

# Porchetta+ Manischewitz= WHAT?

The chefs at a tiny Manhattan restaurant are meddling with the sacrosanct traditions of Italian cooking and turning them into a brave new cuisine.

By FRANK BRUNI

**O**n a recent morning in a Greenwich Village studio apartment with little natural light and minimal décor beyond a cactus and a bookcase crammed with volumes about food, the chefs Rich Torrisi and Mario Carbone plotted the future of their lavishly acclaimed restaurant—and, just maybe, of Italian food in America.

They talked of *scungilli*. That's an Italian word for snails. It refers in particular to the conchs and whelks that many Italian-Americans have encountered on their grandparents' tables, probably among the seven fishes at Christmastime, possibly in a marinara sauce. Scungilli never quite rose to the level of delicacy and tended not to appear on American restaurant menus. But Torrisi had a thought. What about repackaging scungilli along the lines of escargots?

"They're *both*, after all, snails," he said, looking up from the laptop computer that he kept open so he could take notes, surf the Web and

steal peeks at his inbox, which has been a daunting, glorious traffic jam ever since his and Carbone's restaurant, Torrisi Italian Specialties, on the edge of Little Italy, took off last year. Carbone sat beside Torrisi on a black sectional; three of the restaurant's cooks and one business manager squeezed in around them. It's always a large group at these sessions, which have the bedraggled, brainstorming feel of college-exam cramming and happen one or two mornings a week in this apartment—Torrisi's. Carbone rents a smaller studio a floor below.

Carbone listened and nodded. "I could see a perfect piece of scungilli on a toothpick," he said, adding that there would be, in Gallic fashion, a pool of garlic butter nearby. The dish would not only elevate an Italian-American staple; it would also nod to the sort of bistro fare long treasured in Manhattan. It would be a hybrid and a hyphenate, although he didn't phrase it that way. Italian-French cuisine.

"Italian-Jewish" would be the term for a Passover-pegged riff on porchetta that the group deliberated at even greater length. Porchetta is a classic Italian pork roast, but they wondered aloud about substituting lamb. And, for a glaze, what about using Manischewitz, a semisweet kosher wine? Would the nuances be right?

"This might not ever see the light," Carbone said.

"Boo!" countered a cook, Eli Kulp. "Stone him!"

The discussion, which lasted two hours, was a glimpse into what has made Torrisi and Carbone, each 31, the newest darlings of the New York culinary set and garnered their restaurant a string of accolades: honors from the Web site Eater.com and Time Out New York and a nomination from the James Beard Foundation, which will hold its annual awards ceremony on May 9, as one of the



**Food Network** The staff meets twice a week at Torrisi's apartment in Greenwich Village.

**Italian-Jewish** Roasted lamb loin with Jerusalem artichokes and Manischewitz.



five best new restaurants nationwide. Although Torrisi Italian Specialties has just 25 seats and charges only \$50 for a fixed meal of at least seven small- and medium-size courses, it marshals the ambition of a much larger, fancier operation. To come up with one new dish, half a dozen talented people will worry it for hours on end, then hone it in kitchen trial after kitchen trial. The process is governed not by efficiency or profit margins but by a fierce and sometimes mischievous creative itch.

It's governed too by Torrisi and Carbone's desire to reflect, in one restaurant, and very often on one plate, the immigrant groups and cuisines historically concentrated in the broad patch of Lower Manhattan where the restaurant is located, including Chinatown, the Lower East Side and, of course, Little Italy. In addition to plenty of conventional dishes, they have done Italian-Chinese fare. They have crossbred crostini with bagels. And without meaning to, they have raised some big, thorny questions about where Italian cooking in this city and country goes from here.

Now that Italian, more than French, has become the favored cuisine in upscale restaurants, will it experience an evolution similar to the one French cooking did a quarter century ago, when its hegemony was firm? Put more succinctly, will it be fused? Some chefs say that's an unsavory specter. Others say it's unnecessary—or even unworkable. Torrisi Italian Specialties suggests otherwise. And if you scout around a bit, it's not the only sign pointing in that uncertain, uncharted direction.

"Fusion" has become a naughty word, harboring connotations of gimmickry, but it remains an apt description of the commingling of traditions that became so fashionable in the wake of Wolfgang Puck's bold mash-ups of Asian, Mediterranean and Californian tropes in the '80s. And it's what happened with French cooking in America in the late '80s and the '90s, represented by three of its greatest New York practitioners: Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Daniel Boulud and Eric Ripert. All

**Italian-Chinese** Dried scallops that the restaurant gets from nearby Chinatown.



invited the ingredients and seasonings of other (especially Asian) lands into their kitchens.

As Vongerichten's empire grew, it became a fusion juggernaut, embodied in the Vong and Spice Market restaurants in New York and other cities. At Le Bernardin, Ripert's seafood temple in Midtown Manhattan, the menu morphed bit by bit into something of a world tour. In an unmistakably French vessel, you set out for Japan, Peru, Morocco and more.

