



The Journal



Fellini Café in the heart of Texas

Italian hotspot takes shape in Houston City Centre



Unique minimalistic look built by Oscartek and imported from Italy

Houston Nov 1, 2015; On "Italian Scooter and Bike Night" at the coffee bar Fellini Caffè in Rice Village, Fabrizio Consiglio parked his Ducati beside six other Italian motorbikes.

He walked to a sidewalk table where other male Italian immigrants were sharing a bottle of Prosecco. He kissed his friend Valerio Giuliani on each cheek. They all spoke in Italian. Consiglio arrived in Houston this spring, while another man at his table, Matteo Beltrami, had been in the New World just 48 hours. Even Fellini's pastry chef Giuseppe Montoro was baking in a Palermo pasticceria two months ago.

Houston attracts not just a wide variety of immigrant groups but also entrepreneurs in the restaurant business who know how to tap into the communities.

Fellini co-owner Paolo Fronza, an Italian immigrant himself, began pulling in Italian-born customers as soon as he opened one

month ago at the new Hanover Rice Village development at 5211 Kelvin. He goes to lengths to make the place look and feel like the home they left behind.

"All groups look for a place to congregate," said Charles Gallagher, chairman of the sociology department and a researcher of immigration issues at La Salle University in Philadelphia.

European-style cafes tend to be upscale.

"Italian espresso machines are beautiful and help give the place cachet," he said. "It's a way to differentiate it from Starbucks."

Fellini's equipment was imported from Italy. Most of its employees are Italian-born, as is the architect. Many of the Italian-born customers are either engineers or medical researchers.

First-generation entrepreneurs catering to their own immigrant group have a built-in advantage, said Betsy Gelb, professor of marketing at the Bauer College of Business at the University of Houston.

"Your customers want you to succeed," she said.

There have been times when every Fellini customer was speaking Italian, Fronza said.

They learned of Fellini through Fronza's friends and his Facebook page, said Fronza, a former executive with the Italy-America Chamber of Commerce of Texas.

Fronza said the Fellini project cost about \$350,000, funded by personal finances. He and his partner, Salvatore Albelice, a local distributor of Italian-branded coffee and coffee equipment, spent \$100,000 on the bar alone. It includes stainless-steel display cases and refrigerators, all imported from Italy.

The developers of Hanover Rice Village had been approached by other coffeehouse concepts but picked Fellini even though the owners had no cafe experience, said David Ott, the company's development partner.

They were confident knowing longtime local restaurateur Nash D'Amico would be helping them set up the business, he said, and were convinced it would feel authentic and complement Rice Village coffeehouses Croissant Brioche and Salento.

Hanover Rice Village has exceptionally wide sidewalks, Ott said, with room for Fellini's walk-up window for coffee orders. Later at the same project Coppa restaurant will have a walk-up pizza window and Cyclone Anaya's will have a taco window.

Fellini's architect, Florence native Filo Castore, associate principal at the Houston office of Perkins & Will, said he



Pastry chef Giuseppe Montoro poses with crême puffs

wanted the streamlined modern interior to resemble coffee bars in Italy. "This is the most Italian place in Houston," said Houston native Jerry Baiamonte, past president of the Houston Cultural and Community Center. "The way the high-end stainless steel bar displays the sandwiches and pastries - you know you're walking into a spiffy Italian spot."

Francesco Fusco, an aerospace engineer, said he can live the Italian lifestyle at Fellini.

In the morning he'll stand at the counter and have a breakfast of cornetto, an Italian croissant, and a cappuccino, and in little time he is on his way, he said.



Italian delights served fresh

Did This Year's World's Fair Change the Future of Food?

by Anna Roth Oct 29, 2015, 1:00p

The food-themed Expo Milano 2015 wraps up in Italy this month. But what did it actually accomplish? I'm sitting in the dining car on a vintage train in Russia, eating pork-stuffed pelmini, drinking vodka, and watching the springtime countryside slide by the windows. Well, almost: The windows are LCD screens, the luggage next to me is a prop, and my table is facing a constant stream of people exiting an interactive display that touts Russia's agricultural prowess over a thumping techno beat.

This is the fun, weird restaurant in the Russian pavilion at Expo Milano 2015, the most recent World's Fair wrapping up this week on the outskirts of Milan. One hundred and forty-five participating countries have set up immersive, townhouse-sized pavilions along a nearly mile-long strip. Strolling along the promenade with thousands of other gawking tourists, you're greeted by everything from a Thai temple to an Iranian garden to Russia's mirrored monolith.

Most countries deal with the theme only superficially... Expo feels like a huge missed opportunity to bring about real change.



