

Soul OF Sicily

For Italian-Americans, it was the moment when the meatballs got big. We speak of the 1950s, when at least some of the thousands of immigrants who had poured into New York City from impoverished regions of Italy finally began to see the postwar fruits of their sacrifice. Prosperity was within reach, and they expected their meal at the neighborhood restaurant to express that.

“You’re seeing more protein at the table now, because they can afford it,” said the chef Mario Carbone, who on Friday plans to open a restaurant, Carbone, that pays tribute to that booming, transformational time. “They’re becoming more American. They’re embracing what it means to be American. They’re like: ‘I’m going to show off. We’re going to have meatballs tonight, and they’re huge!’”

At their restaurants Parm and Torrisi Italian Specialties, Mr. Carbone, his fellow chef Rich Torrisi and their business partner, Jeff Zalaznick, have in recent years helped New Yorkers shake off any snobby quibbles about “authenticity” and rediscover the pleasures of classic red-sauce cuisine. Carbone will get rolling on Thompson Street in Greenwich Village, in a space that used to house Rocco, which specialized in that kind of fare for nearly a century. Just about every element — the menu, the music, the uniforms, the décor and even the servers’ banter with customers — will be engineered to conjure up the feeling of a lively night downtown, circa 1958.

“When you look at the menu at this restaurant, it’s going to look very familiar, which is the goal.”

— Mr. Carbone

Then again, you might say it’s the middle of the last century as interpreted by chic players from the early part of this one: the contemporary art on the walls of the three rooms will be curated by Vito Schnabel, a son of the painter and film director Julian Schnabel, and the servers will wear vintage-style vests and tuxedos conceived by the designer Zac Posen.

The food, too, will get a 21st-century makeover. As Mr. Zalaznick pointed out, Italian-American fare is “still around, but hasn’t been given the love and care that it deserves.”

So, yes, there will be linguine with clams, and lobster fra diavolo, and Caesar salad, and various permutations of piccata, Marsala and scarpariello. “You could place your order right now, because you know the menu,” Mr. Carbone said. □

