

## Successful Ta' Frenč gourmet event

Although Rita Russotto speaks English with an American accent (she was born in Brooklyn and spent the first seven years of her life in New York), she thinks in Italian and feels intimately linked with the territory around Scicli in the Ragusa province of Sicily where she runs her establishment, Ristorante Satra.

Rita, along with her business partner and fellow chef, Manuel Distefano, were in Gozo earlier this month to team up with Ta' Frenč Restaurant's head chef Mario Schembri and the kitchen brigade at Ta' Frenč for a dinner, themed A Taste of Sicily.

"I discovered an unexplored place – Gozo, that is still virgin, with people who are warm, sincere, clever, efficient and happy to please," she observed following the highly successful event. She was very happy to have teamed up with Mr Schembri and is passionate about sharing Sicilian traditions through her cuisine. She is largely self-taught but, having spent 27 years in Ragusa Ibla, she recently moved to Scicli, a Baroque town that is different, with many ancient traditions.

Rita combines tradition with innovation and a deep respect of the identity of her immediate surroundings. She has teamed up with Enrico Russino, who has been providing fresh herbs to Ta' Frenč for more than a decade, for all her aromatic herbs and this is what makes her cuisine stand out.

She is also keen to use ingredients that have fallen to disuse or to give new interpretations to contemporary recipes. One example is the Gaturro, a type of Sicilian polenta with roughly ground grain that she has relaunched as an *arancino*, using this roughly ground grain instead of rice.

Service for the six-course Ta' Frenč dinner was five star, with a constant flow of food and wine at regular intervals throughout the highly pleasant evening. The wines and a grappa were kindly supplied by N.M. Arrigo Ltd. The four wines that went with the meal all came from the same Sicilian winery, Cantine Settesoli, based in Menfi, Agrigento, and its range-topping Mandrarossa brand. The dessert wine was a Marco de Bartoli Marsala Superiore Riserva and the grappa was a Lucano Nero d'Avola.

The zucchini blossom provided a splash of colour, hiding a blob of Sicilian ricotta quenelle in the centre of a delicious fava bean soup with fried baby calamari, seasoned with wild fennel. This first course was accompanied by a Mandrarossa Fiano, a fresh, fragrant white with strong citrus notes and a fresh, savoury taste.

A pasta dish followed with a cocoa bean and langoustine sauce, seasoned with lentils – certainly an unusual combination but truly satisfying and visually stunning. This was washed down with a Mandrarossa Grecanico Costadune (single vineyard), an easy drinking white with ancient roots, delicate fragrances with a zest of citrus and long, full, savoury flavours.

Next came a delicate fillet of Red Mullet on sweet and sour onions, pine nuts and capers, seasoned with perennial basil. Another white, an Urra di Mare Sauvignon Blanc, whose vines grow close to the sea, accompanied this nicely presented plate.

The main course followed a toasted almond milk sorbet that was creamy and velvety. This consisted of delicately cooked lamb served with mashed Jerusalem artichoke, mustard green and caramelised *pastinaca*. The reddish meat contrasted with the earthy tones of the other ingredients, which were washed down with a Timperosse Petit Verdot.

This is a full-bodied red with rich, intense fragrances of red fruits, ripe apples and fresh prunes. The flavour is freshly acidic with very soft, rounded tannins.

The dessert consisted of fresh prickly pear ice-cream made on the day that accompanied an almond and jasmine pudding with candied fig and a sprinkle of almonds. This was washed down with a splendid Marsala with Grillo grapes that are picked and selected by hand, soft pressed, naturally decanted and traditionally fermented at room temperature in oak and chestnut barrels. Part of the must is enriched with acquavite for the making of the *mistella*, added later to the wine, which is aged for 10 years.

The splendid gourmet experience was rounded off with petit fours, coffee and a grappa with ethereal scents of underbrush and a warm, silky and harmonious taste obtained after the steam distillation of the Nero d'Avola grapes.

The following day, Dr Russino, owner of Gli Aromi di Russino in Sciacca, led an interesting session in which guests could taste two types of olive oil bottled for Ta' Frenç, a Tas-Salvatur made from olive trees planted opposite Ta' Frenç 10 years ago, and a Giarratana, with Frantoio olives from trees that have been growing in Tond Iblea for between 150 and 450 years.

He then encouraged guests to sample different types of dried herbs, all available from Ta' Frenç, including wild fennel, perennial basil, wild thyme, dried capers and a host of other beautifully perfumed herbs that are grown on Dr Russino's farm, which is

now a tourist destination. He even brought along the fresh plants for the guests to smell for their outstanding fragrances.

– ENDS –

Captions:



**Ta' Frenç Head Chef Mario Schembri (first from right) and Maitre d' Joseph Tabone (first from left) with the Sicilian guest chefs Rita Russotto and her partner, Manuel Distefano**



**A collage with the delightful gourmet experience**



**Enrico Russino during the tasting session of olive oil, dry and fresh herbs (above and below) . Rita Russotto and Manuel Distefano are in the background (above).**





**The beautiful display of olive oil and herbs that are available from Ta' Frenč in Gozo**

