

EAT OUT

Serving up the city's best restaurants, bars and culinary riches

Mothers superior

Not only do they still cook for their (grown-up) kids, they cook for all of NYC. Meet five restaurateur moms who make every day Mother's Day.

By **Dori Fern** Photograph by **Roberto Falck**



QUEENS MOTHER
At Manducatis in Long Island City, Ida Cerbone runs the kitchen while her husband and children manage the restaurant's three dining rooms.

EAT OUT

Get a chef talking about the dishes that he or she really loves, and eventually, the conversation will turn to the chef's mother. You'll hear about Mom's thick and hearty lasagna, her rich pot au feu, her perfect apple pie—foods that ooze passion, the kind you just don't find in restaurants. Unless, that is, you happen to visit one of the eateries profiled below. Here, mothers command the kitchen, and in most cases, their children handle other responsibilities in the restaurant. Somehow, they all seem happy, even the kids. And why not? They're guaranteed steady work, good meals and the opportunity to brag about their moms year-round—not just on Mother's Day.

Chez Napoleon

365 W 50th St between Eighth and Ninth Aves (265-6980). Subway: C, E to 50th St. Mon–Thu noon–10pm; Fri, Sat noon–11pm.

A sign in the window of Chez Napoleon reads EVER HAD AN AUTHENTIC FRENCH MEAL COOKED UP BY AN AUTHENTIC FRENCH GRANDMOTHER? HERE

YOU WILL!!!! Taped above it is a snapshot of 78-year-old Provençal *grandmère* Marguerite Bruno, the matriarch who molds the pâtés and stirs the veal stock at this comforting, 40-year-old Theater District restaurant.

Bruno, who bought the place in 1982 with her late husband, runs the kitchen while her daughter, Elyane Vaschetta, 52, mans (so to speak) the front of the house. The lone guy on staff—Elyane's 27-year-old son, William—tends bar at night.

The women of Chez Napoleon are not a showy bunch. They wear close-cropped hairstyles, neat but unadorned clothing and barely any makeup. Nor is this eatery a fancy place. High atop rouge walls cluttered with memorabilia devoted to the restaurant's namesake are shelves of trophies awarded to a young Elyane for skiing and rifle shooting. They give the place a Gallic rec-room feel.

Just as homey is Bruno's cooking: It's plentiful and delicious, but without flourish. Her signature rabbit Marguerite—a rich terrine swimming in cream sauce—takes you back

to the days when cholesterol wasn't an issue.

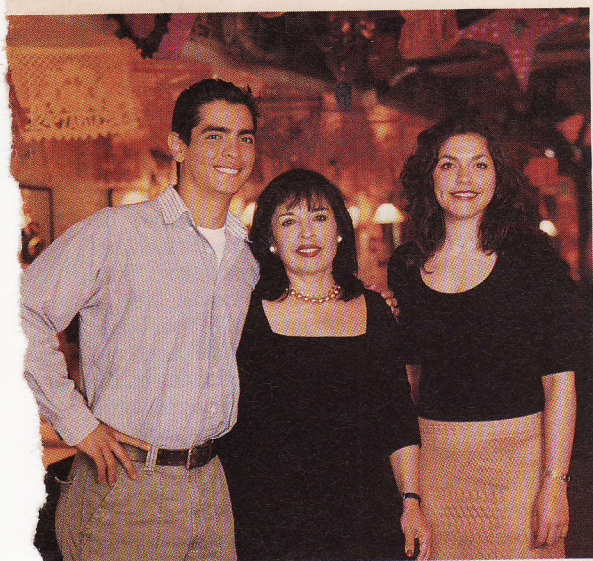
What does Bruno think about nouvelle cuisine? "She hates it!" says Vaschetta, who lives with her mother during the week in a Manhattan pied-à-terre and on weekends in Bellerose, Queens. Bruno laughs, knocking the table in agreement. "The plates are big," Grandma Bruno says in her native tongue, "but there's nothing to eat!"

DokSuni's

119 First Ave between 7th St and St. Marks Pl (477-9506). Subway: 6 to Astor Pl. 4:30–11:30pm.

Myung Ja Kwak is trying to explain, in broken English, what drives her crazy about her daughter Jenny. "Many boyfriends," she says to Jenny's surprise. (She'd thought her mother would complain about her smoking.)

"Mommy!" Jenny responds, shaking her head with a laugh. But Myung Ja isn't finished. She continues telling me how she wishes Jenny would have more friends her own age, not 10 or 20 years older. Jenny is dumbfounded.



FAMILY AFFAIR Restaurants are a way of life for Zarela Martinez and her children Aaron and Marissa.

"We finally have this talk, and it's in the middle of an *interview!* I can't believe this."

