

Forbes



The Culinary King of Sutton Place *Shivani Vora Contributor*

Let's face it: New York's Sutton Place, located in the East 50's near the East River, isn't exactly known as a happening part of town. The restaurant options, for one, are few and far between, and the places that do exist are average at best.

Enter Pino Luongo, a renowned restaurateur and chef, who has transformed the area's dining scene and can be credited with turning this sleepy stretch of Manhattan into a culinary destination in its own right. I like to call him "the culinary king of Sutton Place."

Luongo has a long history of running successful Manhattan restaurants. He's the talent behind the still storied hotspots Le Madri in Chelsea and Coco Pazzo on the Upper East Side. Both are decades-old institutions that are now closed; yet, their fame, along with Luongo's, still remains.

On Sutton Place, Luongo has two eateries to his name: Morso, open since 2011 and serving upscale but approachable Italian regional cuisine. A half block away, there's Coco Pizzeria, opened since 2021 and offering delicious pizzas, along with a variety of raw seafood and pastas.

Many of the neighborhood's residents are regulars at both establishments and dine several times a week.

Mike Lynn Salthouse, for example, says, "As a more than weekly diner at Morso, I can confidently say that this charming Italian gem has stolen our hearts. In fact, we eat there so often that our children tell their friends we live in an "assisted living facility" as it is housed in our building. Our families have held every special occasion there for last 10 years, including a major birthday party for 80 people this past October. It's also worth noting Morso's prices are reasonable for the quality of the dining experience. We feel privileged to feel part of the Morso family."

Kate McGrath is another fan. "Alongside Pino's unique talent as the restaurateur extraordinaire who introduced Tuscan cuisine to America is his how he makes everyone who comes to his restaurants feel like family – and then builds that family into a community," she says. "I specifically remember Saturday nights during the pandemic when two friends and I ate at outside at Morso every week (even in the cold of the winter) just to see and keep in touch with our neighbors. This tradition of family and community continues on to the present day at Morso and Coco Pizzeria."

Now, it's time to hear from Luongo himself about why he decided to establish a presence on Sutton Place, how he's different from other Italian restaurants and what he hopes to do next. Our interview follows.

Why did you choose to open restaurants in Sutton Place? I have always been a pioneer and liked a challenge.

I would refer you to my restaurant Sapore di Mare: it was located in an unlikely Tudor house on the side of Montauk Highway and became a very successful Hampton's restaurant in the 80's and 90's.

In Sutton Place, I saw an underappreciated residential community in the middle of Manhattan, where many customers from my prior locations now made their homes. I found a clientele eager for fine dining in their neighborhood, a place where I could get reasonably priced rent and the real deal breaker – accessible outdoor space. Thus, much like the proverb, “If the Mountain won't go to Mohammed, then Mohammed must come to the Mountain,” I decided to bring fine dining to Sutton Place.

New York, especially the neighborhood, and the Upper East Side overall, is full of Italian restaurants. How is Morso different? It is true, there are a lot of Italian restaurants on the Upper East Side, but I find it exciting to take on the competition. Their claims of being the best Italian restaurant always pushed me to be my best. However, many of them are generic while I do regional cuisine. Morso is primarily Tuscan, but I include dishes from many other regions as well.

Tell me about the style of cooking and some of the signature dishes. My style is one inspired by ingredients and the seasonality of the ingredients. I am against all ingredients, all year-round. In the late fall and winter, I like game dishes and more hearty food while in the summer, my emphasis is on seafood.

Some of my most accoladed dishes are the Rigatoni alla Butera, Spaghetti Rustica, Pollo Martini, Stracotto (Tuscan pot roast) and Grigliata di Mare Mista or mixed grilled seafood.

What was the impetus to opening Coco Pizzeria? About eight years into Morso being a Sutton Place staple, I felt the need for residents to have another place to dine. One thing that was missing was a restaurant-style pizzeria where customers would sit down, enjoy table service or dining at the bar, hang out and enjoy their pizza or other dishes.

How is the eatery unique from other pizza spots in town? The concept is female oriented with the pink décor and the oysters and bubbles in addition to pizza, we offer a full range of salads, appetizers, pastas, desserts, including Focaccia Nutella, and our very own appetizer, the Buzzetti, a mini, half-calzone with four different fillings. Customers don't come in a grab a slice and go, but they stay for the experience of drinks and a good meal in an energetic environment.

Why should people eat at either Morso or Coco Pizzeria? They eat at Morso or Coco Pizzeria to join their friends and neighbors for a meal with excellent food, made with fresh, seasonal ingredients and served by a staff that welcomes them like family.

At one point or another, both restaurants have been called Sutton Place's version of “Cheers.” The two restaurants provide the neighborhood with more opportunities to dine out more often. and do not dilute each other's business as long as the experience at both is positive in terms of service, quality and food.

Tell me about how you think Sutton Place has evolved since you opened here. When I opened, it was a sleepy community with few dining options. I was able to offer a dining experience that checked all of the boxes in terms of food, experience and service. Over the years, the more mature customer base began to appreciate the many amenities I could offer such as outdoor dining, holiday special menus, live music and special occasion parties and events. As the amenities became better known, they became more popular and were patronized by a larger customer base, drawing from neighborhoods beyond Sutton Place.

What do you think that the area is still missing, and do you have plans to open more places here? The area is missing the pre-pandemic way of life! The area is missing the many residents who left during the pandemic and have not returned. We need those residents to return to Sutton Place and re-join our vibrant community.