First Lady Michelle Obama, with chefs Mario Batali and John Besh at the Milan Expo.

Photo: Pier Marco

Each pavilion is supposed to engage with this year's food-focused theme, "Feeding the Planet. Energy for Life." But hunger and climate change are downers, and most countries deal with the theme only superficially, instead treating their pavilion like a multistory, multi-sensory propaganda machine that dwells on their country's greatest culinary assets.

Expo organizers are quick to point out the impressive array of events and conferences throughout Milan and Italy to correspond with the fair, which could plant seeds for innovations in the future. But nearly 20 million people visited Expo from around the world. Though it's easy to think that maybe if everyone learned one thing that's better than nothing — the "spoonful of sugar" brand of activism — Expo also feels like a huge missed opportunity to bring about real change. More than that, it could be a sign for what armchair activists we've all become: We come, we gawk, we conclude that hunger is a big problem in the world, and we move on with our lives with the mistaken idea that awareness is the same as action.



Ready for the party at the DUOMO terrace with ciam s.p.a team The Nutella Pavilion at Expo Milan. Photo: Marta Carenzi/Mondadori Portfolio via Getty Images

The World's Fair used to have a more significant role in people's imagination. The concept grew from French national exhibitions in the early 19th century, but the bar was set with Victoria and Albert's dazzling Crystal Palace at the 1851 Great Exhibition in London, when the World's Fair transitioned from a gathering to an Event.

Subsequent World's Fairs brought new inventions like the telephone, the electrical outlet, the Ferris wheel, and architectural icons like the Eiffel Tower, San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts, and the Space Needle. Even as the magic started to wane in the latter half of the 20th century, the World's Fair continued, ruled by a governing body in London, and debuted videoconferencing, touchscreens, and more.

World's Fairs have also been seats of culinary innovation — all those people have to eat somewhere. Ice cream cones and hot dogs were popularized in 1904 St. Louis; Cracker Jack and Cream of Wheat in 1893 Chicago. Several restaurants from the 1962 World's Fair in Flushing, Queens made the jump from the fair to Manhattan restaurant, including the legendary Midtown spot Le Pavilion, which came from the staff of the fair's French pavilion.

Davis likes to think of the gathering as the equivalent of a handwritten note in the age of email.

It's pretty surprising that the World's Fair still exists at all, and the whole concept seems impossibly quaint. Now, news of huge technology innovations comes in tweets and live-streamed special events, and if we want to marvel at crazy architecture or immerse ourselves in a fantastic environment, we have Vegas, Disney, and Dubai. Even the idea of bringing the world together in one place seems dated, like an AOL ad from the early '90s. But maybe there is something real in that earnest idealism — that there's value in

coming together IRL, not just over the busyness of the internet.

"People question [World's Fairs'] relevance in this day and age, and certainly there are faster ways to get information about technology," says Mitchell Davis, who was in charge of the content, programming and design for the U.S. Pavilion. "But because that is true, physically bringing these people together — staying together for six months, participating with other countries — is almost profound." He likes to think of the gathering as the equivalent of a handwritten note in the age of email.

The "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life" theme was chosen back in 2008, when Italy was putting in its bid to host the 2015 Expo (host cities are selected by committee, like the Olympics). It seemed like a natural fit for the food-focused country. "With its world-famous Mediterranean cuisine, Italy definitely has so much to share with the world on food and nutrition issues," explains Piero Galli, general manager of the Expo's event management division, in an email. He thinks that the choice of food and sustainability as a central theme "contributed significantly to winning the bid."

Countries then presented their plans for pavilions, working from a set of guidelines created by the Expo Committee. These measured the sustainability of the pavilions' architecture, furniture, and food services, along with their engagement with the nutrition-focused theme, though that part was a little fuzzier. Countries were



Oscartek brand at the ciam s.p.a booth

"invited" to present solutions to hunger and food insecurity, and participate in some of the more concrete initiatives like Women for Expo, though neither was an explicit requirement.



The square look is back with advanced cooling technology

The guidelines also state that "the title chosen for Expo focuses not only on human nutrition but also on nurturing the environment in which we live, the place where the food we eat comes from." Countries pay a lot of money to participate in Expo, so it makes sense that they want to show off their assets in the best way possible. Kazakhstan's immersive tourism video showing the agricultural riches of the country, Spain and Morocco's displays of their main ingredients, Brazil's giant steel bouncy net, Russia's whatever-that-was... all were visually stunning, but none gave me a good sense of the ways in which these countries were engaging with the world food system's biggest problems.

Not all countries went this route, however. The U.S. offered one of the better nutrition-focused pavilions, perhaps because it doesn't have a set department to deal with these Expos. The Italian organizing committee instead recruited chief creative officer Davis from the James Beard Foundation (he is the executive vice president of JBF, and will return when the Expo madness is over). Davis worked closely with the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and other organizations to create the displays, but food was always the focus.

