The Zest S10E9
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Dalia: I'm Dalia Colon, and this is The Zest, citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm. The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State.

Today, 40 years of Italian cooking. What do retired basketball player Magic Johnson, the rapper Drake, and yours truly have in common? We've all enjoyed a meal at Donatello in Tampa. The Italian restaurant was started in 1984 by the late Guido Tiozzo, a native of Venice, Italy. Today, Guido's son, Gino Tiozzo, is at the helm.

Balancing classic Italian dishes with customers ever changing expectations. This week, The [00:01:00] Zest continues our celebration of Italian American Heritage Month with a visit to Donatello. On a quiet morning, I stopped by the dining room to chat with Gino. In our conversation, he reflects on the restaurant's 40 year history, reveals the one dish he'll never take off the menu, which I have had and love, and offers advice for cooking better Italian meals at home.

Gino: This is our 40th year, and my father started Donatello in December of 1984. Originally, it was him with a few other friends. partners that had known each other for years before and had kind of followed a similar track in life, leaving home at a young age and having spent 20, 25 years in the restaurant industry, in the service industry, in hospitality.

They came together and decided to open up a restaurant together. They were familiar with Florida. They were all [00:02:00] Italian, left home after World War II. Ended up in London in the late 50s, 60s, and worked in the restaurant industry there. My father spent some time at the Savoy Hotel, almost two years, I think, and really learned fine dining there, but then went to work in other restaurants like La Dolce Vita, and then some 20 years after their time in London, they decided to open up a restaurant in Florida and landed in Tampa.

Dalia: Wow. So they went from Italy to london, to Tampa.

Gino: Somewhat. They all went to the Bahamas actually in the mid late sixties to the mid seventies and work there together in the casinos and restaurants and so on. So they followed a similar track together and had known each other Donatello. Wow. Yeah. So the dynamic all came together and apparently It worked because we're here still 40 [00:03:00] years later and Tampa's been fantastic to us.

Dalia: Amazing. What part of Italy, by the way, people will be curious.

Gino: We're originally from Venice. Yeah, from Venice, Italy. My father's family is in the early 1900s from one of the border islands called Chioggia Sottomarina, just on the edge of the lagoon. And then in the early thirties, my grandparents moved into the city and my father was born in Venice.

Dalia: Wow. Okay. So you grew up here in Tampa?

Gino: I actually grew up in Venice until I was about eight years old. I was born in the Bahamas while my father was there in the mid seventies, but we moved to Venice. before I can remember. And I grew up in the streets of Venice and the canals. Uh, and then we moved to Tampa when we opened Donatello.

Dalia: Oh, that's so cool. I thought you were going to say you grew up in New York for some reason. I think everybody grows up.

Gino: A lot of people assume that I grew up in New York for some reason. I guess so. I've never lived in New York. I've been there several times. Yeah, for sure.

Dalia: So, uh, You were born in the [00:04:00] Bahamas.

Gino: I was. Yeah. My mother's family's all from the islands from the Caribbean.

Dalia: Okay. So like paint a picture of your childhood for me. What did you grow up eating? Who did the cooking? Tell me everything.

Gino: So I was very fortunate in life. One of my grandmothers from Italy always moved over here with us. And, uh, lived with us when I moved to Tampa.

Most of my cooking experience comes from my two grandmothers, you know, and from the restaurant from here. But I was the kid that liked to spend time in the kitchen with them and see what they were doing and, uh, taste the food as it was getting made and so on and so forth. And so that's where originally my passion for food and cooking.

And, uh, a lot of my education comes from the home. Um, Oh, an Italian cooking is, or at least what we do here. It's traditional home cooking. There's some, the recipes come [00:05:00] from experience in the homes, from grandmothers, from tradition, from traditional Italian, which has a lot of variations because every home does it a little bit differently because it varies where you go in the country.

Dalia: Sure. Okay. So what were some of the recipes that were on the original menu? And are there any that are still on the menu today, 40 years late?

Gino: Quite a few are, precisely for the fact of what I just said, that they are traditional. Our bolognese, the pesto, the way we make our tomato sauce, all the bases are still very true to 1984 when we opened.

