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EATING OUT

Pesto perfection

December 4, 2019

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More on Eating Out



Pesto perfection

Most of our Eating Out reviews involve dining at some of the finest establishments and sampling the finished products. However, this week, in celebration of the World Week of Italian Cuisine, we decided to focus on a quintessentially Italian sauce, done in a quixotically Italian way.

Last weekend, Roberto Panizza, president of the Palatifini Cultural Association and founder of the Pesto World Championship as well as Emilio Pescarolo, winner of the 2018 World Pesto Championship were in town to promote proper pesto preparation.

They conducted two events, in partnership with Lulu Hypermarket and the Italian Embassy. The first was a pesto demo conducted at Lulu's Atrium Mall location and the second was a pesto competition at the Darseen Café at Bahrain Fort.

Pesto is another one of those culinary delights I discovered overseas, specifically when my aunt made fresh pesto using freshly picked basil, nuts, garlic, parmesan cheese, salt and olive oil. On its own it tasted like something a deer, cow or alternative herbivore would enjoy at an upscale fine dining restaurant, but mixed with farfalle pasta or in a sandwich, it transcended every other sauce.

I encountered it a few years later again when a friend's mum went in search of authentic European pine nuts and I got a shock when I saw the price label. It was \$100 (BD40) per kilogram! But the flavour difference was evident.

The thing I enjoy about Italian cuisine and what sets it apart from most Asian cuisines is the focus on simplicity. There are usually just a handful of ingredients and the process is fairly straightforward, but the balance each person can achieve or enjoy varies dramatically.

As Roberto explained during the demo: "It's always the same ingredients. What really shapes the final pesto is, first of all, the freshness of the ingredients, especially the basil. The fresher the basil, the more flavourful the pesto. Secondly, each chef likes a certain flavour profile. Some put in more garlic, while others like more cheese or salt. In a competition, we look for a well-rounded balance, but everyone may have their own personal preference. And finally, it's crucial to have a grandmother from Italy around. Because that's what pesto means to Italians. It reminds them of their childhood kitchens and their mum's cooking."

And the most crucial thing that Roberto emphasised was that pesto is never cooked. A tablespoon (or 10, if you are like me) atop cooked farfalle brings the green magic to life. And each variation does so differently. The culinary assistants at the demo overlooked this detail and the flavour difference between the cooked and uncooked pesto was quite evident.

The next day, to test this theory, a mortar pesto competition was held at Darseen Café, bringing 10 pesto makers and more than 200 attendees together.

Each pesto maker had their own spin and the judges including Roberto, Emiliano, the Italian Ambassador to Bahrain Domenico Bellato and the Ambassador of Genoa to the world Alessandro Pilloni, had to taste each pesto twice to decide on a winner.

Alessandro, who lives right here in Bahrain while promoting Genoa to the world, said: "The pesto competition went extremely well and I am honoured to see the 10 pesto makers challenging themselves. The contestants, despite having grown up with a different culinary background were very well prepared. In fact, we had to do a second round of pesto tasting before declaring the winner. I am confident this would be the first of many collaborations between Genoa and Bahrain on both cultural and economic perspectives."

The winner was Suresh Chauhan, who is a faculty member at the Bahrain Institute of Hospitality and Retail. Suresh is now entitled to participate at the 2020 World Championship of Pesto in Genoa.

As for me, I had just spent the weekend, tasting pesto from 12 different chefs and that in itself, at least for me, is the perfect pesto pastime.

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