

Two brave Sicilians in London

2 Jul 2010 by Nick Lander/FT

Mennula, which opened on the sunny side of Charlotte Street, a five-minute walk from Goodge Street tube in London's West End, is Sicilian through and through.

Its name means 'almond' in Sicilian. On the walls of the staircase leading down to the basement kitchen are old black-and-white photos of what this enchanting island used to look like. And the restaurant is owned by businessman Joe Martorana, with 51% of the shares, and chef Santino Busciglio, who owns the balance, both of whom come from the small town of Cianciana, 25 km north west of Agrigento.

The menu resonates with Sicilian ingredients. The white dish that greets every customer includes fresh almonds, olives which Busciglio's parents source for him as well as warm arancini, rice balls coated in breadcrumbs said to have originated in Sicily in the 10th century. The kitchen bakes three different breads, including one from chickpea flour, and also the round amaretti biscuits, this time made from ground almonds, served warm with the coffee.

In between comes a range of dishes that never stray too far from Busciglio's roots. Creamy burrata cheese with beetroot; salads incorporating Dorset crab, avocado and white balsamic vinegar; scallops and broad beans; wild mushrooms, new season's garlic and sweet red chilli. Pasta and rice dishes include bucatini with sardines and pine nuts; risotto with broad beans and summer truffle; and potato gnocchi with almonds. There is line-caught cod with Swiss chard; rabbit wrapped in pancetta with aubergines; a rack of new-season Scottish lamb with a pistachio and mint crust; and several authentic Sicilian desserts: cannoli, biscuit tubes filled with sweetened ricotta cheese; almond milk pannacotta with quince jelly; and excellent ice creams.

I have eaten at this narrow, forty-seater restaurant on more than half a dozen occasions with friends and business colleagues at lunch and dinner. On each occasion I have left impressed while all of those I have introduced to Mennula, including one cosmopolitan vegan, have vowed to return. I hope the restaurant will survive long enough for them all to do so.

Because the opening of this small, fine-dining restaurant represents a brave, passionate but possibly foolhardy attempt by its co-owners to buck two very different trends.

The first is exemplified in Busciglio's move from the kitchens of his former employer, the Ambassadors Hotel near Euston station, to his new role as chef/patron of his own business at a time when so many chefs are moving in the opposite direction. Hotels worldwide are sucking in so many talented chefs because they can offer them the vital capital, infrastructure and marketing support. But Busciglio now realises that all this comes at a price. 'The accountants were happy with the profit we were making on the food but not with the wages I had to pay to produce the quality I was happy with. Once that became clear, I knew I had to move on', he explained.

The second is that this is a privately owned, intimate, fine-dining restaurant which requires its customers to spend a minimum of an hour at the table at lunch at a cost of £20-£25 per head at the least. It is very good food but certainly not fast. And because it is one of a kind, Mennula cannot count on the benefits of any cross marketing or Busciglio's media appearances outside his kitchen.

After its opening six months, the debit side of this new venture does not look too healthy on either the personal or financial level.

Busciglio, who is at least delighted to have lost three kilos twisting his bulky frame round the stairs from the kitchen to chat to his customers, admitted that the stress of opening Mennula was the final nail in his marriage and that after 17 years he and his wife have separated, at least amicably. And that while the opportunity to see his two sons at only certain times has made him appreciate them even more, he holds out little hope of further romance, 'I don't honestly think that working the shifts I do here I could offer another woman more than half an hour a day', he added somewhat resignedly.

During its first three months, Mennula managed to break even. The buoyant trade over Christmas and New Year was offset by a month during which there was scaffolding outside their front door for work on the flats above (this does not

affect those who have booked but always deters anyone walking by who immediately assumes that the restaurant is closed). The restaurant lost money in March and April but broke even again in May. With French patio windows leading on to tables on the pavement, both partners realise somewhat ironically that the financial wellbeing of their Sicilian restaurant heavily depends on the highly unpredictable British weather.

Sitting opposite Busciglio and Martorana in one of Mennula's booths, it became quite clear that each partner interprets this initial lack of financial success quite differently. The lack of financial progress seems to have come as something of a shock to Martorana, who made his money in garages and retail and who is, effectively, bankrolling it. 'It all obviously depends on how deep my pockets are', he added with an enigmatic smile.

Busciglio, by contrast, is much more optimistic. 'I'm in this heart and soul', he explained, 'it's a part of me. I know it's not going to be easy but I do believe that there is a future for what is effectively a family owned restaurant, somewhere our customers know is managed by a group of people who care. I was very worried when I saw that we had lost money but I believe we can survive this. Another ten customers a day and we'll be fine', he said with a brave smile.

In almost every respect, Busciglio and Martorana have done everything right. They took over a former restaurant so that the total investment of £300,000 is not too high. Charlotte Street is unusually broad for London with not that much traffic passing along it, which has allowed a vital cluster of good restaurants to emerge over the years: Pied à Terre, Roka, Elena's L'Etoile and a string of less expensive options are all neighbours. Its location could not be better.

But the more intangible factors of timing and fashion may not be in Mennula's favour. Busciglio admitted that other chefs running similar small, independent restaurants in London are also struggling financially but that provides him with little consolation. Whether two Sicilians can buck two such powerful trends, only time will tell.

Mennula, www.mennula.co.uk