Quite a few dishes are homemade pastas and so on. You know, we've made some variations with some of the protein dishes, but you know, the scalopina that we do. Piccata and so on and so forth are classic Italian dishes.

Dalia: Now that's the type of food that you were eating at home.

Gino: Somewhat. Not.

Dalia: Okay. Explain to me the difference, because I learned [00:06:00] from Giuliano Hazan, another guest this month, that the dishes we think of as, you know, Italian American are really more of like the celebration foods.

And they're not necessarily what Italian families eat. eating at home. What was the difference between like what you were eating at home and what would be served in the restaurant?

Gino: We didn't eat veal very often and veal is a big dish that, yeah, that is known in Italian restaurants, scaloppino, sabuco, so on and so forth.

But it's also a very regional thing. In my home, we ate a lot of fish because we're from Venice, a lot of risotto, which we make excellent risottos here. You know, that's one thing that I'm very proud of because it comes directly. It's something that in my home and in Venice, we do eat a lot of, so it's something that I'm very proud of and it's very dear to me.

But a lot of the classic [00:07:00] dishes, we would make the same way at home. The carbonara, the pesto, the matriciana, but we didn't eat a lot of meat.

Okay. We did not.

Dalia: It seems like in every culture, meat is more of a celebration food or like a, a seasoning as opposed to like the star of the plate.

Gino: Yes. And also, again, I'm going to say very regional.

So if you live in the hills or in the internal parts of the country, there's more meat available. If you live on the coast, then there's a lot of seafood available and Italian cooking is from your ingredients from your area. What is available? What is the freshest?

Dalia: Okay. So you grew up cooking with the Italian grandmothers, which sounds amazing, but did you necessarily want to go into the restaurant business and step into your father's shoes?

How did that come about?

Gino: I did work here when I was going through high school and I lived around the restaurant [00:08:00] here. And also we had a restaurant bar in Venice and I grew up in the square around the restaurant, around the bar. So it's what I knew. And what I saw all of my life, did I plan on it ahead of time coming into the business?

No, I can't say that I did, but life took me that way. And I'm very thankful in my early twenties, after doing a few other things, after spending a few years in school and then venturing out on my own for two or three years and having different experiences that I was able to bring back and that have helped me.

But it was not a planned thing for me. Some of my father's partners phased out and the opportunity was there for me at the right time. And here we are 25 years later now, I think I started back in 1999. Wow. That's so cool. Really the biggest part of my life, you know, my children, my family, [00:09:00] but the restaurant and what I do here and the time I put in here, this is.

Dalia: Amazing. Amazing. Okay. We're sitting in the dining room. Can you just describe it? Like I was here. It's been several years since I've been in here, but it still feels the same in a good way. Not in like a dated way, but it's just like timeless. Nostalgic. Yeah. So you've got like the red table cloths. It's just very classy, elegant, timeless.

Like you said.

Gino: In the lounge and then in the dining room, it's more pink hues, pink lighting, and it's very complimentary.

Dalia: You mentioned the lounge. Okay. There is a jazz lounge here. There is. That is so cool. So how did that come about and why do you think food and live music go so well together?

Gino: Well, This is not the original space, the way the bar is.

This came about in the late 1990s. We did an expansion for the [00:10:00] bar and created this space to put in the baby grand piano. Honestly, why it comes together, I think it's wonderful to have a place where you can have dinner and then not have to get up and leave immediately if you want to. Spend a little bit more time to relax this offers the opportunity for somebody to

have A cocktail before dinner have dinner come in and listen to some music I love live music by the way, and it's part of my piece, if you will.

It's, you know, it's, I don't know if anybody that doesn't. So I'm very happy to have been able to support it in the Tampa area for, uh, 25 years now. Uh, Miss Kitty is one of our performers and she's, uh, an absolute gem to Tampa and Tampa's musical history. Incredible. Yeah, she really is. She's been playing with us for 25 years.

And, uh, I couldn't be more thankful for that. I learned so much listening to her over the years. [00:11:00] If you have the chance to pop in and hear her, she's here during the week, Monday through Thursday, on and off. I can't promise because she's getting older and if she can't make it, someone else comes into play.

