

SAN FRANCISCO

Summer 2008

# DINING OUT

the great restaurants of san francisco



## TASTES AND TRENDS TO FEED YOUR INNER FOODIE

Bye, bye bluefin! Time to change your tuna **12** :: Back to basics—Portraits of organic farming **26** :: Does this wine make my glass look fat? **32** :: Appetite for instruction—Be a global gourmand **38** :: Dave Carnie on Thomas Keller's boudin blanc **130**

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A close-up photograph of a chef with a beard, wearing a white chef's coat, focused on piping a vibrant green sauce from a plastic bag onto a wooden cutting board. The chef's hands are visible, one holding the bag and the other guiding the tip. The background is a blurred kitchen setting. The text 'old school with SOUL' is overlaid in a large, dark red font across the center of the image. Below the title, the subtitle 'Farina brings authentic Genoa to the Bay' and the author 'by Alastair Bland' are written in a smaller, dark red font. At the bottom left, a quote from Luca Minna is presented in a dark red font. The page number '22' and the word 'DINNER' are in the bottom left corner.

# old school with SOUL

Farina brings authentic  
Genoa to the Bay

by Alastair Bland

"The Italian cuisine of America seems to be only restaurants claiming to use Italian recipes. Farina is all about authentic Ligurian and Italian cuisine made with fresh and genuine ingredients by a Genoese master chef who follows traditional recipes developed over the centuries."—Luca Minna

In Italy dwell the olives, the zesty emerald oil, the specially milled wheat, the famed cheeses, the cured meats, the rustic herbs, and the passionate chefs who make the nation's cuisine among the most illustrious on Earth. But, occasionally, the stars align and these elements converge on *terra Americana*, like a surprise porcini mushroom sprouting from an unlikely meadow. The latest such appearance came to pass in the Mission District in June 2007, when Farina opened its doors as a direct portal into the culinary spectrum of Italy's northwest coastal province, Liguria. In the months since, the young and attractive fine-dining bistro has reminded San Francisco what Italy really tastes like.

Farina co-owners Luca Minna and Laura Garrone, natives of the port city Genoa, came to the United States in 1994 as purveyors of Lavazza's fine Italian roast espresso. In the course of business relations, the partners were treated to many meals at Italian restaurants—culinary occasions meant to impress the food-savvy Italians.

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For these seasoned world travelers, it was a familiar symptom of globalization, and in this new millennium, Minna and Garrone decided they would take Italian food in America back to its roots.

Settling in San Francisco, they teamed up with friends and partners Brett Terpeluk, a brilliant American designer, and fellow Genoese Monica Viarengo, a creative landscape architect. Together they crafted a vision. The group secured a choice location in a retired neighborhood cookie factory and installed sleek, imported light fixtures and furnishings to highlight the industrial steel-and-beam atmosphere. They arranged a sidewalk patio and a private dining room upstairs, and last but not least, to fully realize the objective, they secured a chef from Genoa—a humble, home-trained master of Ligurian cuisine named Paolo Laboa.

With a sincere opposition to recipe twists and playful fusion, the Farina team immediately located area farmers who grew the rare produce Laboa would need, like varieties of basil, aromatic herbs, and vegetables indigenous to Liguria and essential to the subtle flavors of the food. From small farms back home they secured other premium products, like cheeses, cured meats, white truffles, pine nuts, finely milled "00" flour, and extra virgin olive oil. Laboa's outstanding line cooks were eager to impress, but he gently trained them to believe in the time-transcendent mantra, "less is always more." Fine food followed.





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Today, the restaurant has attained star-status in the wake of positive media reviews and around-town praise that everywhere whispers the voluptuous name, Farina—Italian for “flour.” Laboa’s amazing pesto, his tender pasta, the homemade focaccia, and Genoese seafood have received much credit.

Skylight bright, the restaurant turns fashionably cool as the afternoon light fades to night, and at about 8pm the restaurant comes fully alive.



Spirited patrons gather amidst the modern-art décor—intriguing Genoese marble sinks laid sideways as countertops and a full bar with walls of Italian wines. Rustic-industrial elements of the retired cookie factory dwell like blurred faces in an old photograph—the tables are topped with signage reclaimed from the bakery, door handles are fashioned from old dough mixers, and on shelves where pastries once cooled, wine bottles and oven-hot loaves now climb to the wood-beam ceiling.

As captivated diners fork pillows of tender ravioli and slice tender Piedmont filet mignon between sips of wine, Laboa and his cooks work in plain view. They guide soft yolk-yellow globes of dough into the press while deft hands on the other side receive delicious sheets of silky pasta that shimmer like cotton on a clothes line.

A quick dip in boiling water and a lathering of pesto produces one of Laboa’s trademark items, the Mandilli al Pesto, a clean, very simple plate of tender pasta handkerchiefs as delicious to eat as the dough is to eye. The pesto speaks softly—and with a stark Ligurian accent—absent cream and butter, it’s instead creamy with Pisa pine

nuts. Carrying just a subtle hint of garlic, this is a far cry from many pungent, mouth-searing American pestos.

The Cappon Magro Vecchia Genova is another Farina centerpiece, which Laboa sculpts before the evening shift begins, then keeps on display on the pasta counter as successive orders slice it away, inches at a time. A colorful casserole of chopped vegetables, salsa verde, and assorted seafood, this is a traditional dish once served as a means for sailors to salvage their wilting vegetables and “turning” seafood by mashing them together into a mold and dousing it with wine vinegar. Chef Laboa has turned the Cappon Magro into one of his signature artworks—it is ship-shaped, rustic yet refined, and garnished with whole Atlantic lobsters.

Aromas of other seafood fill the restaurant like the ocean air in a Genoese fish market. There is poached butterfish with balsamic reduction and whole petrole sole with truffle butter, among other dishes from the big blue. Diners catch the warm, wafting smells of baking Ligurian focaccia while passing platters of cheeses, tarts, gelato, and rich cake through the dining room—bittersweet reminders that dessert is yet to come and that all meals must eventually end.

Happily, appetites always return—lunch and dinner arrive every day—and Italian food itself isn’t going anywhere. It just takes a place like Farina to keep it real. □

