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Tra di Noi Restaurant, Malibu

The Gem of Malibu

A Tuscan Villa-Inspired Hideaway

Elizabeth Taylor recently told her hairdresser José Eber that he must go to Tra di Noi Ristorante for his Valentine dinner. Princess Diana and Dodi Fayed shared a romantic meal there, too. And these are just a few of the Tra di Noi royalty who have been visiting the Malibu restaurant over its 20-year history. Music producer David Foster threw a birthday party for Barbra Streisand here. Opera great Andrea Bocelli sang "Happy Birthday" to her while Foster accompanied on the piano he had brought in for the occasion. Christina Aguilera and tennis star Andre Agas-

si chimed in. "It was like a concert," reminisces owner Tarcisio Mosconi. "It was the perfect night. I'll remember it forever." He also recalls this: "When Jim Carrey had a house in Malibu, he would come here twice a week. If a table wasn't available right away, he would go around to other tables

pretending to be a waiter, filling water glasses and delivering bread." It seems as though Italian restaurants and Malibu fit together perfectly, but it wasn't always so. Before Tra di Noi entered the dining scene in 1991, its arrival had been prepped by La Scala. La Scala's Spanish owner,

Jean Leon, pioneered the concept of sophisticated Italian dining in the sleepy California seaside town. Because of his years of culinary grooming, rich and famous restaurant patrons in Malibu had become accustomed to eating osso buco, whole branzino and the chopped salad that Leon invented. (While the Malibu La Scala closed over 20 years ago, the Beverly Hills La Scala stayed open and is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year).

To fill the void left by La Scala's departure, Sicilian Antonio Alessi (who operated the beautifully designed Italian restaurant Bocca from 1985-88) and his Italian partner Claudio Borin took

over the space in the Malibu Country Mart. Together they created the upscale, yet informal Tra di Noi, which translates from the Italian as "between us." Borin's mother, affectionately known as Mamma Rosa was in charge of the menu for Tra di Noi and the partners' other restaurant, Sage Room on Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu, named both for the delicious herb and the synonym for "wise." Five years later, Borin and Alessi went their separate ways. Borin retained Sage Room and to this day his Mamma Rosa pops into his kitchen to turn out tagliatelle with beef sauce whenever she visits from Italy.

Alessi took custody of Tra di Noi and found a new partner in Tarcisio Mosconi. For 15 years Mosconi has overseen the chef changes from Mamma Rosa through Oreste di Gregorio to current chef-partner Francesco Velasco, who joined the team in 2007. Restaurant reviews have been glowing since the start. In 1993 Michelle Huneven of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote "It's Sunday night and we're relax-

ing with coffee after a good dinner at Tra di Noi restaurant in Malibu. The room, all wood, smells like a mountain cabin. The lighting is subtle, like gaslight. Large garish California landscape paintings aside, there's a European atmosphere and sensibility at Tra di Noi." In 2008 the first Michelin Guide for Los Angeles noted, "You could probably close your eyes, point to the menu, and be pleased with even humble dishes."

Best New Restaurant:

La Focacceria Tra di Noi

Having firmly established itself as a legendary dining institution, Tra di Noi is about to launch itself in another historic restaurant's space: Prego in Beverly Hills. Exactly 30 years ago, Prego Ristorante inaugurated the popular open-kitchen-with-wood-burning-oven design that so many Italian restaurants in Los Angeles would later replicate. Owner Larry Mindel of Spectrum Foods would go on to reinvent the Il Fornaio Italian Restaurant & Bak-

ery chain, spreading it across the U.S. In this high-ceilinged, storied space at 362 North Camden Drive, a new concept called La Focacceria Tra di Noi will serve Francesco Velasco's signature *alta cucina* Italian dishes using seasonal vegetables from local farmers, wild-caught fish, and sustainably raised meat. Velasco's famed truffle menu—a favorite of Pierce Brosnan—will definitely be executed in the new spot. A mixture of tables and booths along one side of the downstairs space

will provide power-lunching opportunities for Tra di Noi's celebrity clientele. The other half of the downstairs space will be given over to La Focacceria Bakery & Cafe. Bakers will begin dispensing freshly baked breads—like focaccia—and pastries, along with coffee and espresso drinks at 7:30 a.m. At lunchtime, artisan cheeses and *salumi* (cured meats) from Salumeria Rosi in New York and Parma, Italy, will be sliced and diced. Sandwiches of all kinds will be assembled. The namesake focaccia might be made into a sandwich with grilled veggies and pesto. Ciabatta will be layered with meat and cheese and then pressed into panini. The famous Prego wood-burning oven will crisp up brioche filled with *polpettone* (meatballs). Of course pizza will continue to come out of that highly visible oven behind the bar. A small

walk-up window will sell La Focacceria Tra di Noi fare to shoppers passing by on Camden Drive. Because even celebrities sometimes take their meals to go. **EL**

TRA DI NOI
RISTORANTE
3835 Cross Creek Road
Malibu, CA 90265
Tel. 310.456.0169
www.tradinomalibu.com

—Los Angeles Times



(L-R) Owners, Tarcisio Mosconi and Antonio Alessi. (L-R) Tarcisio and Executive Chef Francesco Velasco

