

Chef Melis exalts Italy's Mediterranean flavors at Jeddah's Rosewood Corniche Hotel

Fine Italian cooking is the result of expertise and the capacity to select products and maintain their taste and freshness without elaborate ingredients.

This is the philosophy of Claudio Melis, chef from the fashionable restaurant, La Cucina, at Rosewood's Al-Faisaliah Hotel in Riyadh and chief cook of the ongoing Italian Food Festival at Jeddah's luxury Rosewood Corniche Hotel. The event, which began on Oct. 26 and continues until Nov. 4, has attracted many people from the Saudi, diplomatic and foreign community.

"I staked a lot on the simplicity, freshness and exquisite savors of Italian Mediterranean cuisine that go along with Jeddah's coastal climate: Extra-virgin olive oil, San Marzano tomatoes, basil from Albenga, thyme, rosemary, reggiano parmesan, mozzarella, sea bass, cuttlefish, shrimps, octopus and pasta 'felicetti,' produced at high mountain altitudes with kamut and spelt biological grains that brought a northern touch to the ingredients' selection," explained Melis.

"On the special occasion of this 10-day event, I'm also trying to present more modern versions of certain classical Italian dishes like the lasagna au gratin with cabbage, chestnut and porcini on a taleggio fondue or ravioli filled with deer stew served with black truffle butter and red vinegar apple compote," continued Melis. "I aim at maintaining the savors of Italian products while proposing dishes that the Saudi and foreign community may not have tried before and that are part of Italian current cuisine."

Working for fine dining restaurants contributed to determine Melis' almost obsessive quest for high quality products. Thanks to his Sardinian origins, the experience accumulated in Spain, Germany, France and northern Italy in Michelin star restaurants like La Siriola in Trentino Alto Adige, he got familiar with typical Mediterranean and northern Italian flavors but also with those so-called "Italian dishes for foreigners," which are damaging the reputation and uniqueness of Italian products.

"An Italian cuisine for foreigners developed abroad. 'Pasta Alfredo' with cream and 'Pink sauce pasta,' for instance, largely requested by Saudis at Italian restaurants, do not belong to Italian culinary tradition," explained Melis. "My purpose is to preserve Italian cuisine's identity and help foreigners discover its authentic flavors."

A dozen specialties within the buffet's daily menu will be available for the festival's entire duration: A selection of cheeses (mozzarella, taleggio, gorgonzola, parmesan, scamorza), bruschette (slices of grilled bread with tomato cubes, rubbed with garlic and olive oil), carpaccio and various bread typologies and sweets (tiramisu, carrot, apple and ricotta cheese cakes, fruits and fresh made ice cream).

Pasta selections differ every day, varying from lasagna, pappardelle, fusilli and tagliatelle to potato dumplings, fettuccine and ravioli. Daily variations will also concern certain second dishes and sweets. Although flying soon back to Riyadh, Melis gave instructions to present Sicilian cannoli and his own Mamma-style bomboloni with vanilla and ice-cream at the festival's closing event.

Live stations where staff from Rosewood Corniche's Habsburg restaurant prepares and serves Italian food allows clients to have a freshly baked dish that usually buffets do not provide. By having the possibility to select ingredients, you can imaginatively create your own plate of pasta, although certain matches are particularly recommended, such as Lobster and broccoli ravioli with shellfish cream, fettuccine with ragù or pappardelle with asparagus and pachino and shrimps.

For those who still didn't get to taste fresh Italian imported products and appreciate Melis' modern touch to Italian classic dishes can take advantage of these last three days. The menu will include chicken and herbs ravioli served with salvia butter, truffle and parmesan; a totally revisited carbonara with saffron sauce and seafood, instead of eggs

and bacon, that only exteriorly resembles the original dish; pasta shells filled with tomato; risotto with taleggio cheese, lemon, yoghurt and cinnamon; salt sea-bass served on banana leaves and pignatta octopus with potatoes.

Finally, those who won't have a chance to be present should not despair. Fortunately, Melis' skillfulness and good taste are based at La Cucina restaurant in Riyadh where you can anytime ask for the above-mentioned specialties and other dishes, provided that they are purely Italian.