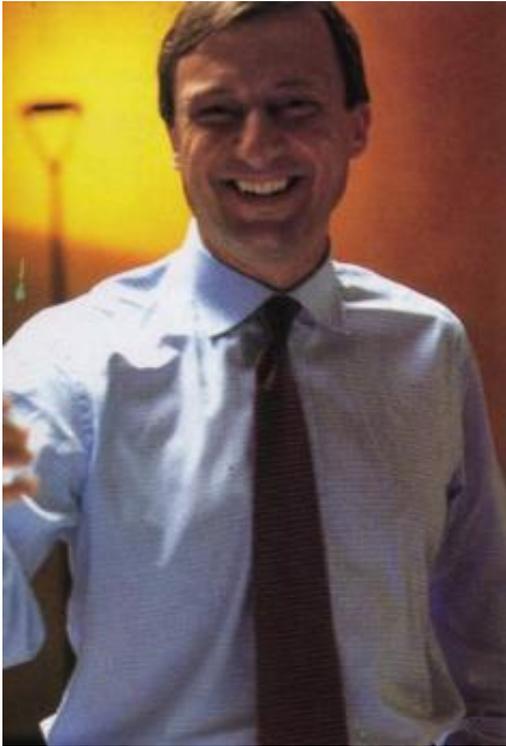


SECONDO IS PRIMO! I TRE MERLI & BAROLO: THE BEGINNINGS...

by [Joelle Panisch \(/contributors/joelle-panisch\)](/contributors/joelle-panisch)



While you read this article and I tell you of the beginnings of New York's first authentic northern Italian eateries, I hear the Godfather floating in the background.

"Let's start from the beginning," said owner Paolo Secondo. So I will.

Secondo came from Genoa, a small city and seaport on the coast of Northern Italy. It's a region with rolling hills and a beautiful Sea. In Genoa he opened the original I Tre Merli, an "osteria" with a fine selection of wine that he got from a town

"It was a place where people could drink wine and just hang out, a classical working-class hangout," said Secondo. "The retired people would just stay there playing cards drinking wine through the afternoon. The working people, you know, a glass of wine or espresso... At the time it was about having a great glass of wine."

Secondo has a thick accent but speaks well with an avid vocabulary. He dresses smart and is, and probably forever will be, a playboy in his heyday, but I have no real evidence of this.

When he first established I Tre Merli in the '70s he used to open doors at 6am to accommodate the night workers. He would start the morning with a slice of foccacia, something Secondo still does when he visits.

In the 80's the entrepreneur sensed a real opportunity in the States. At the time, everything Italian was in fashion. Big Italian fashion houses like Valentino and directors like Scorsese and Coppola were gaining steam. At the time Mulberry Street, but none with a real sense of authenticity. Of the establishments, most felt sterile. Patrons taste

"Still, to a certain extent tasting wine is something that is supposed to be specialized. But in reality I like the company, you know, getting a little inebriated— that's the whole idea. Otherwise, why?"



In 1982 he traveled to New York. He knew he wanted an aesthetic that felt like a mix between a church and a winery. He knew that for his concept to be successful there was little to compromise. At the time SoHo still had its original integrity. West Broadway was ridden with cracks. The artists had attracted galleries, and the emergence of bars

Secondo knew the space where he eventually opened the New York I Tre Merli was perfect. “What drew you to it,?”
 “Well, I’m European and I like beautiful things and beautiful architecture. Soho, with all the cast-iron architecture, was just perfect. It was too beautiful to be abandoned for long.”

I Tre Merli, on West Broadway and Prince Street was formerly a one-story warehouse, and in the 1960’s the space was taken over it was a boutique of Indonesian art and dresses.



This is when Secondo gets interrupted. Into Barolo struts an ornately clad patron, very thin with a fur coat. “How
From the dining room I can here Richard Emolo (Secondo’s maître d’ and trusted associate, whom I will get to sho
a martini.

