

PLOW TO PLATE FILM SERIES

August 14, 2023



LE CIRQUE: A TABLE IN HEAVEN

By Adam Rabiner

“It’s a family affair,” sing Sly and the Family Stone. That sums up this documentary about Sirio Maccioni, the founder and genial host of Le Cirque, the famed Manhattan restaurant known for its celebrity clientele. Sirio is front and central, and deservedly so—as he is simultaneously funny, charming, and loving. But supporting roles are played by his three adult sons: the oldest, Mario; middle Marco; and youngest Mauro; as well as his long-time wife, Egidiana. They would add the following words to describe Sirio: “Stubborn, old-fashioned, critical, and infuriating.”

Sirio has an interesting backstory. Working in the belly of a cruise ship in 1956, he was too busy waiting tables to witness the Statue of Liberty, as the *SS Atlantic* sailed into New York harbor. But he fell in love with Manhattan—“jumped ship”—then worked as a waiter at Delmonico’s. By the early 1960s, he had become the maitre d’hotel of the Colony restaurant. He opened Le Cirque in 1974 to immediate success.

Sirio makes a point of showing that he “hates” the restaurant business. According to his autobiography, his father, who died when he was twelve, “swore that I was never, ever to go into restaurants, or hotels, unless it was with a beautiful woman, and I was staying there as a guest.” Yet he disregarded this advice, and enrolled at the hotel

school in his hometown of Montecatini, Italy, and trained as a waiter. He once said, “I saw opening a restaurant as serious business—a profession that is respectable, if you are stupid enough to do it.” He claims he’s worn down from the years of responsibility and worry. But the audience can see that despite his protests to the contrary, Egidiana is right when she states, “He likes to do it, he complains if he’s not doing it.” Though they both would have liked their three sons to have been “professionals,” with weekends off, all three chose to follow in their father’s footsteps, despite Mauro’s protest that he is little more than a “glorified waiter.”

SIRIO, THE TRADITIONALIST, PREFERS AN ELEGANT RESTAURANT OF WELL--DRESSED PEOPLE OFFERING CLASSICAL MENU ITEMS.

The differing styles, educations, and business practices between father and sons make up much of the drama of *Le Cirque*, which revolves around the planned opening of a new iteration of the restaurant in 2006, in the Bloomberg Building. His children, armed with college and business degrees from NYU, Columbia, and Cornell, focus on profitability and fret over Sirio’s tendency to “give things away all the time,” to his favored clientele—which have included such luminaries as the Reagans, Trump, Kissinger, Giuliani, Joan Collins, and Martha Stewart. Wielding a spreadsheet (which they cannot get Sirio to look at, let alone take seriously), they want him to reduce his comps to less than 2%.

They also argue about an array of other matters, as they compete to define the vision and business strategy of this new version of the fabled *Le Cirque*. What type of food should it be serving, how should it be presented, should there be a single establishment—or two dining options, one formal and one a more casual bar, should there be a dress code, etc.? Sirio, the traditionalist, prefers an elegant restaurant of well--dressed people, offering classical menu items that people will recognize, such as prosciutto with asparagus and melon. There is a generation gap between Sirio and the younger, more innovative members of his family, who find many of his ideas passé.

As they hash out the details, tempers often flare, insults are flung, feelings are hurt, and sometimes his children are brought almost to tears. Egidiana balances everyone out, pouring water on the fire when necessary, and mediating between father and sons, by reinforcing the message that the world has changed since 1974. The stakes are high for the family, who are the sole investors, unlike many new restaurants that are backed by large corporations.

Though charismatic Sirio is clearly the star of this film, it is the family dynamics which bring energy and pathos. The family struggles to bring this collective enterprise to a mutually satisfactory conclusion. But even as they fight fiercely (and Sirio can be quite mean), it's obvious that they have intensely strong bonds tying their love-hate relationships together. And whether they like it or not, with restaurants in far-flung locations like Las Vegas, New Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Abu Dhabi, and Dallas, the younger generation is carrying on the family business with panache.

Le Cirque, September 12, 2023 @ 7:00 p.m.

Screening link for Zoom info: <http://www.plowtoplatefilms.com/events/>

To be added to our mailing list for future screening announcements, please email a request to plowtoplate@mail.com.