



LIDIA BASTIANICH

Owner of Del Posto Restaurant and So Much More

BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

Photos courtesy of Natalie Black Photography and Del Posto

[Lidia Bastianich](#) is an American/Italian celebrity chef, TV host, restaurateur and partner in the new Italian marketplace Eataly. She is an icon in the food industry, a mentor to new chefs and a talented woman that thrives on nurturing others. Lidia and her family own and operate five restaurants including [Del Posto](#), a Michelin-star restaurant with Executive Chef Melissa Rodriguez at the helm.

THE SPARK IGNITES

Lidia's memories and love for food began at age four or five when she lived in Istria, formerly Histria, the largest peninsula in the Adriatic Sea located near Croatia. Her grandmother would ask her to get a branch of rosemary or some basil from the garden. Lidia says, "I was her little helper; and whether I was picking tomatoes in the summer or helping to make sausages in November, I had fun doing it."

After the communist party took over her hometown, Lidia and her family escaped to a refugee camp in 1956. In 1958 Lidia was 12 years old; and with the aid of Catholic Relief Services, she and her family immigrated to Astoria in Queens, New York. Lidia reminisced about how her family continued to cook the best that they could even though they could not always get the ingredients they wanted. As a young girl, she assisted in the kitchen when her mother got a job as a seamstress, and eventually, Lidia landed a job in a bakery.

THE PASSION GROWS

The years went by, and Lidia continued to pursue jobs in the food industry during her college years. She met Felix Bastianich, and they married and had a son, Joe. It was Felix's dream to own a restaurant, and so they

partnered together, opened an Italian/American restaurant and hired a professional chef. Over the next ten years, Lidia worked as the sous chef and increased her culinary knowledge. She and Felix had a daughter, Tanya, and purchased a second restaurant.

The foursome visited family in Italy as often as possible. Lidia would contact chefs she read about and admired in Italy and would work side-by-side with them during her visits. She also attended culinary courses in America to improve her overall knowledge about food and the hospitality industry. The couple sold their two restaurants and opened Felidia, their first restaurant to showcase the regional food they loved and ate in Italy.

Lidia shared, "I did what I knew best, and that brought attention from the press, [Julia Child](#) and [James Beard](#). People began to ask, 'Who is this woman cooking all kinds of Italian food like risotto, gnocchi and other dishes you only find in Italy?'" Julia Child wanted to know how to make risotto, and we became friends. She invited me to her show, and I met the producer. He said, "Lidia, you are pretty good; how about a show of your own?"

THE MENTORING CONTINUES

After almost 50 years in the industry, Lidia is an icon. Her friendship with Julia Child lasted throughout the years, and Lidia exclaimed, "Julia Child had the character and spirit to stimulate Americans in the simplest ways. She taught them how to handle products, and this is how I remember my grandmother and how I like to connect with food. Every chef should give food respect as it is always about the product."

Lidia has starred on Public Television for more than 20 years. The first series was released in 1998 and was called Lidia's Italian Table. Her current series, Lidia's Kitchen, is in its 7th season. She is an author of 12 cookbooks, including her newest one, Felidia: Recipes from my Flagship Restaurant, which will be released in October, 3 children's books and her





memoir. Lidia partnered with Oscar Farinetti when they opened Eataly in New York. This incredible Italian marketplace boasts a variety of restaurants, retail shops, numerous eateries and a cooking school. Eataly is now in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Chicago, Boston, and two locations in New York. The newest Eataly will open soon in Toronto.

Lidia's family owns several restaurants, and each one expresses a different side of Italy. In her current career, Lidia enjoys mentoring, nurturing and working with the chefs and staff at each of the restaurants.

THE RESTAURANT FLOURISHES

On my recent trip to New York, my friend, Gina, and I had the privilege of dining at Del Posto. We did not have the opportunity to meet [Executive Chef Melissa Rodriguez](#) as she was not on-site the night we dined. Lidia says, "Melissa is a stable, dynamic, motivated, passionate chef. She has the respect of her team and has excellent technique. She attended the Culinary Institute of America, respects tradition and understands the simplicity and straight-forwardness of Italian food. Melissa combines all the above with her artistic techniques and presentation."

Lidia shared that Melissa can create intense flavors and that her pasta dishes do not require multiple ingredients to be appreciated. She is a master. Lidia declared, "Del Posto is like a beautiful hotel or villa in Italy with amazing service, lovely linens and formal china. The restaurant is a representation of Italy at the top of its game."

THE FEAST BEGINS

Dinner at Del Posto was divine. The evening began with a greeting from Marta at the front of the house and finished with her hailing us a cab at the end of the evening. Everything from the elegant decorations, stunning tableware and magnificent piano added to the atmosphere of the exceptional dining experience. Service was friendly and impeccable, and the food, well, we just kept ordering. I have dined at several Michelin-starred restaurants, but Del Posto was my first Italian establishment, and it was spectacular.

Dinner started with a skewer of prosciutto, melon, basil and mozzarella perched upon a cup of cantaloupe soup with lemon verbena syrup. This simple yet delicious first course paired with a glass of 2006 Champagne Corbon Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Avize Brut created an inspirational launching pad for the evening.

The following dishes ranged from Carpaccio di Gamberi, a course that the server and I jokingly referred to as spot prawns on steroids in the best way possible, to Branzino con Guancia and finished with a variety of tasty desserts. Spot prawns appeared in every part of the Carpaccio from the zabaglione and gelee to the oil and prawns themselves. Tarragon oil set off the dish, and the polenta chips added a crunchy texture. The Branzino, or sea bass, arrived with cured pork jowl, chicory and Meyer lemon. The fish was tender and flaky, and the cured pork and lemon added salt and brightness. Joe, our sommelier for the evening, paired each dish with wines from around the world. We began with Champagne from France and ended with an assortment of delicious Amaro digestives from Italy.

THE DISHES DELIGHT

We enjoyed our entire dinner at Del Posto, but my favorites were the pasta dishes. The first was Fazzoletto di Seta, a handkerchief pasta with herbs, mussels and saffron. Second, my ultimate love was the Corona Ripiena di Toma e Tartufo Nero, a crown-shaped pasta filled with toma cheese and black truffle. The pasta was al dente, the cheese was creamy, and the truffles elevated the dish to a ten on my culinary scoreboard. Third, came the meaty Agnolotti di Coniglio. These small pillows of pasta arrived filled with braised rabbit and topped with Taggiasca olives and Parmigiano Reggiano. Our final pasta was the Garganelli al Ragù Bolognese, quill-shaped pasta tossed in a pork, veal and tomato sauce.

THE LEGACY CONTINUES

Each course at Del Posto arrived meticulously designed with intense flavors, magnificent colors and attention to detail. These dishes transported me back to days in Italy when I feasted at delicious restaurants that overlooked bustling plazas and seaside waterfronts along the Amalfi Coast. The entire evening took me back to my favorite regions in Italy. Lidia and her staff bring regional Italy to America through delectable cuisine and hospitable service. ■