But we also have three and four piece bands that come in on the weekends. Scott Hardy's Encounter is our regular band. Although there are some others that rotate in and it gets live and fun. There's not many places that have live music and that you can dance anymore. And. I honestly would like to keep that going and give people a place to perform.

Yeah. People a place to listen and enjoy over the years.

Dalia: That's so cool. It's like the restaurant and the live music are on parallel tracks. And I realized another time, probably the first time I came here was maybe 15 years ago when I was a reporter for the Tampa Bay times. And I was doing a roundup of Jazz venues in the area and this was one of them and I got to see Miss Kitty.

Gino: Oh, bless you. Yes. That's wonderful.

Dalia: And so it's [00:12:00] so cool that like you've kept the restaurant going. The live music has a home here, which is amazing.

It's pretty rare that a restaurant is around for 40 [00:13:00] years, especially like a. Family owned restaurant. So did you expect it to last this long? Did you think, okay, I'll just do this for a couple of years and then I'll be doing something else?

Gino: No, I think my I had hoped, and I still do, that there would be a place for us in Tampa and that people would continue enjoying what we do.

I feel like I'm upholding a tradition, not just culinary, but also in hospitality. a certain way of dining, service, and so on. And not just me, but our entire staff and crew, many of which have been with us for, in one case, almost 40 years. No. Carmelo will have been with us for about 40 years in March. Is he a server?

He's a head captain, yes. And, but, Not just him. There's about a third of our staff that's been with us for over 20 years and some of those over 30. I just wanted to touch on [00:14:00] that because we operate as a big family. And it's really a blessing to have that long standing staff to pass on the culture and the tradition.

It's imperative. To what we do, the feel that we like to give when people come in to visit us, I did want to touch also on, uh, you said the look and the feel of the, of the restaurant and the dining room. This room has the, which were in the lounge here has some original, mostly decorated with tapestries that come from Venice and masks also that come from Venice.

These are, made by two sisters that were childhood friends of my stepmother. And most of the artwork in the dining room that is, uh, if you see a lot of the metallic pieces, gold and silver and copper were, um, painted here in Tampa, [00:15:00] but by a Venetian painter who was a childhood friend of my

father's and was a professor of art in the, at the Academy in Venice, all of his life.

My stepmother hand painted all of the ceiling in the dining room about 25 years ago, not on her back. Okay. Michelangelo. But in our, in our home and then we replaced those. Each section with new hand painted tiles. Oh my gosh. And I even have some artwork of my sons in the dining room now. And some of a good friend, uh, Alan Divers.

So, um, very, all of, everything that you see around you is very dear to me. Wow. It has, uh, you know, it has a place in my heart. That's very cool. And ties to a family or a family friend.

Dalia: Are your dad and stepmom still around?

Gino: My father passed in 2019. Okay. Yeah. She is though.

Dalia: Okay, well [00:16:00] that's awesome. I mean, wow.

He would have to be so impressed with how you've carried on, especially through the pandemic. I know people are listening to this. Maybe they have a food truck. Maybe they have a small restaurant. Maybe they have a little catering business. And they would love to be where you are. So what are some do's and don'ts that you've seen over the years, either at Donatello or at other restaurants?

I mean, you've got to walk in when you go to another restaurant and be like, Oh my gosh, I can't believe they did that. Or yeah, we did that and it didn't work. They should definitely not do that. Like, like what's the playbook here?

Gino: So when I go out, I try to enjoy where I'm at without being overly critical.

But don't compromise in quality. Don't compromise in what you believe in. Stay true to what you do. And I'm not saying that we've never questioned that over the years, we've gone through our ups and downs with economic shifts and so on over the years, over 40 years, there's been some moments [00:17:00] that. Make you question what you do, but I would say the most important thing is quality in product and stay true to what you believe in, you know, service, hospitality, taking care of people usually comes back tenfold, you know,

Dalia: that's good. Yeah, that's good. Cause that's hard to do. Like if you are struggling financially, of course you want to cut corners.

Gino: Yes, but it doesn't. Workout in my experience, you know, in my experience, it really doesn't. And I just want to touch on one idea. The advertising is an important part of any business, but I feel that the best form of advertising is a referral from a friend.