"So much has happened in the last 25 years in America in food, there are things we can teach the world," he says. The U.S. food market has global influence, and comes with a fair share of controversy. Davis and his peers saw Expo as an opportunity to show the world that the U.S. was actively working to create better food systems, and not just a country of industrial farms relying on pesticides and GMOs.

Switzerland's pavilion provided the most effective lesson about resource-sharing I've ever participated in.

Guests entered the red, white, and blue structure by a ramp and were greeted by a message from President Obama, then could peruse interactive displays on farming, policy, nutrition, research, and more. (It wasn't all hard stuff. The first floor had a walkthrough of short animated videos about American cuisine and a gorgeous photo set documenting regional foods, while the back featured food trucks serving lobster rolls, barbecue, and hamburgers.)

Switzerland's pavilion featured towers filled with 2.5 million sleeves of Nescafé, two million salt packets, 420,000 bags of dried apples, and even fewer cups for water. You could take as much as you wanted, but the supplies wouldn't be refilled for the duration of Expo. It was the most effective lesson about resource-sharing I've ever participated in: I took greedy handfuls of instant coffee packets and dried apple rings from the halfway-full towers to supplement my budget traveling, and did feel a twinge of guilt about taking more than my perceived share. (The apples and water supplies are now totally gone; salt and coffee are still hovering around halfway full.)

And the U.K.'s pavilion also took on the real issue of declining honeybee populations — even if the garden-to-giant-steel-hive concept was a bit convoluted, it at least got points for trying.

The most forthright was the U.N.'s massive Pavilion Zero, right in front of the entrance, which gave a dramatic visual walkthrough of the biggest issues facing the global food system today. One room had dozens of TV screens showing food commercials interspersed with commodity prices around the world. Others had a garbage sculpture meant to bring your attention to food waste, and a stunning diorama of a landscape that changes from pastoral to industrial. That pavilion is the first thing most people see at Expo, and in many cases, the most relevant.



All glass Wine Coolers

It's easy to get overwhelmed at the festival, but as I wandered around the pavilions, eating Belgian frites and admiring Israel's vertical garden, I wondered: Where was the real Tomorrowland stuff, the utopian (or dystopian) visions of the future that would look dated in a decade or two?

A trailer housing a mechanical bartender always had a crew of Instagrammers around it, but it seemed more gimmicky than innovative. The Wine Pavilion featured 1,400 Italian wines in climate-controlled, self-serve wine dispensing machines; certainly a collection that would have been impossible a half-century ago, but can wine preservation technology save the world?

Hidden behind Spain and Mexico's pavilions was the thing I'd been looking for: The Supermarket of the Future. It was designed by Carlo Ratti, director of the SENSEable City Lab at M.I.T., who teamed up with an Italian grocery chain to produce an interactive shopping experience. When you picked up a food — an apple, a bottle of wine, a pack of prosciutto — a display above it would show not only health information, but also details about its sourcing, carbon footprint, and more.

Of everything I saw, it was the thing that made me feel like I was seeing a future that was better than this one. But as it turns out, many of these conversations may not be taking place at Expo at all, but were happening in tandem. It may be that we're only going to be able to see the legacy of Expo in the rearview mirror.

"Of everything I saw, it was the thing that made me feel like I was seeing a future that was better than this one."

It's maybe best to think less of the Expo as a World's Fair and more as a conference that had a theme park attached. Like Davos or the MAD Symposium, it's possible that the connections between people and countries will become the lasting legacy. "For the first time in its centuries-old history, this Expo did not aim to simply be an exhibition of human progress, but... become a global and interactive event," says Galli. "[Expo] promotes discussion and cooperation between nations, organizations, and businesses to develop joint strategies to improve the quality of life and support the environment."

So that may mean the American-run food and technology accelerator, which connected 12 companies that are engaging with the development of food in different way, from organic animal feed to floating greenhouses. The U.N. organized World Food Day, which brought dignitaries from all over the world to the Expo grounds (Secretary of State John Kerry gave remarks for the U.S.). And a number of projects have come together to address some of these themes and could do more in the future.

The next World's Fair is in Dubai in 2020. It is about water — an issue closely tied to food production, and likely one that will grow with climate change. Hopefully countries will see it as a way to pool resources and knowledge and create meaningful change. If that were the case, the World's Fair could maybe have social resonance once again.



361 Beach Road, Burlingame, CA 94010

Tel: 855.885.2400 | 650.342.2400 | Fax: 650.342.7400 | www.oscartek.com