

LIVING

# La dolce Brooklyn

By Hailey Eber

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The dining room at Antica Pesa.

Bryan Bedder



House-smoked duck breast with asparagus and balsamic glaze (left, ) is one of the succulent dishes at Antica Pesa. At right, Antica Pesa's cacio e pepe ( ) has gained a following with boldfaced names. (Anne Wermiel/NY Post)

On a recent Saturday, Christopher Nicolla enjoyed the same over-the-top Italian hospitality and delectable pasta he had the week before while vacationing in Rome — but he wasn't in Europe.



Francesco Panella and brother Lorenzo oversee the dining room at Antica Pesa. (Anne Wermiel/NY Post)

“Antica Pesa is really something a little bit different for Brooklyn,” says Francesco Panella, 43, who opened the restaurant with his older brother Simone, 45, who is based in Rome and oversees the kitchen. Their mustachioed younger brother, Lorenzo, 40, lives in Brooklyn full time and helps manage the restaurant. The crowd is “not hipsters,” Francesco says. “It’s a mix.”

Indeed, many diners trek in from Manhattan, and the Panella brothers are a big part of the draw. “I haven’t met a nicer person,” says Nicolla, recounting how Francesco whisked him, his girlfriend and his sister to a star-studded late-night party after he dined at his restaurant in Rome, despite hardly knowing him. “I got a text [from him] last night,” says the Gramercy resident. “[It read] ‘cancel your plans, reservations at 8:30.’ ”

Clad in crisp white pants, a plaid button-down and Converse sneakers, his thick hair coiffed just-so, Francesco works the room with flair. He enthusiastically welcomes guests in charmingly broken English, sits with regulars, soothes those who are waiting for a table and insists you try the ravioli with artichoke sauce (\$20), a recent addition to the menu.

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Such hospitality, and the restaurant’s famed cacio e pepe (\$16) — a traditional Roman dish of spaghetti, Pecorino, Parmigiano and black pepper — has made the restaurant popular with boldface names. Tom Hardy is known to stop in regularly, and on one night in March, both he and Madonna were in the house, dining separately. (Francesco proudly displays a signed picture of the Material Girl on a mantle in the bar area.) Julianne Moore and designer Rachel Roy stepped in for a bite last week before catching Paul McCartney at the Barclays Center, Sting and his wife Trudie dined at Antica Pesa last month, and Ivanka Trump tweeted that it was her “favorite new restaurant in Brooklyn,” calling it “simply delicious!”

And the Roman original has long been a draw for celebs. In January, Quentin Tarantino hosted a premiere party there for “Django Unchained,” and no less than five of this year’s Oscar winners — including Anne Hathaway and Ben Affleck — reportedly dined at the restaurant in the months leading up to the awards.

“We’ve been dealing with celebrities for the past 15 to 20 years — first in Rome, now here,” says manager Gabriele Guidoni, who worked at the Roman restaurant for years before helping to open in Brooklyn. “It’s not really something new for us,” adds the 36-year-old.

Indeed, Francesco can still recall the day in 1982 when he first knew he wanted to go into the family business. Italy had just won the World Cup in Spain, and Italian President Sandro Pertini came into the restaurant with Spanish King Juan Carlos. The president loved sorbet with his meal, so Francesco’s father ordered him and his brother Simone to pick some lemons from the tree. Simone made the sorbet, and Francesco presented it to the president, cementing him as the host with the most. That one day was “very important in my life,” Francesco says. “We were so, so young.”

But not only celebs bask in the Panellas’ charms. Nicole Purcell, who runs the CLIO advertising awards, and her friend Nancy Mammana, 42, who works for a sports agency, eat at Antica “as much as possible,” says Purcell, 36. “My family is off-the-boat Italian, and this is the best pasta.”

The two, who both live on the Upper East Side, dined at Antica Pesa when they were in Rome three years ago and were thrilled when the restaurant opened in New York. “We don’t come to Brooklyn,” says Purcell. “Only for this restaurant.”

And while many Manhattanites are fans, the restaurant also attracts its fair share of regulars. Jenna Adesso, 34, a photo editor who lives three blocks away, comes in at least once a week for a drink or a bite, often with her roommate. “We like the owners, great bartenders, great

Nicolla, a 27-year-old menswear designer, dined at Antica Pesa, an Italian restaurant in Williamsburg that opened last fall. It’s the first stateside outpost of a 91-year-old hot spot of the same name, located in Rome’s Trastevere district. It’s been run by the Panella family for four generations, and it’s brought an incongruous bit of continental grandeur to an otherwise mellow block of Berry Street.

Unlike your typical Billyburg boite, there are no cozy confines and tin ceilings here. Instead, there’s an expansive, glossy interior marked by

double-height ceilings, huge orb-like light fixtures (no Edison bulbs) that dimly light the warm-but-modern space and Fornasetti wallpaper. The crowd is a bit older, a bit dressier, their style a bit less fashion forward — more Meatpacking District than Kings County.

service,” she says. “We’re always treated like we’re family.”

While some questioned the Panellas’ plans to open in Williamsburg instead of Manhattan, Francesco was convinced that the formerly gritty hipster hood was the right spot.

“Williamsburg reminds me of my district many, many years ago,” he says. “Trastevere is close to the river, like Williamsburg is, there is something familiar between [the two]... [it feels] like home.”

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