

# "Q" Is For Quality

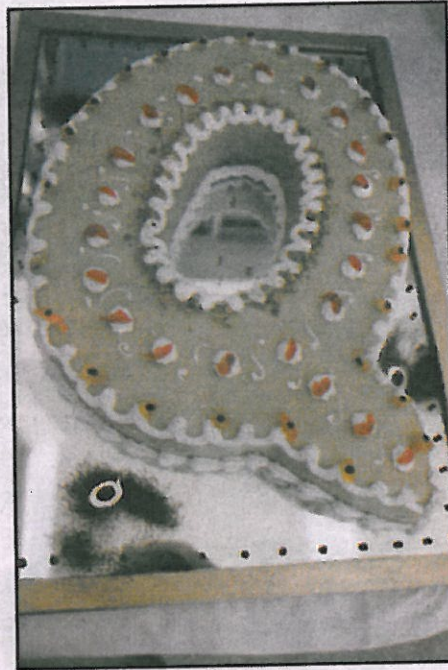
by Mona Day

Three Santa Monica restaurants - Drago Restaurant, Valentino Ristorante, Locanda del Lago have been awarded the "Q Seal of Authenticity" by the Italy-America Chamber of Commerce West, the largest of the 65 Italian Chambers in the world.

Various Italian government agencies had long felt that Italian restaurants are the ambassadors of history and culture, and that the quality and authenticity of Italian cuisine is world heritage that needs to be protected from inauthentic competition.

As a result, these agencies have challenged Italian restaurants around the world to prove their authenticity by qualifying for the "Ospitalita' Italiana - Seal of Authenticity" to provide assurance of quality in the hospitality industry. Since its launch in 1997, over 5000 hotels, restaurants and holiday farms in 18 regions in Italy have been qualified with the seal.

Restaurants have to pass an extensive series of rigorous criteria that includes the percentage of denomination Italian wines on their list, the menu being written in perfect Italian, there being at least one Italian speaking person to engage with customers, the quality of the olive oil (extra virgin, of course) - the list goes on. The results of the certification are worth it for both the restaurateurs and their clientele.



Valentino's Sicilian Cassata  
Photo by FusaroPhotography.com



This is the first year that the Q competition and certification has gone international, and California has produced the most qualifying restaurants, with LA's thirty one restaurants beating out San Francisco's three.

The LA restaurants received their Q seal golden plates at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura at a ceremony featuring a lively blind competition for the most creative dish in the shape of the letter "Q" and a certain reporter for the Santa Monica Observer was one of the lucky judges.

Locanda del Lago's Executive Chef Walter Cestroni served a Terrina di pollo e prosciutto of Jidori chicken and foie gras terrine wrapped in Parma prosciutto with summer truffle aioli.

Valentino Ristorante's Chef Nico Chessa whipped up a classic Sicilian cassata into a very pretty Q. The Palermo version's main ingredients are ricotta, candied fruit peels and marzipan, and it won the Best Dish award for both presentation and taste. Chef Nico said he felt very honored to be recognized since the event was not just about chefs and restaurateurs but about Italian culture and its preservation. Asked if he offered this item in the restaurant he claimed, "We will be in a big trouble not featuring this dish a

Valentino" adding "as the owner himself is from Sicily."

"Where can you enjoy an authentic Italian experience in Los Angeles?" the organizers asked rhetorically. "Now there is a solution: look for the "Q", look for Quality: Italian Quality served on a Golden plate."