

## **In Mid-Manhattan, Culture and Cuisine *All'Italia***

***By Philip Berroll***

It's easy to feel a bit disoriented when entering Eataly for the first time. Not just because of the crowds, which are plentiful at most hours of the day, or the noise, which is on the level of a Times Square subway station at rush hour. It's the fact that Eataly is not a place that can be easily categorized. Part market, part tourist attraction, part festival – it really doesn't resemble any venue typically found in New York, or for that matter in the U.S.

And that, as it turns out, is part of the plan. Eataly's creators are attempting nothing less than the establishment of a high-class Italian culinary emporium in the heart of New York City. Located in Manhattan's Flatiron District at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, Eataly is based on another marketplace of the same name which entrepreneur Oscar Farinetti opened in the Italian city of Turin in 2007. For his New York venture, Farinetti took on a trio of culinary heavy hitters as partners: celebrated chefs and food-TV personalities Mario Batali and Lidia and Joe Bastianich. The group opened Eataly in August 2010, with the stated goal of making it “the ultimate culinary mecca for New Yorkers, visitors, gourmands and Italophiles alike.”

This explains why every aspect of Eataly is designed to appeal to three primary audiences: sophisticated Americans, Italians and people who *wish* they were Italian. Starting with the “Welcome/*Benvenuto*” banner that greets visitors at the entrance, all of Eataly's signs are in both Italian and English – “We consider this to be a quintessential element of Eataly,” says managing partner Alex Saper. Helpful hints are posted for non-American customers (“In the U.S., leaving a tip is customary. Typically, 15 to 20 percent is sufficient”). Ask for “salami” and you'll get a blank stare – what's offered here is *salumi*. Walls are decorated with maps and other displays about the history and culture of Italy's numerous regions.

But above all, there's the food, a cornucopia of Italian national and regional specialties with an emphasis on artisanal (i.e. hand-made rather than mass-produced) products. Eataly includes seven full-service eateries, each specializing in a different food group: *Le Verdure* (vegetables), *Il Manzo* (meat), *Il Pesce* (fish), *I Salumi e I Formaggi* (salumi and cheese), *Il Crudo* (a raw bar), and of course, *La Pizza* and *La Pasta*.

Since no Italian meal would be complete without wine and dessert, there's also *Lavazza Café* (named for Italy's premier coffee company) and Eataly Wine. *Lavazza* offers gelato, pastries, chocolates and bite-sized *dolci al cucchiaino* ("spoon desserts"), along with espresso and cappuccino. At the wine shop, customers can choose from among nearly 1,000 bottles of *vino* from the major winemaking regions of Italy.

And for people who think "Italian beer" is an oxymoron, Eataly recently opened *La Birreria*, a 4,500 square-foot open-air rooftop beer garden, which offers a wide variety of both Italian and American craft beers.

Each section of Eataly has been staffed and stocked to appeal to consumers looking for something more than "typical" Italian fare. *Le Verdure*, for example, features a resident "vegetable butcher" who cleans, peels, chops and cuts the customer's order – saving discarded peels and trimmings to be used as compost. Much of the pasta on sale is made fresh, by hand, every day. So is the mozzarella at the cheese department, charmingly named *Il Laboratorio della Mozzarella*.

Having a "laboratory" on the premises is in line with the overall mission of Eataly. Much of its agenda focuses on discovery, on education, on expanding the knowledge of the visitor. This is the idea behind Eataly's on-premises *scuola* in which instructors – including Batali and the Bastianiches – offer regular classes in cooking and food and wine appreciation as well as nutritional, sociological and scientific topics relating to food.

Finally, there are the retail items – rows upon rows of shelves stocked with cured and fresh meats, cheeses, fruits and vegetables, fish, handmade pastas, desserts, baked and canned goods, sauces, olive oils, and coffees and teas, not to mention cooking utensils and cookbooks.

Customers can haul their bounty to the checkout line using lightweight shopping carts made from recycled plastic water bottles.

There's no denying that the unique qualities of Eataly can be jarring to the uninitiated. It's not the aforementioned crowds, which won't shock anyone who has experienced lunch hour at Zabar's or Whole Foods, or the prices (described as "fair" and "reasonable" by Eataly's founders

– which is another way of saying not cheap, but not excessively pricey by New York standards). It has more to do with the very nature of the Eataly experience.

Like most Americans, New Yorkers are used to buying pre-prepared food at salad or hot food bars and eating their meals at readily available restaurant tables. At Eataly, the first option doesn't exist and the second only in truncated form. At each restaurant, it's not uncommon for the customer to wait on line to order, wait again while the food is made, then wait *again* for one of the sparse number of tables to become available. (There is the option of ordering to go, then finding a seat on a bench at nearby Madison Square Park.) Nor is it easy to combine food categories; if you want a meat dish with your rigatoni, it will mean separate trips to *Il Manzo* and *La Pasta*. It's appropriate that Eataly employs an international environmental organization called Slow Food as a consultant.

But customers who are willing to take a bit more time than usual will find the experience well worth the wait. (First-timers are advised to use Eataly's main entrance on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, where an information booth is staffed by helpful employees who answer questions and hand out detailed floor plans.)

If Eataly proves to be a success, the partners are poised to expand into other major U.S. cities. "They have been scouting locations," says Alex Saper. "Right now they're considering L.A., San Francisco, D.C. or Boston."

Though it's too early to gauge how well Eataly has been received by the general public, it has made a positive impression on one particularly tough group of critics: the online "foodie" community. While describing Eataly's layout as "daunting," "a madhouse" and "a trip," food bloggers have been nearly unanimous in praising the quality and variety of its offerings.

"I can't say that it's built for browsing, unless you come in right after it opens," says Ann Newman, a New York food writer. "But the food is really high class, and a lot of it is different from the usual gourmet choices. That makes it a special place."

*Eataly is located at 200 Fifth Avenue, with entrances on both Fifth Avenue and 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. It is open seven days a week from 9:00am to 11:00pm, though the hours of individual departments may vary. For more information visit [www.eataly.com](http://www.eataly.com) or call 646-398-5100.*

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