

## PEOPLE

## Taste of ITALY

Raffaele Ruggeri talks about his global restaurant chain Bice's history, the debt he owes his late grandmother and his brand of world cuisine



Brian Salter

It starts the moment you walk through the door. *Buona Sera!* You experience the first of your double takes as a couple of Filipina beauties greet you in well-rehearsed Italian. *Buona Sera Signor! Signora! Come Stai?* The greetings continue from passing waiters and from the maitre d' as you are shown to your table in Dubai's latest — and what must be its classiest — Italian restaurant.

We are at Bice Mare, located in the Souq al Bahar, across the lagoon from the world's largest shopping centre — Dubai Mall; our table looks straight out on to the world's tallest tower — Burj Khalifa; and right in front of us are playing the world's largest musical fountains. Before you even have time to sit down, you just know that this is going to be a special evening; that you're in for a treat.

"Bice [pronounced 'Bee-chay'] was the pet name for Beatrice Ruggeri," explains her grandson, Raffaele, now president and director of international operations of this multinational restaurant chain. He is over in Dubai from his HQ in Madison Avenue, New York, for the opening of this latest restaurant in a string of some 50 restaurants worldwide that his Group controls. This year, despite the downturn, his US operations alone have grossed some \$45 million. "Mare means 'sea'," he continues, "and this restaurant is dedicated to serving the best Italian seafood in the world. Seventy five per cent of the dishes we serve here are seafood."

The Bice Group is no stranger to Dubai. For the past nine years, there has been a Bice restaurant in

the Dubai Hilton, serving traditional Italian fare. You can also find them in Abu Dhabi, Jeddah, Doha and in a couple of months' time, in Bahrain, too.

"In 1926, my grandmother opened a *trattoria* (restaurant) in Milan. She was the first of 11 brothers and sisters and ended up cooking for everybody. She became an icon in Milan and 50 years later, her sons Remo and Roberto — my father — started the expansion of her vision of establishing a chain of restaurants throughout the world. In 1978, a second Bice opened in Sardinia, with New York a logical step for their third restaurant," Raffaele gushes, warming to his theme, almost as fast and as voluble as the fountains now playing at full force outside.

"From the age of seven, I spent Sundays with my father and grandmother in their restaurant in Milan, and from a very early age, I was taught the fine art of hospitality. I enjoyed being at the cash desk and carrying plates to the tables. For me, it was a very exciting thing to do. And, I grew up realising that this was what I wanted to do."

By the time Raffaele was 16, the family had moved to Los Angeles. "My immediate family are all in



America now," he says, adding that he now lives in Miami with his wife and two children, driving the three-hour journey to the office in New York, in preference to taking the plane. "My grandmother

carried on working in the Milan restaurant until she was 93, when her eyes finally gave up," he recalls, pensively. "But her influence is still everywhere in the Group, and there are three or four closely guarded recipes that have stayed with us around the world and that we maintain to this day," he adds.

What makes a restaurant great, as opposed to just being good, I wanted to know. Raffaele was in no doubt. "What's the most important thing in a restaurant? Location, location, location. Unfortunately, this is all too true. You can serve the very best food, but in a poor locality, no one will see you. This is a prestige location; an exciting location. We wanted to make no mistakes and offer the best of the very best that we could, with no room for compromise. Here with the Burj and the water fountains, we have it all! We have a location to die for. From a visual point of view in Dubai, there is simply nothing to match."

It would appear that he has a point. Despite being open for such a short time, you'll need to book two weeks in advance if you want to guarantee a table at the Bice Mare. Raffaele would be the first to admit that it is not cheap. "There are some substantial prices on the menu so we only draw a certain clientele who have been to the best restaurants in the world and know what good food is. It is a combination of texture, looks, smell, taste, colour, crunch; and we make sure that everybody who comes in to our restaurants gets an unforgettable experience including service, charm, politeness, food... the whole encounter is important."

So, given the undoubted success of the Bice Group, does Raffaele have any new ambitions to accomplish? "As long as I feel I can express my creativity and am fulfilled, I am happy," he purrs, contentedly. "For the past two years, I have been working on merchandising and food branding and have some new ventures about to start, including household linens, plates, glassware, dishes... as well as prepared food such as dry and fresh pasta, tomato peel and sauces. We'll only be supplying gourmet outlets," he explains hurriedly. "Not regular supermarkets. This will not be a mass product. It has to represent the quality of our worldwide image."

