

# Los Angeles Times

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## At Piero Selvaggio's Valentino, trendy dining isn't on the menu

*As L.A.'s restaurant choices multiply, Valentino recommitts to its ornate, formal Italian experience.*

**March 18, 2013** By Russ Parsons, Los Angeles Times



Owner Piero Selvaggio pours wine for patrons at Valentino restaurant in... (Ricardo DeAratanha, Los...)

Piero Selvaggio has just delivered a plate of Sardinian fregula with grilled octopus — chewy pasta dyed a deep black in squid ink and strewn with lavender tentacles — to a table at Valentino restaurant.

Then he turns his attention to the wine, Valle dell'Acate, Zagra. It's crisp and aromatic enough to stand up to the dish, and it's made in Sicily only a few miles from his hometown, he says, as something across the room catches his eye.

A couple's dinner seems to be evolving from polite and friendly to the sort of special occasion marked by tightly clasped hands and soulful stares. Selvaggio — proprietor, host, food pioneer — nods to his longtime maitre d', Giuseppe Mollica, who wordlessly acknowledges him. Mollica approaches the couple and offers to move them to a romantic alcove.

It's an old-fashioned gesture in an old-fashioned place, and the couple happily accepts. Valentino, open for 40 years, has been at the heart of a lot of memorable meals like this one.

But more and more, that kind of scene seems from a bygone era — one that Selvaggio refuses to give up on.

The world of restaurant-going was once restricted to the moneyed few or the most festive of occasions; today people are eating out two to three times a week. Though the Los Angeles dining scene was once dominated by a handful of fancy places, today's diners can also choose from noisy hot spots run by celebrity chefs, countless gastro pubs and ethnic restaurants offering cuisines from all over the world.

Valentino, a Santa Monica restaurant once described in Wine Spectator magazine as lapping other Italian restaurants in America like "a Ferrari in the fast lane of the autostrada," is now honored mostly like an antique car: undeniably beautiful but an object out of the past.

That air of formality — hushed room, fine china, heavy silver, a forest of crystal wine glasses that ring like chimes when you make a toast, a small army of uniformed waiters that sees to your every need — that's the vision of fine dining that Valentino embraces.

Are today's customers even interested in that kind of experience? The answer seems to be mixed. On the Yelp website, a barometer of the fancies of younger diners, Valentino has a respectable four-star rating (out of five). But there is a strong undercurrent of bad reviews, and a consistent thread runs through them. What seems respectful and professional to some seems stiff and unfriendly to others.

"The waitstaff all around was pretentious and looked down their nose at us the entire meal," wrote someone posting as "Never S." "I've never felt more uncomfortable at a restaurant."

Selvaggio readily admits that he is a man out of another time when it comes to dealing with younger eaters. "What do they want?" he asks, perplexed. Then he mimics someone glancing up while typing on a smartphone.

"They don't have a clue what we're about. And they can't wait to run you down," he says. "This is not my clientele."

Nonetheless, Selvaggio is gambling that even as the food world in general becomes ever more casual, the need for the ritual of fine dining is not gone.

"It cannot be just the food," Selvaggio says. "Our experience of a meal is based on a lot of things. And what we give is the style of theater, the music of the place. After that, an osso buco is just an osso buco."

This treatment comes at a price. Entrees on the regular menu run \$30 to \$40, but hardly anyone in the food cognoscenti orders off that menu at Valentino. They know they can ask Selvaggio to orchestrate a custom menu that starts at \$60 to \$70 per person, plus an additional \$50 each for the wine pairing. The bill can climb, very quickly, from there.

This winter, two of Selvaggio's oldest friends and competitors have made significant revisions to their own fine-dining establishments. Michael McCarty of Michael's in Santa Monica has stripped away the white tablecloths that give fine dining its nickname and dramatically lowered prices. Almost the same week, Wolfgang Puck unveiled a leaner, more modern Spago, emphasizing small plates that give an illusion of lower prices, though the total bill may be the same or even higher. But Selvaggio's feelings about the Santa Monica restaurant go deeper than business.

"I'm making a choice and making a statement that after 40 years I want to be more for the few than for the masses. I'm 67 years old, and I'm thinking, 'What am I going to do for these next five or six years that I still have enough gasoline in my tank to play the game?'"