



Kitchen prima donnas dish up culinary arias

PROFESSION

By Eric Tang

NINE successful professional Italian *donnas* sincerely believe that a woman's place is in the kitchen.

These nine female chefs either run their own restaurants or supervise the operation of the kitchens of five-stars hotels and nationally acclaimed restaurants in Italy.

This week they are displaying their culinary skills in Hong Kong.

"Women have always been doing the work in the kitchen. In the past, only men had the opportunity to make themselves known. Now it's time for us to be recognised," Odett Fada, who is now working for an Italian restaurant in Los Angeles, California, says.

Weightlifting test

Such recognition comes with a high price.

They inherited a wealth of recipes from their mothers and grandmothers and began their training at an early age either at home or in their family business.

Their passion for the culinary art was cultivated under a long established tradition of gourmet appreciation. Yet passion and tradition alone would not have taken them very far, had they not possessed unfaltering perseverance.

"Now that we are professionals, we deal with problems that any male chef would encounter. But when we first started, it was difficult because everyone wanted to try you out," Fada says.

"My peers wanted to make sure I was capable of working in a kitchen and I was made to take this weightlifting test, carrying heavy pans and trays around.



MAGNIFICO: Eight of the nine chefs on tour prepare a tray of pastry for epicures in the territory where they are 'dismayed' that there is not enough bread.

"Working 14 to 15 hours a day was expected. Of course, they also tested my knowledge."

Unlike some of her teammates in the tour, Fada does look deceptively fragile.

All of them have gone through the hardship Fada

describes and now they all take pride in their professional position.

Rosaria Martufi manages her own restaurant in Lazio, Italy, and is also its head chef.

Agata Parisella inherited her family's highly rated restaurant business. She once

declined an offer from the Hilton Hotel, preferring to run her own business.

The women wear uniforms, their traditional apparel, and the men in the kitchen help work in their own friendly but serious personalities.

The co-ordinator of their tour, Mauro Vincenti, is impressed by their efficiency.

"They started work the minute they arrived in Hong Kong," Vincenti says.

"They wanted to see the hotel inspected the kitchen and checked out everything so

that they wouldn't lose any time."

Vincenti first invited the chefs from Italy to his restaurant in Los Angeles.

The nine women presented a total of 12 dishes and the event was such a success they decided to go on tour.

Vincenti explains that the chefs find cooking Italian food in foreign countries a positive challenge to their artistry.

"There are basic ingredients which are absolutely necessary," Vincenti says.

"Olive oil, basil, *parmigiano* and parmesan cheese are the absolutely necessary basic ingredients. Without those we need a miracle.

"Italian dishes are diversified and each dish is determined by the produce available in the region. As professional cooks, they rely on their palate's memory when they go abroad.

"Say, like in Hong Kong you can get good tomatoes and eggplants but they taste different. These ladies will just think of a way, using other ingredients available to create the desired taste."

What the individual chefs will prepare for the epicures in Hong Kong very much depend on where his hometown is.

Meat dishes

North Italy is a huge piece of flat land and, naturally, meat dishes can be expected from here.

Down south, which is closer to the sea, the climate is warmer. Most of the seafood dishes, vegetable dishes and the famous extra virgin olive oil are from this region.

"The south was invaded by Arabs from North Africa and Asia Minor as well. Many of the southern dishes have pine nuts in them because of these foreign influences," Vincenti adds.

Perhaps the nine chefs will also be influenced by the Chinese dishes they have tried in Hong Kong. They certainly are fascinated by the Chinese culinary skills but are dismayed about the absence of bread.

The nine chefs will be at the Carlton Hotel's *Tosca* this week.