We could go on all night. Raffaele Ruggeri could talk for Italy. But eventually all good things must come to an end and with stomachs and palates well satiated, it is time to draw to a close and head for home. *'Buona Notte!'* chorus the staff, still busy whisking plates around the restaurant. *'Arrivederci!'* We've enjoyed having you.

But not half as much as we've enjoyed being here.

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## The Record Traveller

Kashi Samaddar has visited 194 countries in record time — and has stormed into the Guinness Book not once, but twice

A simple farmer's young son used to watch planes flying over from a small village near Hoogli in West Bengal, India. He was fascinated by the great winged machines — but had no idea that people could actually travel in them. The same boy, now in his early fifties, has entered the *Guinness Book of World Records*, not once, but twice after breaking his own record, for visiting all the 194 sovereign countries in a record time of 12 years, eight months and 13 days, and six years, 10 months and seven days. JAYA SARKAR discovers Kashi Samaddar's voyage from a village to the world.

#### On himself.

I was brought up in a small village with very little exposure to the outside world. My parents knew the importance of education and wanted my siblings and myself to pursue education seriously. I did a BSc degree with Physics honours and BTech in power engineering. In 14 years, I grew from a sales engineer to a company head. I moved to Dubai in 1992. My profession requires me to go around the world very frequently.

#### Did this make you ambitious to set a record?

My frequent travels have definitely given me an opportunity to set the record. During my travels, I used to face different kinds of travel-related problems.

The most intense problem was rejection of visa for unjustified reasons. Once, when I was travelling to Brazil, my visa was refused whereas my Korean counterpart got in without any difficulty. I was stranded at the airport for two days. This was unfair and unreasonable. I tried to bring these issues to the notice of the authorities, but I was never taken seriously. The discrimination in issuing a visa as per the nationality made me want to do something substantial. One needs to be remarkable to get noticed.

I found that this was one area which was not ventured before. I had already travelled around 80 countries by then. I made personal visits to the countries I had not travelled. This was not an easy task as it requires a great deal of effort, energy, time and money.

#### Has the Guinness Book of World Records made a difference?

A great difference. Now, I am known as an ambassador of goodwill. A lot of people from different walks of life from all over the globe have joined me. There is a structure body called Peace through Tourism. Our website [www.ttpglobal.com](http://www.ttpglobal.com) deals with many other issues like guiding people to obtain visa through a proper channel. All the guidelines required for travelling are given on request, such as necessary documents, contact details of offices, authorities etc. For several countries, like Costa Rica, Macedonia, Panama and Tonga, one needs to travel to nearby countries instead of going there directly. Any other travel-related queries are answered within 48 hours.

#### How are you evolving through all this travel?

Travelling to Third World countries has rekindled my philanthropic aspiration. It's like rediscovering my own self. The world is beautiful and so are people, irrespective of their colour, religion or nationality.

We are all fellow earth dwellers. We need to have a sense of belonging to it.

#### Travelling is an exorbitantly expensive affair. How do you manage finances?

I've spent around Dh2.5 million in personal travel to set the record. I have a supportive team at work but no sponsors so far. I believe if the intention is good, help comes from some unimaginable sources.

#### So where there is a will, there is a bill, too...

It goes hand in hand. I have no monetary support so far. Yet, I am happy that a small move that I took has turned into a global movement. I have support from all over the world but the biggest support is from my wife, without whom I wouldn't have achieved this. Travelling across the globe at different time zones, climatic conditions; food, language are humungous challenges. Meeting and befriending people of different cultural backgrounds is a fulfilling experience.

#### Any nightmares to share?

Yes, quite a few nightmares like losing important documents and subsequently, facing the hassles. Stranded at airports or in hotel rooms due to delay or cancelled flights. The worst was when I was in Somalia and crossing the Guyana-Suriname border in South America. I literally had to go through riot-affected areas. Seeing convoys and military men armed with ammunition was a frightening sight.

#### Next destination: the moon or Mars?

Neither. I am fortunate to live on this planet which is so beautiful and if at all I can give it back its due, in terms of simply maintaining its beauty, I will consider myself lucky.

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KNOWING NO BORDERS: Two-time Guinness Book of World Records entrant, Kashi Samaddar. KT Photo/ Bernard Testa