

MANDUCATIS

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THIS IS NOT A REVIEW. It is the story of a love affair.

A dozen years ago, on an intrepid search for fresh eggs, I found myself in a red-brick light bulb factory in Long Island City. Sources had told me that the folks at the factory sold eggs from upstate farms, and this turned out to be true. The factory was an offbeat place in other ways — the owners had brought a perfectly swell upright piano in off the street, and one of them played it — and I spent a few happy hours there. These people handed me a card with the name Manducatis on it. This card would change my life.

On a first visit to the then-modest-looking restaurant, my friends and I knew we had stumbled into the presence of genius. It was not that the menu looked different from many another Italian menu; it didn't. But what came out of the kitchen was different. Lasagne had never tasted this good, and neither had cannelloni. Somehow, we were

able to keep eating this almost-delicate food long after we usually would have felt too full. Partly, this was because of chef Ida Cerbone's light hand and her insistence on fresh ingredients. Partly, perhaps, it was because she sent us a wonderful salad at the end of the meal, Italian style, "to help push things down."

On our second visit, somebody had spilled the beans, and Ida and her husband Vincenzo Cerbone — Vincent to most customers — knew we were from a newspaper. That was election night in 1980 (when Jimmy Carter lost to Ronald Reagan), and after the Cerbones had given us wine and bread, they came to the table, coats on, and asked us to excuse them while they voted. A good review was not more important to them than exercising that American right.

Over the years, I have come to know Ida and Vincent's four children and now two grandchildren: Anthony, Joseph, Piero, Gianna, Angela and Vincenzo, named for his grandpa. Their friends and family are mine, now, too. We have visited Ida's home village near Monte Cassino in Italy, eaten figs from her family's trees, strolled to the bottom of the hill to fetch water from Ida's spring, eaten pizza made from flour milled at Ida's brother's mill. Our bond has little to do with restaurants and much to do with the fact that we both were once farm girls.

In Ida's case, that meant carrying a bucket of milk to the family of a baker on the way to school each morning. At 10 or 11, she noticed a handsome young man, the baker's son, 10 years or more older than she "I had my eye on Vincent even then," Ida said lightly. He paid her no attention.

Many years passed; she was 19, and he was more than 30, and both, unbeknownst to one another, were in America. They met at a party, and both broke off their engagements to other people. It sounds corny to mention it, but Ida and Vincent are still crazy about each other, and you can see it when they are together.

Memories crowd each other, jostling for space. Should I reminisce about the time Vincent and I sang too much with the accordion player on New Year's Eve, which is also Vincent's birthday? Or about the time I was in the hospital and Ida, forever thin and young, showed up wearing gorgeous suede boots, bearing pastries and looking like a movie star? Then there was the morning I found an antique wooden ironing board on the street and brought it to Ida. There were mornings we three sat in the sunny front room of the now-expanded Manducatis and drank coffee together before the restaurant opened. Or should I tell you Vincent's story about Al Capone, a story I can follow even in Italian, for I have heard it so many times at my own request that I know it by heart?

No, there is no space for all that. You want to know about food, because this is a space where food is the important part. Before

Manhattan restaurants had New Zealand mussels and flown-in buffalo-milk mozzarella, I had them at Ida's, our name for this place. Long before it became the craze, she filled small bowls with privately imported "liquid gold" olive oil for bread dipping. Chefs from Manhattan come to her for ideas. I, too, try to make things taste "like Ida's." Ida makes her own arugula pasta, roasts succulent little pigs in winter, lets white beans simmer by a wood fire overnight for soup. We yearn for her greens when we have done without them too long.

When tomatoes are at their peak, Ida not only jars all the tomatoes used all year in the restaurant, she sometimes goes to a cousin's farm upstate to help gather the tomatoes! This is uncommon in the extreme, but Ida does it as if it is a perfectly ordinary way to run a restaurant. We never consult the menu now, we just ask Vincent. Vincent tends a fine collection of wine, stories and friends, and he knows how to cure prosciutto and make wine with great finesse.

One night, missing someone, I went into Ida's kitchen and saw an appealing dish of tomatoes and rice. I want that, I said. But there was a pasta I coveted that evening, too. Ida sent the two starch courses to me, one after the other, and she said, "Tell Sylvia this is pasta with love."

This is a valentine for Ida and Vincent, with love. ■

Why: A personal valentine.

When: Sundays, 2-30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.; weekdays, noon to 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 10 p.m.; Saturday, 5 p.m. to 11 p.m.

How Much: Appetizers \$4.50 to \$7, pasta and other entrees \$8.50 to \$18.