



# Bringing Italy to New York

Forget Manhattan's Little Italy district. Eataly, the brainchild of Piedmontese entrepreneur Oscar Farinetti, is now the big player in the Big Apple. By **Carla Capalbo**

WHEN EATALY OPENED in New York in 2010, there were queues around the block. The pace has barely let up since. The innovative formula of a supermarket for Italian artisan foods that also houses several restaurants has been an unparalleled success. Shop and eat. Eat and shop. Eat or shop.

'It's fun,' exclaimed a woman I sat next to at the pizza and pasta bar in the crowded 23rd Street venue. 'I came in to buy artisan Italian cheeses but seeing all the food made me hungry. So I'm having a plate of pasta here before going home.' We watch as a young chef prepares the spaghetti of the day for us, to order. Like all the food cooked here, it's fresh and authentically Italian. Other mini restaurants within the store offer seafood, beef or vegetable-based dishes, panini, pastries, gelati and coffee. As well as wine. It's available here in the restaurants, the shop, and in Eataly's central wine bar, La Piazza.

Eataly is the brainchild of Oscar Farinetti, an Italian entrepreneur from Piedmont. Eataly's flagship store was launched in Turin in 2007 to huge acclaim. Others have since opened in Tokyo,

Bologna and Genova. I went to meet Farinetti at Fontanafredda, the wine estate he runs in Piedmont.

The first thing that strikes you about Farinetti is his energy and infectious good humour. The genial 57-year-old clearly relishes the success of his new venture. 'You could say I was born in a bag of flour,' he laughs, when I ask him about his connection with food and wine. 'My grandfather was a miller and *farina* is Italian for flour, so even my name derives



**Left: artisan Italian meats for sale in New York's popular Eataly, whose La Piazza wine bar is pictured above**

## The Fontanafredda connection

Fontanafredda had noble beginnings: it was bought in 1858 by King Vittorio Emanuele II, the first king of Italy, for his lover, Rosa Vercellana. A commoner, she was given the title Countess of Mirafiore before she and the king married some years later. Mirafiore became the most prestigious brand of the estate's wines. In the 1930s, the property was bought by Monte dei Paschi, the Sienese bank, which held it for 70 years until 2008, when Farinetti and his Eataly partner,

Luca Baffigo, bought a 64% share. Farinetti is now revitalising the estate, opening it to the public with two restaurants, a shop and a retreat. He has also brought back the Mirafiore brand for the best crus.

'For me, wine is probably the most important part of food, and Fontanafredda is central to Eataly,' says Oscar Farinetti. 'This iconic Serralunga d'Alba estate is unique – it's the only Langhe property of 120 hectares to remain in a single piece.'



**Left: Oscar Farinetti, founder of Italian-US store and eatery Eataly. Above: Fontanafredda winery, in which he has a stake**

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'My family owned supermarkets near Alba that included electrical and non-food items. My father hated those, so he gave me that side of the business. I fell in love with the technology and realised that Italian families were going to want American mod cons too.' In 1989, Farinetti left the family business to set up two electronics chains that were to become Italy's largest, Unieuro and Trony. When he sold them, in 2007, they were worth a fortune.

'I can sell anything I believe in,' he says enthusiastically. 'A mentor of mine told me the secret to a great life is to put poetry into everything. So I saw fridges as magical white boxes and shipped them to customers filled with food. I sold millions of televisions by telling people to buy the best TV but watch it as little as possible. I also predicted that telephones wouldn't always need metres of cords.' He was right. And he was right again when he calculated that people would be happy to pay for good food if it was presented palatably.

'Eataly's success is no fluke,' he insists. 'I had always wanted to get back into food, and I applied the same market principles.' Before opening Eataly, Farinetti spent five years researching food sales. If competition between global providers was pushing food prices and quality down, it also provoked a counter-reaction from movements like Slow Food,

whose Founder Carlo Petrini is also from Piedmont and was a childhood friend of Farinetti's. Slow Food's groundbreaking biennial *Salone del Gusto* marketplace for unique, handmade foods raised awareness – and selling power. Farinetti's challenge was to make customers willing to pay for quality.

'With Slow Food as a consultant, we offer abundant information about our Italian artisanal food, and it's accessible to everyone.' So are the Italian celebrity chef dinners and other gastronomic happenings Eataly hosts. That's a powerful formula: Eataly recently won the coveted World Retail Innovation Award for its unique selling concept.

For Farinetti, it's a win-win situation. He now owns majority shares in the companies producing more than one third of Eataly's key ingredients, including dried pasta, meats and wine. 'It's the best way to be sure we're selling high-quality ingredients,' he says. Farinetti also runs five wine estates in Piedmont, including Fontanafredda, and he recently bought a share of Le Vigne di Zamò in Friuli. So he's well placed to cash in on all of Eataly's successes. He plans to open several Eatalys – including in Rome, London, Berlin, and Milan – before he turns 60, when he'll launch into something new. 'I like setting myself utopian targets,' he says with a smile. **D**

*Carla Capalbo is based in Italy and leads gastronomic tours for Marin Randall Travel. Her latest book is Collio: Fine Wines And Foods From Italy's North-East*

*'My father was an ambitious grocer from Barbaresco and my mother came from Barolo, so wine has always been part of my life'*

**Oscar Farinetti**