

SPECIAL ISSUE: AMERICA'S PASSION FOR FOREIGN FOODS

THE GUIDE TO GOOD TASTE

SEPTEMBER 1984
U.S. \$1.95 U.K. £1.90

FOOD & WINE

ELEGANT
PIZZAS

RICHES OF
NORMANDY

Piero Selvaggio
Valentino
Santa Monica

When Piero Selvaggio opened Valentino 12 years ago, his only experience in the restaurant business had been a night job washing pots while studying journalism. "I wasn't a food man," he says. "I didn't know anything about wine. I knew that great meals need warmth."

"What is a restaurant? A restaurant is only four walls and tables and chairs. But I wanted a restaurant with a statement, with personality. And there was room in Los Angeles for a place like mine, so our trattoria adventure started. I wanted a place where I could say to each customer, 'Hi, so happy to have you with us. What do you feel like having today?'"

A major turning point for the restaurant was a *Los Angeles* magazine review that criticized the "never-employed" pot of marinara sauce in Valentino's kitchen. "We changed chefs; we went to the sensualists in food and learned how behind we were and how much we had to learn. I saw an awakening in Italy and realized it was time to awaken people in this country. The tomato sauce started disappearing."

"Our style is a combination of the best you can have in Italy along with the best of California. Some people could describe us as California-Italian. They can call us what they like, but the expression of the cuisine is very much our own. I am doing *nuova cucina* if you mean that I am doing things that haven't been done before, and in my own style."

"We had to fight people's habits, but there was a nucleus who believed in what we were doing. American audiences are very good if they trust you, and once they do they are faithful. It's up to us to break the routine of tomato paste and mama and papa cooking. It's very easy to be an Italian restaurant. It's very difficult to be a good Italian restaurant. Quality, to me, means that I am proud of what I do."

At Valentino, Piero Selvaggio with a selection of wines from his extensive cellar and an assortment of dishes that includes pigeon breast with tortellini, mozzarella salad and grilled pheasant. [3115 Pico Blvd., Santa Monica, CA 90405; (213) 829-4313]

PHOTOGRAPHS: DENNIS GRAY