

 WORKING IN AMERICA

Luigi Diotaiuti: From Native Country to Adopted Homeland, Celebrating His Roots

BY BECKI L. YOUNG

The region of Basilicata in Southern Italy could not ask for a better ambassador than DC chef Luigi Diotaiuti. In August, Diotaiuti created a non-profit, *Basilicata Stile di Vita* (“*Basilicata Way of Living*”) to preserve the region’s traditions including recipes, farming techniques and culinary practices in order to pass them on to the next generation.

The organization has already served a traditional meal for thousands on the piazza of Diotaiuti’s hometown; his vivid description of a long communal table with chefs and grandmas making pasta by hand is reminiscent of a scene from a romantic Italian film.

Speaking of films, Diotaiuti has one to his credit: the 2013 “*The Beauty of Basilicata*” *Dinner at the James Beard Foundation*, a documentary about a sold-out dinner that Diotaiuti cooked – on his birthday – at this famed American culinary shrine in New York City. In addition to the scenes in New York, the filmmaker traveled with Diotaiuti to Italy to record the scenic region that inspired the meal.

Diotaiuti’s efforts to promote and preserve the cuisine of Basilicata have been recognized by the Italian government, which awarded him the coveted “*Insegna del Ristorante Italiano*,” the seal of approval of the President of Italy, in 1998. The award recognizes his contributions as one of the most authentic Italian chefs outside of Italy.

The US State Department invited Diotaiuti to participate in the Culinary Diplomatic Corps, in which chefs from across the country cook for visiting dignitaries, and participate in public diplomacy programs that engage foreign audiences abroad as well as those traveling to the US. As part of this program, Diotaiuti prepared

a Thanksgiving dinner at the US Embassy in Rome, which was served to immigrants.

As an immigrant himself, Diotaiuti has a special appreciation for the symbolism of this meal. He says, “In one way or another we are all immigrants.” In a world where borders are breaking down due to ease of travel and communication, Diotaiuti expounds, the world is getting closer and closer; our modern identity, including our culinary identity, comes from an interchange of cultures and ideas.

His first gig in Washington DC was at Primi Piatti, which had just opened a few years earlier. There was only one other person who spoke Italian, a waiter who helped Diotaiuti through a tough first few months – interpreting with the staff and translating orders and recipes. Eventually Diotaiuti enrolled in a language class at Lado where he studied English on his days off.

When he decided to open his own restaurant in 1996, the DC dining landscape was bleak, with only a few standout establishments. An eternal optimist, Diotaiuti selected the name “Al Tiramisu” which means “cheer me up” in Italian. At the time relatively unknown, the coffee-flavored treat has since become the most well known dessert in the world, and Diotaiuti’s star has risen in tandem.

After all these years, Diotaiuti maintains strong ties to his native Italy. Diotaiuti’s brother still lives in the Basilicata region, where he raises the rare and prized Podolico cattle. The hearty Podolico cow has adapted well to the mountains of the Basilicata region of Italy. This elevated terrain, created by thousands of years of earthquakes and volcanoes, is a rocky, harsh environment, hot in summer and dry and cold in winter. These mountains, with their wild herbs and grasses, are a perfect location for farmers who practice transhumance, the movement of

grazing animals from the lowlands in winter to the mountains in summer (culturecheesemag.com/farm-animal/podolico-cows).

Each year Diotaiuti travels to Basilicata to help his brother migrate the herd, and then returns to Washington, where Al Tiramisu’s menu features a ravioli stuffed with the “straw-gold, cantaloupe melon-size” *caciocavallo podolico* cheese made from the milk of the Podolico cow. This annual pilgrimage is a fitting journey for a man firmly rooted on two continents, determined to bring the best of his native country to his adopted homeland, while continuing to celebrate and honor his roots.

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