It's not at all surprising that Jenny Kwak's friends are older. She was, after all, only 19 when she and her mother opened Dok Suni's six years ago. Jenny had just dropped out of Parsons and says that she missed her mother's cooking. She was living in the East Village; her family lived (and still lives) in Flushing, where the Kwaks moved from Korea in 1980. Myung Ja wasn't working at the time, so she jumped at the opportunity to go into business with her daughter.

"My formula for running a restaurant was pretty simple," says Jenny. "People come to eat; you serve them. You're as hospitable as you can be." Creating a cool vibe has also been key to Jenny's success. Compact and dimly lit, Dok Suni's has the air of a hip bar—it's not at all like the emporium-size 24-hour Korean eateries on 32nd Street.

The first year, though, was tough. Many New Yorkers were unfamiliar with Korean food, and the East Village restaurant scene had yet to explode. Eventually, Jenny's plugged-in "older" friends spread the word, and Myung Ja's home-style cooking gained notice. Soon, regulars such as Quentin Tarantino were dropping by for dishes such as bibimbop, a rice, meat and vegetable casserole that Korean women traditionally created from the leftovers that remained after the men in their family had eaten.

Propelled by the success of Dok Suni's—the restaurant takes its name from a Korean term used to describe a strong, resilient woman—this mother-and-daughter team is branching out. Their second endeavor, Do Hwa, is scheduled to open on Carmine Street this summer. A much larger restaurant, it will offer a more varied menu typical of Koreatown eateries, says Jenny, who just wrote her first cookbook, a paean to Myung Ja called *Dok Suni: Recipes from My Mother's Korean Kitchen* (St. Martin's).

True, many of Jenny's friends are older than she is, but her mother shouldn't be too disheartened. Jenny tells me that her best friend is a 55-year-old woman named Myung Ja.

Felidia

243 E 58th St between Second and Third Aves (758-1479). Subway: N, R to Lexington Ave; 4, 5, 6 to 59th St. Mon–Thu noon–11pm, Fri noon–11:30pm, Sat 5–11:30pm.

Lidia Masticchio Bastianich and I are sitting at a table in the back of Felidia, the two-story townhouse restaurant in east midtown that Bastianich owns. It's a lovely place, with mahogany wood paneling, a skylight and a fireplace. Captains in white dinner jackets toss orders of homemade pappardelle on hot plates in the middle of the dining room for the last of the well-heeled lunch crowd. Warmth mingles with formality here; the place is a lot like Bastianich herself.

Talking to me in the supremely professional tone of someone who's done an interview or ten, she lists her numerous projects: PBS cooking show, cookbook, line of bottled sauces, tours of

Italy she operates with her daughter Tanya, and restaurants she co-owns with her budding restaurateur son Joseph, including Frico Bar, Becco and Lidia's in Kansas City.

That Bastianich maintains such a businesslike demeanor might have something to do with how hard she's worked. After emigrating from Italy's Istrian peninsula in 1958, she and her then-husband Felice opened their first restaurant, Buonavita, in Forest Hills in 1972. She was determined to expose Americans to her native cuisine, splitting the restaurant's menu between Italian-American standbys like veal parmigiana—cooked by a hired chef—and then-obscurer native dishes like risotto and polenta, which Bastianich made herself. "It was just like *Big Night*," she says.

Today at Felidia, you'll discover an entire menu of Istrian specialties—dishes like braised tripe with polenta, rosemary-infused veal chops with summer truffles, and wild-mushroom risotto. It's rich, earthy food prepared with uptown flair.

Discovering Lidia The Mom, though, did not happen for me until I spoke with her on the phone, a few days after our first meeting. While we talked, she managed to quiet my clamoring daughter, Amira, by delivering a few soothing, yet authoritative, words to her over the phone. The incident made me realize that for Lidia, there is no distinction between business and family. It's a point she reiterates herself. "I remember my pediatrician telling me, 'Children are happy when their parents are happy. You have to fulfill your goals,'" she says. "Sure, there are considerations—the kids need sleep, they need this, they need that. But my kids were always part of what I did."

And today, they're an essential part of her success.

Manducatis

13-27 Jackson Ave at 47th St, Long Island City, Queens (718-729-4602). Subway: 7 to Vernon Blvd–Jackson Ave. Mon–Fri noon–10pm, Sat 5–11pm, Sun 2:30–8pm.

