



MAMMA MIA!

How a brave idea from a little restaurant in New South Wales has beaten Italy on the world stage.

FOR DECADES, FRANCA CECE has proudly offered her homemade limoncello to family, friends and more recently, the diners at a very traditional restaurant that is attached to a petrol station about an hour's drive out of Sydney.

The wood fired pizza might be the first thing that draws in the uninitiated, but out the back, Franca and her sister Eugenia, are hard at work producing their Calabrian dishes the way their mother and grandmother did. All the pasta and gnocchi are handmade and you will find goat and rabbit, homemade desserts and cakes on the menu. Franca can't leave the diners wanting though and she hands all her customers a shot glass of digestive limoncello at the end of their meal.

Many of them have, over the years, begged her to sell them some, but since she didn't have a liquor licence she couldn't oblige. Now, thanks to her son

Domenico, Franca's lovingly preserved family recipe has taken a giant step out of "The Local Italian" in semi-rural Bargo and found itself wearing the highest honour at the prestigious International Wine & Spirit Competition in London, beating the entries from Italy, The Netherlands and New Zealand.

Franca and her family arrived in Australia when she was 10, from a tiny rural spot in the Cosenza region of Calabria. There was a long family and regional tradition of making liqueurs since it was the only way that poorer families could enjoy them. When she was old enough, the recipe was passed on to her. When she married Giuseppe, they bought a service station in Bargo, about 100 kilometres from Sydney and off the F5 freeway, with its flora and fauna reserves and these days, popular bushwalking tracks and nearby wine and

tourist regions. In 2006, sons Dom and Davide, converted a shop next door into a wood fired pizza restaurant, with Franca as "head chef."

Dom had watched the customers begging Franca for a take home version of her limoncello. "I began helping mum to make it and soon mastered the art," Dom says. Once he was satisfied that it matched Franca's version perfectly, he decided to produce it for the customers. Franca was totally unaware of what he was doing. It was Dom's secret surprise – a tribute for her years of hard work. But, things are never that easy. Dom describes his quest for a liquor licence as "two and a half painful years" and two rejections before he was handed the precious piece of paper earlier this year.

Throughout that waiting time, he continued to practice making it and also bought the Cello trademark. Davide, a

graphic designer by trade worked on the label designs and they'd put Franca's photograph on the back of the bottle. Once they'd perfected that, Dom handed one to Franca and asked what she thought of the Limoncello he said he'd bought in Sydney's Leichhardt. "She said 'nice looking bottle', so I asked her to look at the back. There was a long pause and complete silence. The tears were rolling down her face. She was so happy and proud and couldn't believe we'd kept it secret from her," Dom says. She could now sell it to her customers.

Cece Liqueur Pty was born. With Franca's blessing and encouragement, Dom started working on other flavours. He produced four – lemon, lime, orange and passionfruit. By the middle of March this year, the first Cello bottles appeared on the shelves of a local bottle shop. But, Dom was hankering after a competition to test his "baby."

"After speaking to industry experts, I decided I would enter them into a competition, but not just any competition. It had to be the International Wine and Spirits Competition in London. The IWSC is the biggest, most prestigious and most stringent competition in the world. My philosophy was if they were good they would win awards and if they didn't, then I'd go back to the drawing board to improve them," Dom says.

While he was waiting for the competition results, he took a trip to Italy to learn more of the secrets around liqueurs. On July 27 the results were released. The Limoncello was placed first in its category and the others had picked up a silver and two bronze medals. "That wasn't bad for a micro producer who had only received his licence five months prior!" Dom says.



The judges' notes on the winning limoncello were: "Bright lemony colour with an opaque appearance. Cracking nose, bursting with juicy Sicilian lemon aromas which follow through in the mouth. Vibrant acidity, a slightly pithy bitterness and succulent lemon flavours, with very good distillate. A very serious product, beautifully made."

It wasn't long before he had around 30 bars, restaurants and bottle shops in NSW on his client list.

Dom puts the success down to the quality of the lemons he uses. Sourced from Peter's Ridge on the NSW central coast, they are "as close to organic as you can get" and while they don't look pretty they are bursting with flavour. He ensures they are carefully peeled using only the outer skin of the citrus to maximise the natural oils and not too much sugar.

And, Dom isn't stopping there. In

the age old Italian tradition of wasting nothing when it comes to produce, there is a homemade line of Cello jams made from the leftover liqueur fruit. Later this year, he will also launch, with Serendipity Ice Creams, a range of alcoholic sorbets for adults.

In between, he's heading for a major liqueur and spirits competition in Chicago and will also enter the Australian international contest.

Back in Bargo, Franca not only continues to offer her customers their after dinner shot, but she autographs the bottles they can now buy. Giuseppe adds another dimension by singing an operatic aria for the diners now and then.

The Local Italian can be located at 116-118 Rainside Avenue Bargo.

FURTHER INFORMATION:
www.celloliqueurs.com