



# La dolce vita – direct from Italy

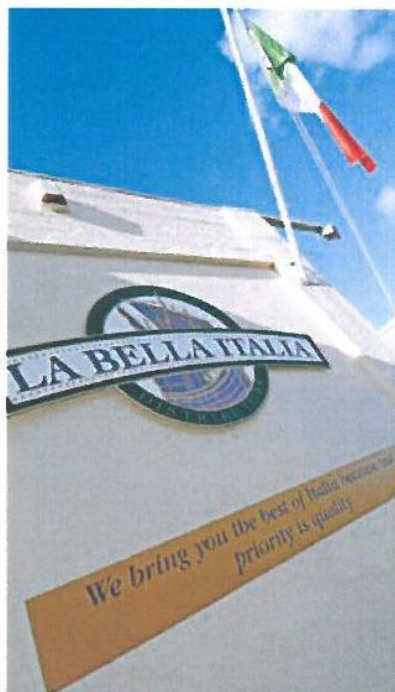
Words MARTYN PEPPERELL Photos WILLIAM DAVENPORT

Located in the eclectic suburb of Petone, just across from the harbour foreshore, La Bella Italia's La Mamma flagship store is an oasis of Italian food, wine, passion, history and culture. As authentic as it gets, a trip up the motorway to visit La Mama for breakfast, lunch or dinner (or even just to collect some Italian deli items) is an escapist opportunity to bask in the rustic decadence of countryside Italian cuisine.

The flagship store for the La Bella Italia brand, La Mamma is, much like the rest of the La Bella Italia Empire (which includes a similar space on The Terrace – La Bambina No.1, a product warehouse in the Hutt Valley and several selling points in Auckland), the brainchild of Antonio Cacace.

Chief architect of the La Bella Italia brand, Antonio is a native Italian and third-generation hospitality proprietor. Having now lived in Wellington for 18 years, Antonio is equally proud of his home and his adopted land of residence. Over this period of time, he's built himself into an exuberant self-made success with a first class reputation in the local and national hospitality industry. What is his recipe for success? How has Antonio reached this point?

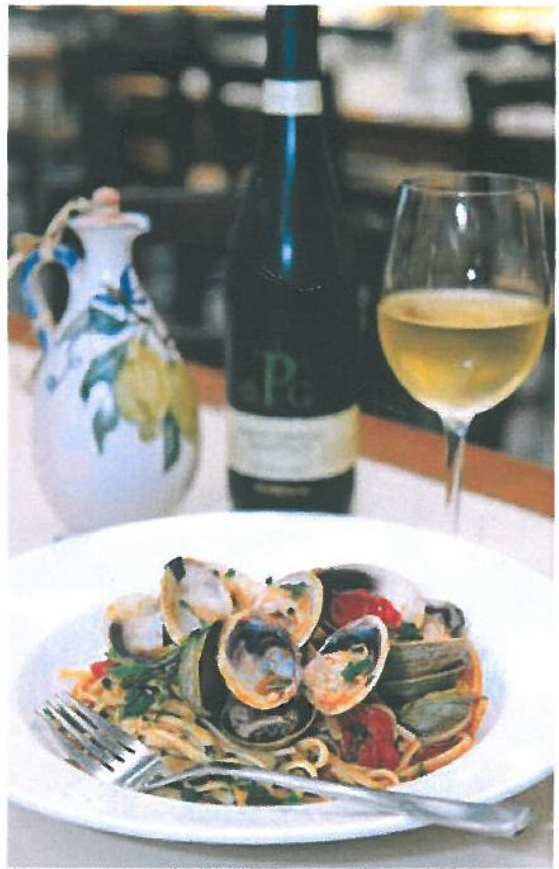
In his words: "A good atmosphere and good people, combined with good food and good wine is the right



recipe isn't it?" Obviously that is a pretty modest way of describing a business built on hard work and determination, but that's Antonio's way – keeping his focus on the good things in life. And some of these good things include freshly imported Italian foodstuffs and delicacies, an area Antonio has focused on since La Bella Italia's inception in 1996.

Operating from 7.30am to 5pm from Monday to Wednesday, and extended hours Thursday to Sunday (open 9am on the weekend with late closing), as a restaurant/café, La Mamma serves a selection of appetisers, antipasto dishes, pasta, sides, grilled pot and pan dishes – a mixture of meat, fish, chicken and vegetarian options – plus dolci-sweets, quality coffee and an extensive range of Italian and New Zealand wines (which can be matched by staff to meals on request).

"We are very proud of what we do," says Antonio. "We try everyday to look after our customers the best with a pronto-service." With all food and drinks prepared in traditional Italian ways, inherited by Antonio from his Michelin chef father and chef grandfather, La Mamma changes its menu every season. It places an emphasis on freshness, particularly with its locally sourced seafood and lamb products, which Antonio describes as, "some of the best in the world". A real star on the menu is the fresh and succulent Mozzarella di Bufala, which



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arrives in the country every two weeks straight from Antonio's home region in Italy.

Often imitated by newer businesses looking to capture the authentic 'made in Italy' feel of La Bella Italia, as Antonio firmly states: "If you want the 'autentico' [Italian for being or reflecting the essential or genuine character of something], La Mamma and the other La Bella Italia stores are the place to be."

La Mamma is also a deli store, stocking 27 different types of Italian cheese, a good selection of French cheeses and a variety of small goods products (Antonio was the first to import Prosciutto di Parma into New Zealand). Basically, all the ingredients you need to recreate a slice of La Bella Italia at home.

Of course, having access to the right ingredients is only one part of the equation, so to facilitate a fuller level of understanding, La Bella Italia also run comprehensive demonstration dinners, where diners are introduced to the secrets of the ingredients and cooking process. Taking it to the next level, they host popular hands-on cooking classes for both adults and children.

For the ultimate in Italian culture aficionados, Antonio can take you even further and, for those in the know, regularly does. His food and culture tours to Italy, a several-week long trip he personally leads on a regular basis through the regions of Italy. In his words: "The tours

started as my way of fulfilling a passion for the products, perfumes, colours of my country and especially my hometown. Many people have shared this passion and I want even more to experience it. This tour is the culmination of the request of so many of my customers, now friends."

Fittingly, La Bella Italia also organise the Italian Festival New Zealand, an event which this year will be held at the Westpac Trust Stadium. "It will be bigger and better, with the best of products made in Italy on display and, of course, all available to eat and drink," says Antonio.

Juggling multiple restaurants, a warehouse and all of La Bella Italia's extra projects is no easy feat and while Antonio often looks very busy, he is never too fatigued to happily pass on his singular passion for his home country to his New Zealand friends. As he concludes, "At the end of every single day, it is a great satisfaction for me to see such happy people dining and shopping in my restaurants and shops."

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