

Francesco Panella: the Brooklyn Man Still in Love with Italy



by [Stefania Virone Vittor](#) editorial staff | November 12, 2019



A frank chat around our shared love of authentic Italian cuisine with the Roman restaurateur-entrepreneur who has conquered New York

I reach Francesco Panella on his cell phone while he's in Los Angeles. It's 8 a.m. and he's already gone for his morning run. The brilliant entrepreneur behind the American success of Italian restaurants [Antica Pesa](#) and [Feroce](#) in New York is in the City of Angels filming *Little Big Italy's* third season TV show, after which he'll head to San Diego. He makes his love for television clear right off the bat, telling me about the light feeling it gives him, as well as the opportunity it provides for meeting other lovers of Italian cuisine. A big fan of both "la cucina italiana" and *La Cucina Italiana* (excuse the pun), he's honored to inform us that he begins each of his menus' recipes by consulting our historic magazine. The honor is mutual.

Although always on the move and bursting with commitments between restaurants and Italian TV, Francesco Panella is lacking in neither availability nor manners. Despite his over [125,000 followers on Instagram](#) and celebrity selfies with the likes of Russell Crowe and Jennifer Lopez, he remains the same simple boy from Rome who left the family restaurant to bring his vision of Italian cuisine to America. Recognized as a symbol of the Italian spirit, Francesco has lent not only his face, but above all his heart.

Past meets future

Francesco Panella is direct and sincere, just like the food at his restaurants. Together with brothers Simone and Lorenzo, he is the heir to a know-how handed down over four generations — from the time Antica Pesa opened its doors in the heart of the Trastevere district in 1922. From his childhood in the family kitchen in Rome to his arrival in Brooklyn, Francesco has kept his feet firmly on the ground with a strong sense of reason - even if the Proust-like memory of Grandma Anita's afternoon snack of bread, butter and sugar still gets him excited: "Sometimes it turned into dinner, as money was tight." Francesco Panella is a man living in the future with a heart full of the past. His words come out like a river overflowing, enthusiastic about life and eager to tell his story, without falling into self-celebration or banalities. He left Rome to export Italian tradition to the United States, just like our great-grandparents and grandparents.

Antica Pesa Brooklyn, NYC (ph Leonardo Cestari)

Authentic passion

In 2012, Francesco Panella choose to take the big leap, landing in Williamsburg instead of Manhattan, "because I chose to lead the way, not follow it." His brilliant intuition allowed him to conquer America away from the spotlight, with Antica Pesa on Berry Street the hands-down winner. Indeed, whether in Rome or New York, there's not an Italian or international star who doesn't long for Panella's *cacio e pepe*. Francesco puts it simply: "We offer Italian tradition. Not the mandolin and checkered tablecloth cliché but authentic Italian style – so beloved abroad – with honest sincerity." While restaurants open and close daily, the Roman businessman chooses not to follow fashions or indulge his customers' whims. The secret to his success is all in his *attitude*, which has never changed. "I think it's strange when people constantly change their look throughout life; to me they don't know who they are. Knowing who you are every day and remaining true to yourself is very important. Success doesn't need to change a person".

Simone Panella, George Clooney e Francesco Panella all'Antica Pesa Roma (ph Instagram)

Respect for Italian-American cuisine

The United States has given him much and continues to do so. Feroce, opened at the beginning of the year inside the Moxy Hotel in the Manhattan's flower district, is also giving him great satisfaction: "Americans are more attentive to the quality of food. They want to learn, to discover and understand. They deserve respect." Francesco continues with fervor: "This is the country that welcomed us after the war with cardboard boxes full of spaghetti and dreams." But back to reality: "This is the big difference between the current sad situation of closed ports. We brought our warmth around the table, the convivial spirit that got our great-grandparents and grandparents through hard times. Italian-American cuisine is the generous fruit of these two extraordinary countries."

Feroce Ristorante, Manhattan, NYC (ph Michael Kleinberg)

The nostalgic lover

Staying in America, for him, is a way to pay homage to this union of cultures, like a successful marriage. Unprompted, Francesco furthers the convincing romantic parallel: "Italy is like the girlfriend who broke your heart – you know that you'll love her forever, but you'll never get back together." Maybe that's why he continues to look for her around the world, to fervently defend her and to passionately support her. And when he misses her, he makes sure to bring her to him. "Walking through the streets of Rome, stones underfoot, there's an unmistakable scent, which becomes the scent of the city. It's the scent of Antico Forno Roscioli," says Francesco, who for a few months now has been transporting the original Roman pizza to his second New York success, [Feroce Pizza & Bocce Bar](#).

To be, there is no question

Francesco Panella's expressive urgency passes through traditional Italian dishes updated with light, contemporary touches and supported by original, quality ingredients. From *bucatini all'amatriciana*, to *paranza* or *cotoletta alla milanese* so tender it can be cut with a spoon, his 100% Italian pride has everyone convinced, both Italians and not. In New York, where he works 22 hours a day, Feroce and Antica Pesa are his home, the staff is his family, success is today, and tomorrow is unknown. Passion and determination, he confesses, are not enough. "It takes great sacrifice. You need to make a conscious choice and keep with it to the end, closing your private life away in a safe".

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