But while French cooking grew more adventurous, Italian cooking was still proving itself, still trying to nudge many diners' impressions of it past red-checked tablecloths and red-sauce clichés. That was the challenge before chefs like Mario Batali, who didn't yoke themselves entirely to authenticity—at Babbo as far back as the late '90s, Batali put jalapeño on pasta and paired lamb chops with cumin-seasoned yogurt—but nonetheless preferred to explore the country's 20 regions and flex their Italian fluency than to speak in multiple tongues. Even today, Batali says, no chef in his generation "wants to be the one who brought cilantro or lemongrass into risotto."

But they all came of professional age before

serious Italian restaurants multiplied as wildly as they did over the last decade, during which it seemed that one of every three serious restaurants to open in New York had a predominantly Italian menu. Two events last year underscored the ascendance of Italian cuisine in New York, the country's standard-bearer. Sam Sifton, *The New York Times's* restaurant critic, awarded four stars to Del Posto, of which Batali is a principal owner, bringing an Italian restaurant into the newspaper's French-dominated uppermost echelon. And Batali and his partners opened Eataly, a colossal Italian-cuisine department store, with restaurants, food counters and specialty groceries. New Yorkers and tourists mob it morning, noon and night. By the time the veteran food writer John F. Mariani published his book "How Italian Food Conquered the World" in March, the title seemed less a provocation than an overstatement. The world? Maybe not. America? Without any doubt.

It was the very pervasiveness of relatively straightforward Italian cooking that sent Torrisi and Carbone in a different direction. They met at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., in the late 1990s and later worked together and became good friends at Café Boulud on the Upper East Side, where the Italian-American chef Andrew Carmellini, under Boulud's distant supervision, did French fusion dishes. Both of them wanted their own place and a chance to serve food more reflective of their Italian-American heritage, and in the summer of 2009 they found a spot on Mulberry Street, Little Italy's thoroughfare, small enough that they could afford the rent and the

Italian-Old New York  
Tartar of Delmonico with  
a béarnaise sauce.



renovation. They opened Torrisi Italian Specialties — they liked the sound of that surname better than the sound of the other, or than of both — in the very last days of December, but just at lunchtime and only as an Italian-American sandwich shop rigged for high-volume takeout. They needed time to ramp up. A fixed, multicourse nighttime menu of more intricately composed dishes didn't come along until the following March. When they first sketched it out, Carbone recalls, they automatically went to Italian regional food. "We went to a place that was comfortable."

But the more they thought about it, the less interesting it was. Their culinary mentors — including Batali, whom Carbone knew from working at Del Posto, Babbo and Lupa, another Batali standout — had already paid ample hom-

Hot Lunch Torrisi started as a lunch-only  
Italian-sandwich spot.



age to the old country. Besides which, their own true culinary heritage, as children more of New York than of Italy, was an eclectic one.

At the public schools that Carbone attended in Queens, the cafeterias regularly served Jamaican beef patties. Torrisi, who grew up in the Westchester County suburbs, would frequently accompany his father, a Manhattan court officer, to work in Chinatown, whose restaurants kept him fed. As an adult, he says, "I kept going back to that area — I was drawn there." He would shop for food in Chinatown, and while doing that one day not long ago, he noticed signs for Mulberry Street in both English and Chinese.

"That really struck me: an iconic Italian street in Chinese characters," he says. "I thought: we need to play upon these things that happen in America." From that impulse, shared by Carbone, their restaurant's foray into Italian-Asian cuisine was born. They dressed sautéed broccoli rabe with dried scallops. They prepared fried rice in which thinly shaved prosciutto replaced nuggets of pork. And they acknowledged the proximity of the famed Jewish delicatessens of the Lower East Side with an antipasto called crostini Russ-and-Daughters. Named for the renowned purveyors of Jewish appetizing, it layered smoked sturgeon and cream cheese on housemade bagel chips, then added accents like sesame seeds and poppy seeds.

They even found an Italianate assignment for the Jamaican beef patty — something, they note, that's incongruously served in a great many pizzerias. The patty is an envelope of pastry with seasoned ground meat inside, so they made squiggles of cavatelli from dough that included shortening, which the pastry would typically contain, and curry powder. For the shortening they used goat fat, in honor of the animal in Jamaican curries. And in a beef *ragù* to go over the cavatelli, they incorporated seasonings a patty might have: cardamom, cumin, coriander.

They weren't thinking about fusion per se. They were thinking about New York and approaching *terroir*, a French concept usually applied to the climate and natural harvest of a given area, in a new way. What ethnic foods had come to co-exist in, and define, the *terroir* of this city? The answer: Almost every kind. Their take on chicken *fra diavolo* gets some of its heat from *sriracha*, an Asian pepper blend. It sits on a slick of un-Italian yogurt.

I asked Carbone if he and Torrisi were pointing the way toward a chapter of Italian cooking defined by interethnic escapades. To my surprise, he winced, his response illuminating the widespread conviction among chefs that Italian cooking should never be overthought or overworked — that its spirit runs contrary to that and its fans wouldn't be pleased. "French food," he said, "is based off the chef. Italian food is based off the grandma." He added that his restaurant's dishes,

in his belief, are fundamentally Italian in both their straightforward, uncluttered presentation and in their adherence to the Italian ethos that food should evoke the place where it's served.