Back, to I Tre Merli... When it opened in 1985 it was the first Italian restaurant to be opened by native Italians, not
“I’m talking about the fact that when I first opened I Tre Merli not many people weren’t even familiar with mozzarella
supermarkets and big stores... parmesan cheese was cheap and bad.... olive oil was cheap, there was none of the

I Tre Merli became very popular very quickly with Europeans living in New York, whom today would be referred to a
often would, spend it on drinking wine. To them I Tre Merli filled the great nostalgic longing that they felt for home,
Europeans came the artists and the avante garde crowd, and like magic it was a success.

And its success spread. SoHo was not a commercial attraction like it is today. In 1985 it was very much a desti
the growth of SoHo with the arrival of his clientele. “I happen to believe that the success of I Tre Merli at the time c

That, it probably did. However the opposite was true of I Tre Merli’s relationship with SoHo and its beloved artists.
residents and didn’t like anyone coming into *their* area. The uniqueness of SoHo was their hidden secret and they
privileged playground.

It took time for feelings to change. And perhaps they never really did. Some bread was broken as visitors came to
mostly what appeased the situation was the exodus of artists themselves. SoHo became commercialized and the

The recession of the early 90’s also caused another clientele shift. Many galleries had to close and with it I Tre M
provisions to the Maastricht Treaty began the free exchange of money in Europe that eventually resulted in the eur
prompting many Europeans to move back.

Despite the shifts Secondo still managed to expand. In 1989 he opened the very sucla foccacia open in the west

In 1990, Secondo opened his second spot in SoHo just blocks away from I Tre Merli. Barolo is similar in concept
is a region in Piedmont, less than 100 kilometers away from Genoa, renown for being Italy’s best wine. And with i
classically prepared and delicious.

“We’ve been educated by our grandmothers [so] we know how food should be prepared and how it should be done
— the most elegant place in the most elegant area in New York.

The years have been kind to the two establishments and they have received tremendous acclaim and prosperity.

This is where Richard Emolo comes in. Emolo, now the general manager of Barolo has been with Secondo since
best stories. Emolo has a rhythm to him, a jazz. He’s a native New Yorker but there is something distinctly Italia
watching. It didn’t surprise me when I found out he was married to Gina Davis.

“It took about a year but after that it exploded it became kind of a boys club,” said Emolo. “It became a riotous sc
with Northern Italians, mostly men.”

Emolo joined Secondo and I at the bar of Barolo. Stories were traded of times when men used to make pyramids c
and making a ruckus.

“It really made our reputation... the scene was so wild.” said Emolo.

There was the time in the beginning when Secondo forgot to buy a cash register and Emolo had to manage the mc

When they first opened and had a movable bar (with its own plumbing and hoses) in the center of the space. Ever
inspector, but not without a few goodbye celebrations.

Emolo recalls the time they moved the bar out of the way and replaced it with a pool and barrels of sand. Bikini cl
poolplay.

“Some of the most beautiful girls in the world working for us because at the time the fashion industry was just grow
so they worked as waiters.”

That would explain the presence of a fashion-house legend at the party to tear down the bar. “We had a party for [i
sledgehammers and started knocking it down. There is a great picture of me cutting it with a chain saw in front of
publicity.”

And over the years there also have been a plethora of celebrities— Robert DeNiro, Al Pacino, John Gotti, Madonna
Emolo to spill the goods on them. He gave me a sly smile and asked me to come back after the article was publi

For Secondo, he gets more excited when he sees politicians. "Celebrities are bullshit." The Clinton's have been in 20 years have dined at I Tre Merli or Barolo.

His favorite story is when Ed Koch- known to be a man who loves food and wine- was asked what his favorite Italia

After all these years, I Tre Merli and Barolo have become staples in SoHo. They will survive this recession just like opened Revel in the meatpacking district, an area that gave him the same feeling as SoHo did in the 80's.

When I asked him what gave these places staying power, he replied, "I trust my instincts. Stay away from the trend know what is good. We believe in classical italian food and we stay connected to the food that people like."

From Issue:



[\(/content/spring-2009\)](#)

Filed under:

