

SAN FRANCISCO

Winter

DINING OUT

the great restaurants of san francisco



Italy's New Home

at Farina
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TASTES AND TRENDS TO FEED YOUR INNER FOODIE

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A glass jar is filled with fresh produce, including mushrooms and eggs, resting on a bed of straw. The scene is lit with soft, natural light, creating a warm and rustic atmosphere. The jar is the central focus, with the produce arranged neatly inside. The background is blurred, emphasizing the contents of the jar.

Over Land & Sea

Farina Foods brings us the full bounty of Italy


By Alastair Bland

competition between hundreds of professionals and amateurs from around the world. Each had at their disposal all the same ingredients—basil, pine nuts, Pecorino and Parmesan cheeses, olive oil, sea salt, a clove or two of garlic, and a mortar and pestle. But there's a degree of craftsmanship that makes pesto more than the sum of its parts. It takes a master to perfect the process and conduct it to a perfect end.

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Although the pesto-making accomplishments of Farina have gained the restaurant international acclaim, Chef Laboa sees room to improve. Items like North Coast porcini mushrooms and prawns from Monterey Bay have shown remarkable similarity to their counterparts in Liguria, but in other cases, Californian substitutes for Ligurian essentials just won't do. Olive oil is one example, and Laboa prefers the range of flavors produced by selected olive mills throughout Italy. For salads, the spicy oils of the sun-struck south are ideal; for the pesto, he uses only the mild oil from a small farm in Imperia. In fact, the restaurant will soon be featuring a tasting lineup of several olive oils from Italy and California to showcase these distinct regional variations.

The way Minna sees it, this is globalization at its best. "We're bringing the natural gifts of Italy to San Francisco through Farina Foods, but we're also taking our customers across the world through a culinary experience. Really, it's a beautiful way to travel."

The journey from San Francisco to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and the hills of Liguria remains as long as ever. Yet, Farina makes that journey easy. When Chef Laboa strolls to the table bearing a plate of jet-fresh Alba truffles to shave over a plate of his handmade taglierini, and when he exposes that marbled interior, born of the Italian soil, and when that thick, rich aroma hits your nose and knocks you into reverie ... that's when you know that you've arrived. 



To prepare food in the true style of a region is one thing,

but to perfectly transplant the entire culinary experience from a faraway province without the muddling effects of fusion is quite another. At the Mission District's Farina, the smells, flavors, and the very produce of northwest Italy appear before diners just as they might in a *trattoria* in Genoa, and while globalization has made a culinary melting pot of many cultures around the Earth, clearly Farina has worked the miracle of rapid global transport to turn a trick of a very different sort. They have brought Ligurian cuisine to San Francisco intact—authentic, and just as dazzling as a heavenly platter of white truffles, only hours out of the Italian soil.

The bucolic hills to the north of Liguria are nothing less than “a blessed country,” Luca Minna and Laura Garrone, Farina co-owners and Ligurian natives, say. In these lands, Nebbiolo, Dolcetto, Barbaresco, and Barbera grapes have their origins, the cheese is world-class, and one of the most coveted delicacies that grows anywhere—the white Alba truffle—takes shape underground by the roots of oak, hazel, poplar, and beech trees. Truffle hunters use dogs to find and dig up these rare, earthy gems. On the panoramic hills overlooking the Ligurian sea, the centennial olive trees provide some of the most respected olive oil in the world. The native Genovese basil is D.O.P.—*denominazione di origine protetta*—protected.

Minna and Garrone knew from the start that to authentically reproduce the cuisine of their homeland in Farina's kitchen, they would have to source certain items—especially white and black truffles, selected reserve wines, cheeses, olive oils, pine nuts, certain seafood, and the finely-milled wheat flour (farina “oo”) essential to pasta and pastry making—directly from Italy.

So, in late 2008, Minna and his partners launched Farina Foods, a purveyor based in Miami designed for the express purpose of providing Farina with a fast, direct link to farmers, foragers, and even fishermen in Liguria and other regions of Italy. “Only in the age of globalization could this be done,” Minna says.

“Transportation is key to bringing in these fresh foods within 24 hours. Thirty years ago the logistics and technology could not offer that. So today, the fresh truffles, the cheeses and the catch of the day in Genoa that arrive

at the local markets early in the morning can be served fresh in Farina later that night.”

More delicate produce, like greens, fragrant tomatoes, and seasonal fruits, are sourced from California growers. Were it not for Chef Paolo Laboa, a Genoa native who learned to

one of the very cornerstones of the region's cuisine and of Farina's signature pasta plates, and upon moving to San Francisco in 2006, Laboa spent six months scouring Bay Area markets before he finally found what he was looking for: true Genovese basil growing at two small farms in Watsonville.

“... we're taking our customers across the world through a culinary experience. Really, it's a beautiful way to travel.”

—Luca Minna

cook with many of the world's finest offerings at his fingertips, finding suitable basil locally would have been impossible. As the heart and soul of Liguria's famed pesto, basil is

Chef Laboa knows basil—and the art of grinding pesto—perhaps better than anyone. In April 2008, Laboa and his sous chef, James D. Bowien, won the Genoa Pesto World Championship, a

