is a purist. He makes daily trips to the markets and insists everything be made from scratch, including the pasta.

was delighted to have his brother half a block away.

"Then I was very strong for me and John to open a place," he said. "The Razzazzo were running Monte's for many years already. When we opened Monte's it was huge, successful right away."

Mosconi is a purist about food and cooking. He makes daily trips himself to the markets and insists that everything be made from scratch.

"We make the pasta here and we have a pasta guy who comes in six days a week and makes it," Mosconi explained. "We got a pasta machine from the great Lombardy of Italy, it's no problem. People can tell the difference when it's homemade. We use fancy flour. The Vincenza region of Italy is very

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