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Q & A: Style & Substance

12:00 PM, By Megan Rowe

Piero Selvaggio is training his sights on new sites.

Piero Selvaggio is a textbook example of the American Dream gone right. Arriving from Sicily at age 18, he worked his way up from busboy to manager, attending college and earning a bachelor's degree in Romance languages. At 26, in 1972, he joined with a partner to open Valentino, an Italian restaurant in Santa Monica; two years later, he bought the partner out and molded Valentino into a critical and commercial success. He developed two casual concepts, Primi and Posto, and eventually sold both so he could focus on Las Vegas. In 1999, he opened Valentino and The Grill at Valentino at the Venetian Resort and Casino; he followed that with Giorgio Ristorante at the Mandalay Bay Hotel and Casino in 2004. In 2009, he opened PS Valentino Vin Bar at the Hotel Derek in Houston. We chatted with the ever-dapper Selvaggio from his home base in Santa Monica.

**RH: How do you divide your time these days?**

Selvaggio: I spend most of my time in Santa Monica for a number of reasons, mainly because I am expected to be there. With finer restaurants, there is the image of the restaurateur, who is expected to be hands-on. When I opened in Las Vegas, I brought in the best chef I'd worked with as a partner and manager, so he had a vested interest. He also became a partner in the Houston restaurants. The manager and chef there are key people from our organization.

RH: What's the thinking behind your latest venture in Houston?

Selvaggio: In Houston, Vin Bar operates practically all day long because we're in a hotel. We do breakfast in the restaurant as well as roomservice breakfast; at lunch we serve a lot of business people; then at 4:30 it becomes two restaurants, and the crudo bar takes over. We do a whole series of small bites or a nice platter, with our own fruit chutneys. It's more casual and serves comfort food, while the remainder of the restaurant is Valentino, with the fine experience we're famous for, a great wine list and complete menu. We experimented in Las Vegas, and it worked very well for us to have a casual café with a fine dining space. There is a demand for both.



LAIID-BACK VIBE: The latest addition, Vin Bar, is a nod to more casual dining fans.

RH: Speaking of Las Vegas, how has the slide in visitor traffic affected your operations? And what about the other markets where you do business?

Selvaggio: Things have been as hard as I have ever experienced over 40 years in the business. We are surviving these times and the good news is that it's beginning to look brighter. In Las Vegas, I hear that convention bookings are way up, and hotels are showing some life in the first quarter. Santa Monica also is coming back. Lots of people have been judicious with their spending, but people who want to entertain, do business or just show off want to do so in a finer restaurant, and that's something we've always been good at. In December, we had a great increase in corporate parties and Christmas celebrations, which is very promising.

RH: Your restaurants are known for their professional service. What do you stress in your training?

Selvaggio: We always start with the premise that when people think about their experiences in restaurants, they will in time forget the food, but they won't forget the service. They won't forget the rude waiter, the cold food, anything that's not positive. And they will also remember the good, from the greeting to the finish. Having said that, we try to give employees a sense of what we've been famous for, which is caring for the guests, adapting to their needs, being friendly, but at the same time understanding when to step back, being efficient but unobtrusive, and showing your knowledge so customers will trust and respect you. Those are very basic things. It's all in the little details: remembering that Mr. Smith likes his martini very dry, or likes extra spicy foods, or wants take his time. All those little things are just another layer of quality service.

RH: How do you keep your operations fresh?

Selvaggio: We always look for the artisan, the small producer, and thanks to the farmers' market and the speed of delivery, that has gotten easier. Twenty years ago it was very hard to bring fresh mozzarella and other products from Italy. As for the interior, you've got to reinvent it in every possible way. Over three decades, the original Valentino has probably had 10 facelifts. And you must understand the expectations and demands of the guests. There's nothing worse than having an old, stuffy, boring menu. The idea of "fresh" has so many components: the talent of the chefs, the quality of the product, the right atmosphere, the service.

For instance, with the crudo bar and small plates at PS Valentino Vin Bar, we're going back to what people are looking for these days. With wine, we've always led the pack, keeping it fresh by acknowledging what a bar represents today. It's now a social place; it used to be a place to get drunk.

What we do every day is theater, not a movie. It's something you have to do perfectly every day. New spectators have big expectations. Sometimes people even call and say, "I've heard good things about your restaurant. Impress me."

RH: The restaurant business is very different now than it was when you started. What are the most significant changes you've observed, especially in recent years?

Selvaggio: There have been so many changes that have made us adapt to people's expectations of a restaurant. Now a guest can go on online to decide where to eat and make reservations. And online, everyone has an opinion, bad or good, fair or unfair. But even as technology has developed, the restaurant business has gone back to its roots by adopting organic, sustainable, farmers' market products. We've gone back to the basics of what we eat and the art of nutrition.



FLAGSHIP: The original Valentino in Santa Monica upholds the fine dining tradition.

RH: You are gradually building a solid portfolio of restaurants. What's your growth strategy?

Selvaggio: We like the idea of associating with boutique hotels. Hotel owners don't want to have much to do with restaurants. They don't want the big headaches of running a restaurant that most of the time loses money. What we like to do is join forces with operations that will give us carte blanche to run the food and the banquet department. Banquets are the big secret in any hotel; they are one place where you can make a difference. And in certain cities, restaurants in hotels are well accepted. We are talking with hotel companies in Monterey, CA; Dallas; and Orlando. We'd like to take our time and grow very slowly. My role model has been my friend, Wolfgang Puck. He has 35-40 restaurants and a very solid structure.