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photography EVAN SUNG

# FROM ROME TO NEW YORK, ROUND TRIP

How **Francesco Panella**, along with his brothers Simone and Lorenzo, exported Roman cuisine from the Italian capital's historic Antica Pesa restaurant to the Big Apple

**T**he beating hearts of two of the world's grandest cities — the animated neighborhoods of Trastevere and Brooklyn — have something (appetizing) in common: the Panella brothers' Roman-style cooking. Heirs of Antica Pesa, the historic Roman restaurant established in 1922, Francesco, Simone and Lorenzo took their culinary passion across the ocean via an authentic menu beloved by international celebrities from

the worlds of cinema, television and sports. In fact, it's almost easier to mention those who haven't (yet) dined there.

It all began four generations ago, when the former Vatican City customs post on Via Garibaldi, an old-school osteria at the time, became a full-fledged restaurant. The sixties saw the beginning of its gradual rise to success headed by Pietro Panella, a sociable restaurateur and forward-thinking art enthusiast. In fact, the nine walls of the restaurant's Sala Invernale (the Winter Dining Room

Spaghetti cacio e pepe at Antica Pesa Brooklyn keeps to the traditional recipe. Just after opening in the U.S., Simone Panella decided to import the pasta-cooking water from Italy, but the idea was soon abandoned as it wasn't sustainable. On the opposite page, Francesco Panella.



complete with a striking fireplace) are adorned with extraordinary paintings created by his artist friends before they became famous. The works continue to enliven the ambiance today.

Pietro's friends also included former Italian President Sandro Pertini, who dined there with the King of Spain, Juan Carlos, in 1982, just weeks after Italy defeated West Germany to win the World Cup. Spain had hosted the tournament, and Petrini and Juan Carlos decided to pass up the traditional institutional

dinner in lieu of an evening at Antica Pesa. Pertini loved lemon sorbet, so Simone decided to personally prepare the president's dessert using freshly picked fruit from the garden. Francesco then volunteered to carry the tray — with his trembling hands — to their table under the watch of his proud, yet slightly amused father Pietro. This teamwork by the 12- and 14-year-olds might have marked the turning point in what would become Antica Pesa's current success.

While Pietro Panella, a lively

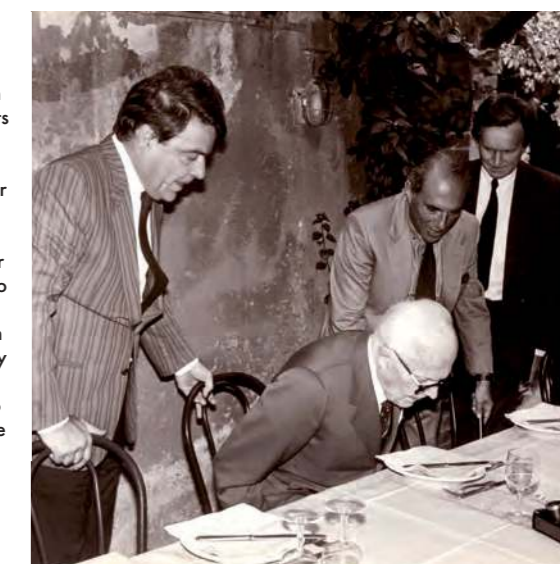
78-year-old, remains in control of the historic restaurant, Francesco Panella is now the entrepreneurial symbol of Roman and Italian dining abroad — Italians know him from his television show *Little Big Italy*. Simone, instead, is the creative mind in the kitchen, balancing tradition and innovation. Together they have managed to renew enthusiasm in the Trastevere restaurant, which continues to rise in popularity, winning over lovers of Roman cuisine one dish at a time, including cacio e pepe →



Antica Pesa Brooklyn is located in Williamsburg. Executive chef Emanuele Baldassari (right, on the sofa with Francesco Panella); under Simone Panella's direction from Rome, he prepares the seasonal menu. On the left, trippa alla romana with mint emulsion and carta musica, and the inside of the restaurant.



Antica Pesa's Roman heart beats strong in the Panella family, whose genuine cuisine has won over celebrities and artists in NYC. From left, clockwise, Simone and Francesco Panella at their American debut; Madonna in 2003 celebrating her daughter Lourdes's birthday; Pietro Panella with his three children in the 1980s; an original 1989 drawing by Keith Haring on Antica Pesa letterhead; Sandro Pertini dining at the Rome restaurant in 1982.



“One night a big, bald man walked in, insisting on having dinner. It was Russell Crowe, who'd come from the studio. After 40 minutes taking off his makeup, we had a meal together”

and *saltimbocca alla romana* (prosciutto-wrapped veal that's been marinated in red wine). Three being a perfect number, their younger brother Lorenzo joined the team to manage Antica Pesa in New York. In October 2012 the Panella family inaugurated their Williamsburg restaurant, and among the attendees was then-mayor of New York Mike Bloomberg and businessman James Murdoch. The decision to open in the United States was unanimous, as the family shared a strong desire to move

beyond their national borders.

Francesco had already worked in the United States. “There comes a time in the life of an entrepreneur when you understand you need to do something different. For me that time came around ten years ago, when I started spending time with people in New York and California who are still great friends of mine. We established a steady exchange of ideas among our three neighborhoods: Silver Lake in Los Angeles, the Mission District in San Francisco and Williamsburg/

Brooklyn in New York. It was a special network predicting what was going to happen in the United States and consequently in Europe. I realized it was time to change, to open this restaurant, which is also a think-tank.”

There are two ways to work in the restaurant business: one is to stay inside the comfort zone and follow trends, and the other is to be strong enough to be exactly who you are and let others follow. Francesco Panella decided to be a driving force by sharing his family's

philosophy. Within years Williamsburg had become a fashionable district and Francesco thought his new plans for a restaurant in NYC could soon become reality. In Manhattan's Flower District on Fifth Avenue, Feroce Ristorante & Bar, the Roman entrepreneur's other establishment, has been wildly successful.

Antica Pesa Brooklyn soon became a favorite among Italian food enthusiasts. Hollywood stars have dropped in to taste the *pappa al pomodoro* (bread and tomato soup typical of Tuscany) and *trippa alla romana* (braised tripe typical of Rome). Like in Rome, people were lining up to enjoy an experience with the Panellas, who welcomed everyone with genuine affection.

The two restaurants have many things in common, starting from Simone

Panella's cuisine, created in Rome through trusted executive chef Emanuele Baldassari. Considered a member of the family, Baldassari began working with the Panellas years ago, and having spent time abroad he was the perfect choice for the U.S. outpost. There's a direct connection between Simone and Emanuele, between Rome and New York. “We worked together side by side for years. He knows exactly what I want, gets my style and perfectly understands the dishes at Antica Pesa Rome. It's easier to work together when you're on the same wavelength,” Simone explains. Baldassari is his alter ego in the Williamsburg kitchen, and they Facetime every week to share updates, discuss new proposals and study new dishes. The menu follows in the Rome restaurant's footsteps and

changes each season. While the fruit and vegetable supplies are entrusted to small, local organic farms, the key ingredients are perfectly Italian, such as the pasta Mancini or Pecorino Romano Fulvi.

Great attention is placed on the quality of all the ingredients, which must be faithful to their Italian origins, and it's respect for cuisine and a love of Italy that drives them even further. Francesco Panella admits he finds strength in the distance and, almost like a nostalgic lover, confesses that “Italy is like the girlfriend who broke your heart. You know you'll always love her, but you'll never be together again.”

Maybe that's why he continues to seek her out all around the world, and to ardently defend and support her, even overseas. ■

PHOTO ARCH. ANTICA PESA