

Sunday Lunch with ... Pasquale Scaturro

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Pasquale Scaturro walks into Ethiopian Diamond, at 6120 N. Broadway, takes a deep breath and smiles. He inhales the sharp scent of incense and spices and knows this place is good. Knows it's the real thing.

The two young publicists who've accompanied this star adventurer don't look so sure. As they look around the big, dimly lit restaurant, with its industrial carpeting and low-grade fixtures, they're wearing expressions that seem to say, "Oh, this is why we've never brought anyone to this neighborhood for an interview."

Scaturro ignores them. He's too busy greeting the place's Ethiopian staff in their native Amharic, telling them how much he loves their country, how much time he spent there recently.

At first, the waiters seem surprised, even confused. Scaturro, though tan and ruggedly handsome, doesn't look all that different from the restaurant's regular "we've-had-Thai-twice-this-week-so-let's-try-this" crowd of Loyola students and artsy locals. His standard uniform -- tan Ex Officio shirt, jeans, smartwool socks and Teva boots -- is the same sort of thing everyone here wears. Except he sports this outdoor adventure gear because he's actually had some serious outdoor adventures. Really serious outdoor adventures.

Bandits, killer crocs

As far as he knows, and he's checked it out pretty thoroughly, Scaturro, 50, is the first person to travel the length of the Nile River, from its source in Ethiopia, through Sudan and into Egypt, where it meets the Mediterranean Sea.

From the expressions of the Ethiopian waiters, he's right. Not only have they never heard of anyone doing this, it's clear they can't imagine why anyone would even try to brave the treacherous rapids of the world's longest river, the one they call the Great Abbai.

Scaturro gets this a lot. For some reason, people just can't seem to get their heads around taking a 3,253-mile journey the first four months of last year -- that's 144 days in a raft -- through unmapped territory peppered with deadly stretches of whitewater, patrolled by well-armed bandits and inhabited by killer crocodiles. Even the people in the highlands above the river's Ethiopian banks stay away from it, fearing its untamed force and the malarial mosquitoes of the wetlands.

But, crazy or not, Scaturro knows his Ethiopian food. And, when he asks the waiter for shiro -- a traditional comfort food not regularly offered in restaurants -- his request is greeted with pleasure and accommodation. Of course they have shiro here, he's assured.

The mix, made from roasted chickpeas ground into a powder, is imported directly from Addis Ababa, the waiter tells him.

As we sit and drink chai, I ask Scaturro, a full-time geophysicist and part-time adventurer who has climbed Everest three times and led expeditions along many of the world's major rivers, how he came to attempt his history-making descent of the Nile.

"It's a funny story," he says, smiling slyly beneath his mustache.

Rushing down Kilimanjaro

He happened to be in Africa, leading some friends on a Kilimanjaro climb, when he got a call on his satellite phone from his friend and fellow adventurer Richard Bangs, who was in Ethiopia with a film team, looking into producing an IMAX movie about the Nile.

"They needed someone to lead the expedition," explains Scaturro, who, in addition to his own adventuring, regularly leads oil and gas exploration missions all over the world.

"And Richard asked me to do it. But I had to come meet them right away."

So he rushed his friends up to Kilimanjaro's summit -- "I definitely pushed them," he says with an only slightly rueful laugh -- and then ran down the mountain ahead of them.

He had always been fascinated by the Nile and was sure the film would be a vehicle, and a source of funding, for a serious exploration of it.

"I got down in a single day," he says, "and went straight to the airport."

"But wait," I interrupt him, knowing from my own, quite unadventurous, experiences with traveling in Africa that just showing up at an airport and buying a ticket is not the sort of the thing that happens very regularly. "How did that work?"

Only one flight left

Scaturro laughs again, describing how he arrived at the tiny airport in Moshi, Tanzania, to find that, amazingly enough, there was one flight leaving that day that would allow him to rendezvous with the IMAX team in Ethiopia.

The airline counter wasn't open, but Scaturro -- who is in the habit of learning 100 words in the local language wherever he travels -- managed to find someone who helped him get in touch with the woman who worked there.

"She's telling me, no, no, it's not possible to get on the flight, but, you know, I'm talking and talking to her," he says, his eyebrows suggesting that in addition to using his Amharic and Swahili, he might also have been pouring on the charm, "until she finally relents and says yes, OK, she'll bring the machine to the airport, all I have to do is show up with my ticket so she can change it. So then I tell her I don't have have a ticket. Not any ticket."

Naturally, he persuaded her to let him on the flight anyway.

"And, you know," he says, "I never paid a dime."

Having read an account of Scaturro's Nile adventures, which included traveling through all of Sudan without any sort of entrance visa or official permission, I find this very easy to believe.

Not all of Scaturro's tales are met with such credulity, though. Though he was careful to investigate his claim of being the first to descend the entire length of the Nile -- "On the

rare days that we would see people [on the shore], I asked," he says, "I asked the whole time, 'Have you ever seen anyone on this river? Have you heard of anyone being on this river?' And it was always, 'No'" -- he was greeted with skepticism when the small expedition team finally arrived in Egypt.

Guards at the border looked at their two 16-foot inflatable rafts and simply refused to believe these were the boats that had journeyed all the way from the Sakala Springs above Lake Tana in Ethiopia.

"Everyone knows it's impossible," one soldier told him.

Scaturro liked that.

"Everyone knows it's impossible," Scaturro repeats, dipping a piece of injera, the spongy, pancakelike bread that is both staple and utensil, into the perfectly seasoned shiro.

The Omnimax film "Mystery of the Nile" is playing at the Museum of Science and Industry.