

FOOD&WINE**Why L.A. Restaurant Uovo Makes Its Pasta in Bologna**

Flavia Lucidi

Jerry Greenberg, who also runs HiHo and Sugarfish, is the king of hyper-specific sourcing.

Andy Wang September 19, 2017

"That was stepping off the cliff and falling in," L.A. restaurateur Jerry Greenberg says of his decision to have a kitchen in Italy for Uovo, his new restaurant in Santa Monica.

Greenberg and partner Lele Massimini, who was born and raised in Rome, had been talking about opening a pasta restaurant for the "better part of a decade." After eating

around Italy for years, they had found red-yolk eggs that make superior pasta. Their plan was simple: They would ship eggs to L.A.

"We worked with the government and found out you couldn't do that," Greenberg says.

So Greenberg remembers stepping away from a back-to-school gathering with his family and getting on the phone with his partners, who also include Lowell Sharron and Massimini's brother Carlo.

"We talked about it, 'Are we really not going to be able to do this business?'," Greenberg says. "But we had learned something along the way: The expert pasta-making companies in Rome and other places, they rest the pasta. We put two and two together. There was this aha moment where we were like, 'Wait a second, if we were crazy enough to make the pasta in Bologna, we do know that it's the best pasta we've ever experienced.'"

So they now have a kitchen in Bologna run by Pino Mastangelo and Stefania Randi, who both previously worked at a restaurant where Greenberg says he tasted the "single best noodle we ever had." (Greenberg isn't naming the restaurant because he's not in the business of revealing secrets.) Uovo's pasta flies commercial and rests on the plane. There are no direct flights from Bologna to L.A., by the way.

This is as Italian as Italian food gets in America. (A chef from Italy, Gianni Pucci, is part of Uovo's culinary team in L.A.) The tonnarelli all'Amatriciana, for example, features perfect noodles and difference-making thick pieces of crispy guanciale.

"Even at the highest level, there's a choice about guanciale," Greenberg says. "Either it should be thinly sliced and almost like a lardo, or it can be crispy. We found a restaurant in Rome that we think does an amazing job of crisping their guanciale. I'd probably not be exaggerating to say we took four fundamentally different approaches to crisping it."

They experimented with cast-iron pans, various thickness of guanciale, cooking at different temperatures and crisping the guanciale with and without oil. For Greenberg, running restaurants is about hyper-specific sourcing and also about total precision.

Next door to Uovo is HiHo, a new burger joint started by Greenberg, Sharron, Matt Levin and Ajay Sahgal. The restaurant makes its version of the classic Southern California roadside cheeseburger. But the beef is 100 percent grass-fed, grass-finished wagyu from First Light, a cooperative of farmers in New Zealand. (Greenberg found this beef, not surprisingly, while he was trying "every grass-fed beef we could find, from every part of the globe.")

"There's marbling from the genetics of wagyu," Greenberg says. "But since you only feed them 100 percent grass, they don't get over-marbled."

The result is beef that tastes both rich and clean.

"It's low in saturated fat, higher in omega-3s," Greenberg says. "But forget all that, and it tastes good. So many people who eat at HiHo several times a week say, 'I don't feel heavy after eating this burger.'"

HiHo makes its own pickles and onion jam. HiHo's hand-cut fries, which involved years of R&D including "a year that turned out to be a failure," are simultaneously crunchy on the outside and creamy on the inside. They're something like a hybrid of skinny fast-food fries and thick restaurant fries. HiHo also serves Straus Family Creamery shakes and housemade banana cream pie and key lime pie.

Given that Greenberg is also cofounder and CEO of Sushi Nozawa, which has outposts of Sugarfish and KazuNori around L.A. and in New York, I ask about his thoughts on expanding Uovo and HiHo. These are separate companies that share some resources and DNA (Lele Massimini is a founding partner of Sushi Nozawa). You can go to Second Street in Santa Monica and visit Uovo, HiHo and Sugarfish. Plus, Kazunori is a five-minute walk away. Could there be clusters like this elsewhere?

Uovo's kitchen in Bologna is bigger than the pasta restaurant in Santa Monica, so Greenberg says it might make sense to open additional Uovos. There are no salads, appetizers, secondi or dessert at Uovo. You can sit at the counter, watch your pasta being made and eat in half an hour or less. It's a concept that seems like it could scale.

"The fewer things you do, the better you can master it," Greenberg says.

HiHo is also something that has potential for multiple locations, but Greenberg stresses that grass-fed wagyu isn't easy to get.

"First Light has a collection of 47 farmer-owners," Greenberg says. "This isn't about taking over the burger industry. There isn't enough beef for 100 HiHos."

This isn't dissimilar to how Greenberg thinks about Sugarfish. He's been cautious about expanding because he knows that there isn't an unlimited supply of high-quality fish and seaweed.

Sugarfish opened its first L.A. restaurant back in 2008, and Greenberg continues to focus on hyper-specific sourcing there. He recently visited the Southern California facility that roasts nori for Sushi Nozawa's restaurants.

The nori from Japan "is selected for us, shipped for us, roasted to our specifications," Greenberg says. "It's very specific to us."

Everything from the size to the packaging to the temperature of the nori is carefully considered.

"The result is a package of nori that's ours and isn't sold to anybody else," Greenberg says.

Greenberg's greatest trick might be merging exclusive ingredients with accessible prices: \$32 gets you an omakase-style Trust Me feast at Sugarfish. Uovo's pastas, including its bestselling tagliatelle al ragu, are \$14 to \$16. A double cheeseburger with fries at HiHo is \$9.75.

"These are three separate businesses, but there's similar thinking," Greenberg says. "If we give guests food that will wow them at a price that might be a little lower than expected, we just think that's a great formula. We want to get our guests so happy that they want to eat there all the time."

Uovo, 1320 Second St., Suite A, Santa Monica, 310-425-0064

HiHo, 1320 Second St., Suite B, Santa Monica, 310-469-7250

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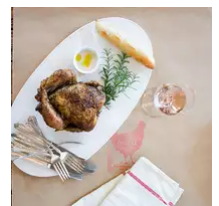
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