As a child growing up in the 1940s, Ida Evangelista trudged from her home in Cassino, Italy,



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Swing DeeJay until 1:00a

The Flipped Fedoras - May 6 | The Camaros - May 20
The Blue Saracens - May 13 | Bim Bam Baby - May 27

"Friday Night Fever" presented by
Miguel Marrero, Harvest Moon Ball Champion
Fridays May 7, 14, 21, 28
6:00p - 11:00p Hustle & Latin Lessons/VIP Lounge
11:00p - 4:00a main dance floor, show and dance contest

The Gerard Cavelli Orchestra - Friday, May 7 - 7:00p
Gary Setzer & King Cadillac - Saturday, May 8 - 7:30p & 9:30p
The Flipped Fedoras - Friday, May 14 - 7:30p
Vito Picone & The Elegants - Saturday, May 15 - 7:30p & 9:30p
The Morris Brothers - Friday, May 21 - 7:30p
Jose Alberto - Saturday, May 22 - 7:30p & 9:30p
Lisa Kirchner Showcase - Wednesday, May 26 - 9:00p

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every morning to the Cerbones' general store to buy milk. Truth be told, young Ida was less interested in dairy goods than in 20-year-old Vincenzo Cerbone. It was never in question: She knew that one day she would marry him. They've now been wed for nearly 40 years, and they've worked together for nearly 21 years at Manducatis, the critically touted restaurant they opened in 1979 on a nondescript avenue in Long Island City.

I arrived at Manducatis (the Latin equivalent of "y'all eat") before business hours on a Sunday morning, my husband and daughter in tow. We made our way through the bar area and into one of the two dining rooms. From there, we could spy Ida through the open kitchen door, stirring the day's pot of marinara with fresh herbs and vegetables on the counter beside her.

I had thought that my family would sit at another table while I talked to the Cerbones, but before I could say otherwise, a plate of Italian pastries and a couple of cappuccinos were plunked down, and the entire Cerbone clan joined my own.

While Ida and Vincenzo's daughter Gianna, 31, entertained my three-year-old with crayons and Barney songs, their eldest son and restaurant manager Anthony, 38, told us tales of celebrity visitors like Michael Douglas. Anthony's 37-year-old brother, Piero, who waits tables, also joined us.

For the Cerbone children, life has always revolved around the restaurant. Gianna remembers being in a playpen in the kitchen and, as a tot, learning how to make gnocchi. Piero describes how, when Ida was pregnant with him, her water broke while she was cooking at the restaurant. And Anthony points out that no one works harder than his mother, who does everything from chopping the garlic to cleaning the pots.

Ida is a slight woman for someone who's spent a lifetime in a kitchen. Renowned for Neapolitan specialties like carrot cannelloni and spectacular cannoli, she sits at the table with a beatific grin on her face as her children and husband heap praise on her, her hands in her aproned lap and her chef's hat pushed back like a nun's wimple.

Although the Cerbones have never resided more than a few blocks from the restaurant, Manducatis, open seven days a week, is where they truly live.

"I really care for what I do," Ida says. "This is my home, and all my customers are like my friends. It's like they're coming home for dinner."

Zarela

953 Second Ave between 50th and 51st Sts (644-6740). Subway: E, F to Lexington Ave; 6 to 51st St. Mon-Thu noon-11pm, Fri noon-11:30pm, Sat 5-11:30pm, Sun 5-10pm.

Had Zarela Martinez never become a mother, the acclaimed chef might still be a social worker. Born and raised in Chihuahua, Mexico, Martinez moved to El Paso, Texas, in the 1970s. When the mother of two learned she had twins on the way, she started catering for extra income. The business took off, and in 1983 she moved her family to New York, where she became executive chef at the now-defunct Café Marimba. "I had a cooking style that nobody else had," explains Martinez, adding, "the press was fascinated to find real Mexican food [in New York]."

But it wasn't until she opened Zarela in 1987 (by hitting up restaurant-world connections she had made the previous three years) that Martinez, 51, really became "Zarela." With her own place, the curvy, dark-haired chef could work the room and turn on her charm—charm that's earned her public-speaking engagements, a cookbook deal and soon, her own PBS cooking show.

Amid it all, she has also managed to be a mom. She's passed on her business acumen to her daughter Marissa Sanchez, 30, who manages Martinez's catering company as well as Zarela. And although Martinez doesn't actually roll tortillas or chop avocados anymore at her festive restaurant (she calls herself "chef de cuisine"), she's bestowed her cooking savvy to her 25-year-old son Aaron, who's been fortunate to grow up eating Mom's signature dishes like *manchamanteles de pato*—roasted duck in a red chili and dried-fruit mole.

Aaron had been receiving good reviews as the chef at L-Ray (which he just left), where his mother's influence, as well as those of mentors Paul Prudhomme and Patria's Douglas Rodriguez, was evident. "One of the things Aaron has taken from me is presentation," says Martinez. "It's simple—let the food speak for itself."

How do Aaron and Zarela differ as chefs? "Women chefs cook for you as if they are your mother, to comfort the customer," says Aaron. "Men are more there to be creative and artistic."

That, and to remind you that if it weren't for their moms, they'd never be chefs in the first place. ■