Michael Tusk, who runs the revered Italian restaurant Quince in San Francisco, says that when he has steered acquaintances bound for Italy toward restaurants that incorporate molecular gastronomy in their dishes — Osteria Francescana in Modena, for example — they're sometimes disappointed. "People want a sense of comfort from Italian food," he says, adding that in his own cooking, "I can't veer too far away from what's reminiscent of classic dishes."

It can be argued that the cluster of flavors associated with Italian cooking is more specific — and less welcoming to interlopers — than the stocks, creams and butter of French cuisine. "Cilantro on Italian food?" says Michael White, who apprenticed for many years in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy before finding fame in Manhattan with his cooking at the restaurants Marea, Osteria Morini and Ai Fiori. "You'd never get there. It'd be sacrilegious."

Batali posits that there's less cause for Italian fusion than for French, because there's already such diversity in Italian regional cooking and such license to make tweaks. He says that while béarnaise sauce follows a nationally anointed script, "*ragù* Bolognese made by two sisters is not the same." In Italy, he adds, "the individual never had to toe the line so carefully, so they never felt they had to bust out."

Besides which, does Italian provide the same template for experimentation that French does? French, many chefs say, is less a larder with finite parameters than a foundation and set of rituals, to which a plethora of exotic flourishes can be added. Carmellini recalls that at Café Boulud, whose kitchen he ran from 1998 to 2005, he prepared bass with coconut milk, bamboo leaves, Kaffir lime. "The only thing that made it French was the technique: steaming the fish separately and pouring the broth over it tableside," he says. He can't think of an Italian analog, and doesn't know what the future of Italian fusion holds.

At Locanda Verde, an Italian restaurant he opened in TriBeCa in 2009, Carmellini has been serving a dish of farro and duck with Cajun seasonings. It has one foot in Italy and one in Louisiana and suggests that if Italian grains and noodles are treated as a canvas — the way pizza, a relatively isolated precinct of riotous Italian fusion, has been for decades — an array of other ethnic influences can provide the brush strokes.

Speaking of pasta and the South, the young chef at Panciuto, outside Chapel Hill, N.C., has concocted dishes like ravioli filled with creamed corn and picci (a sort of fat, hand-rolled spaghetti)

FAMILY STYLE Recipes from the chefs of Torrisi are at [nytimes.com/magazine](http://nytimes.com/magazine).



Italian-American Mario Carbone, Torrisi's  
partner and co-chef.

tossed with fried green tomatoes. The chef, Aaron Vandemark, 33, says he sees an Italian-Southern kinship in the mutual exaltation of locality.

Emma Hearst, 24, the chef at Sorella, a two-year-old restaurant on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, does dishes that could be called Italian-Japanese (broccoli tempura dressed with Parmesan-like Grana Padano cheese) and Italian-Indonesian (a salad of Brussels sprouts and stracciatella cheese dressed with a Sambal chili vinaigrette). Although she started out sticking to more straightforward Piedmont fare, she says that as time went by, "I wanted to incorporate all of these fantastic flavors and ingredients that I've tasted around the world."

The success that Torrisi and Carbone have had is bound to encourage more of this. The dinner-time wait for a table at their restaurant, which doesn't take reservations, can stretch these days to two hours. They have been flown to Miami to cook, and even to Paris. Agents have come knocking, as have publishers and of course TV producers, who have no doubt taken note of their youth, good looks and geniality, all abundantly camera-ready. And hoteliers and established restaurateurs have approached them about translating what they're doing or expanding upon it in an additional restaurant, one with deeper pockets and more seats.

In time, they say, they may well explore much of that. Perhaps they will take over a flashier theater, maybe giving it Carbone's name. But for now they don't even have a publicist. They'd rather expand their repertory of dishes than commit the lineup so far to a cookbook, and they'd rather educate themselves than aim for

"Iron Chef"-dom. Torrisi spent three weeks earlier this year touring and apprenticing in kitchens in Europe. Carbone, playing culinary anthropologist, combs eBay and the New York Public Library for old New York restaurant menus that might inspire fresh ideas.

"Torrisi has a chance of being one of the best restaurants in the country," Carbone says. "We're focused on that path." Their only expansion thus far is the recent acquisition of a larger space next door to their restaurant. They plan to move the supercasual sandwich part of the operation there, where it will grow to include composed dishes and be called Parm. Then the original space can operate as a sit-down restaurant with a multicourse tasting menu daytime and night.

When that happens, possibly in September, they hope to unveil a raft of new dishes. Hence the brainstorming. At the session when they discussed scungilli, they also touched on something Torrisi had been refining for months: a Chinese-style soup dumpling, but filled with Italian-American wedding soup.

They pondered a fanciful spin on arancini, which are fried Italian rice balls, with a turmeric- and saffron-seasoned mixture of rice, chicken and yogurt inside. And they talked about a duo or trio of Italian sausages molded, layered and sliced in a French style.

"An Italian sausage pâté," Torrisi submitted. "A salumi terrine," Carbone chimed in.

They weren't certain what to call it. But it combined two beloved strains of imported New York cooking, and they definitely liked the idea and sound of that. ♦

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