

Going GLOBAL

Acclaimed Italian seafood chef Mauro Uliassi reflects on his new Hong Kong adventure and food's sensual nature

TERRACED DINING
at Uliassi's Senigallia restaurant on the Italian east coast

It was a big year for the maestro of fish. Mauro Uliassi, head chef and owner at Ristorante Uliassi in the Italian town of Senigallia, won a seafood award, a fish soup award, a best dinner of the year award and second star in the Michelin Red Guide.

"We won everything!" says the smiling chef with an English and humour that are uncannily similar to Roberto Benigni circa his 1999 best actor Oscar speech. "We should close and stop while we're perfect!" Fat chance. Along with the second star and a year's worth of different accolades, Uliassi capped 2008 by opening Hong Kong's Domani restaurant in November.

"We went to Hong Kong for a promotional event," he says of Domani's advent, which included a fortuitous encounter with a restaurant magnate. "The next day we went to Pacific Place and that's where we are now."

Going global has been a whirlwind education for Uliassi, who technically signed on with Domani as the consulting chef. Along

with several hours of private English lessons each week to improve his foreign endeavour, he's been learning to translate his style into something compatible with the local culture.

"My cuisine is Italian, but I've travelled the world and the food we have in Senigallia reflects those influences," he says. "This is what we've brought to Hong Kong."

"Domani is not Uliassi," he adds, marking a change, yet confirming that the chef is remaining true to himself. "It's Italian. With Italian food and ingredients and our know-how."

Hong Kong hasn't meant giving an Asian flair to his cuisine or making radical style changes. Instead, it's simply acclimatising to local customs and habits. Food is served with less salt and "very hot," he explains while underlining the words in the air. Sometimes, it is more a case of switching from the habits of a small seaside town to those of a big city on the go. Instead of a multi-course tasting meal, Uliassi explains that Domani customers want only one or two dishes. "Three, max!" he says, smiling, "Served very fast." ➤



"We should ... stop while
WE'RE PERFECT!"



MOUTH-WATERING SCALLOPS à-la Uliassi



Most important, his personal and modern style has been able to win the hearts and taste buds of both tradition-based Italian diners and Hong Kong's cosmopolitan tastes. Uliassi won me over at a 2006 Paris food show with what he called cuttlefish carbonara – shaved ribbons of al dente cuttlefish, cooked *sous-vide* (at a warm temperature over a long period of time in airtight plastic bags), topped with oven-crisped pancetta and egg yolk, also *sous vide*, grated over the top – a daring, well thought-out and perfectly executed dish with a clear tip of the hat to the classic carbonara recipe.

Classics, however, are only a starting point in Uliassi's cuisine. He uses words like 'try' and 'experiment' with reverence and 'puritan' falls out of his mouth with clear distaste; he seems to have too many ideas in his head to be able to just stick to the established classics.

"We close Uliassi for three months every year [roughly January through to March] and go to work in other places," Uliassi explains, divulging part of his creative process. "When we come back, we lock ourselves into the kitchen and reflect on what we had. Then we practice the dishes for a year. That way, we're sure they'll be good."

When we catch up with him at a gastronomic forum in Spain, his blend of classical training along with his culinary artistry and capacity to experiment are all on display. And sex. That, too, he explains, goes into every dish.

Uliassi's biggest lesson is that food is an exploration of the senses. Food is erotic. He is not shy, but he is also not looking to provoke, either. The way he looks at it, there is no reason to be embarrassed by such a parallel. Coming from Uliassi, it is

like listening to a course on philosophy and haute cuisine.

"We cook erotic food. Food, like eroticism, uses all five senses and when you cook it gives you the same satisfaction. When you see a beautiful dish, you salivate. Your mouth waters. Like when you see a beautiful girl," he says.

There aren't any girls on stage with Uliassi, but he is making a seafood stew that has got most people salivating. For this, he separately sautés tiny crab, langoustines and little squid in large copper pans, finally combining them in a cylindrical press that squeezes out every last drop of their primordial ocean goodness. Later, he'll rub baby squid with garlic before quickly sautéing them and adding them to the stew moments before it is served. I completely understand when an Italian food journalist says in an aside, "He's the maestro of seafood."

Later, Uliassi moves on to marinated anchovies – one lounging in a shallow bath of pineapple marmalade and mandarin orange gelatine, with another atop buttered and toasted nut bread. Served next to each other, they're a yin and yang of texture, fat, sweetness and acidity. The trade show is the last place I want to be taking a bite – I want to be on Domani's Hong Kong rooftop or perched above Senigallia's seaside with a nice bottle of chilled Champagne.

"Sex began eroticism. Food became gastronomy. When we think of a dish, we try to conceive something that involves all five senses," he explains. "You hear the crunchiness, the thing itself is a beautiful sight, you lick your fingers," he explains. "Food and love are written into our DNA and once you've got past the necessity, there's also pleasure. We don't just eat because we're hungry, food is a pleasure. I want to give that pleasure."

Joe Ray

"We cook EROTIC FOOD"

ULIASSI DOESN'T just do seafood, as this pineapple meringue and strawberry sorbet dessert shows