People trust the people that are close to them. And having. Providing a good experience for somebody that comes in is the [00:18:00] best way to establish and maintain longevity.

Dalia: For sure. What are some ways that you've had to evolve with customers changing taste? Do people come in and they say, I want the bread basket to be gluten free or I want, you know, a vegan pasta dish, things like that.

Gino: We have added options for. Dietary purposes, of course, but there's also trends in, I honestly try not to follow trends too much, but if something becomes popular, I'll give you an example, just off the top of my head, sea bass became a very popular fish for people's taste. So we added sea

bass and we created different dishes around the flavor profile and texture of that product.

So because. Of our 40 years in business, part of what we have to maintain and uphold is people like come for a certain dish. A lot of people, [00:19:00] if you go think of a restaurant, you think, Oh, I really like that there. Or you think of the dish and it draws you to the restaurant. So it's a bit of a balance.

Between those two ideas of keeping up with new tastes, but also upholding that nostalgic feeling and people saying, Oh, I had this at that restaurant 10 years ago. I remember I was there for a birthday or an anniversary, or just, I would love to have that again, you know, or, I mean, we have customers that come weekly and eat the same dish for years.

Not the majority, but it, but it. I know there's certain cases for sure.

Dalia: Wow. Okay, what's a dish you can never take off the menu?

Gino: Our homemade agnolotti, which are little ravioli made with ricotta and spinach, sautéed spinach, stuffed. They're like little pillows. Oh, stop. We serve them in a bag. Double cream or traditional Alfredo [00:20:00] sauce.

That's one of our original dishes, one of our top sellers still.

Dalia: My mouth is watering. It's, it's like 10 a. m. My mouth is watering. That sounds amazing. And actually that sounds like something I would order because I'm a vegetarian. So that sounds right up my alley. And it's a vegetarian option. Oh my gosh.

What is a tip for making better Italian food at home? Is there a pantry staple that we should have? Is there a a trick that we can learn? We don't all have an Italian grandmother to come home with us

Gino: my tip is that less ingredients are usually better. So to highlight whatever your main ingredient is, even in tomato sauce.

Too many items. Too many cooks spoil the soup. Too many ingredients muddle up the flavor. If you have good tomatoes, you use good tomatoes, less is more. My aunt, when the tomatoes were right at home, my, not my grandmother, but my aunt, I remember cause she would make the sauce very simple, but really [00:21:00] good.

And then when the tomatoes were right, she would put a drop of olive oil, a little bit of salt and maybe one piece of onion. And that was it. That was, you know, and there was. I remember it particularly because it was delicious.

Dalia: Yes. That's very Marcella Hazan of her, like just simple ingredients, but quality.

Very cool. Okay. Gino.

Gino: And if you use a good ingredient to start with, you don't need much to cover it up or dress it up or, you know.

Dalia: Okay. So you've got the local fans for years and years, some of whom come in and order the same dish every week. Love that for them. But then you also have gotten the word out.

And even when famous people come to town, they know about you. And I think another time when I was here was when I was covering the super bowl for the Tampa Bay times and all these different super bowl parties and following celebrities all over town, you know, poor me getting home at like 4am every

day, the newspaper would be on my front porch [00:22:00] before I even got there.

It was crazy. Right. But I have heard that the rapper Drake visited Donatello. Do you need me to repeat that, Alex? Okay, I don't know what you're at liberty to say about that, but how do restaurants adjust to celebrity guests? Are there certain things you have to change in order to accommodate them? Do they have like fans trying to make all these reservations.

Gino: Over the years, we've had a lot of different personalities come in here. Can you name names? I can't, I think. So Magic was in here. Prince was in here. Whoopi Goldberg. Evil Knievel. Robin Williams. Oh my gosh. Yogi Berra. Many different faces and different personalities. And honestly, most of the time, we don't have to do much to accommodate them.

They're usually fairly easy [00:23:00] going. So like prince was sitting in here eating his ravioli and like everybody was just going about their business.

Well, Prince was different. Prince came like right before we opened. And was gone before we opened and then he actually came back after we closed the same night after his show, asked us if we would stay open and came back and ate again.

Dalia: I am dead.

Gino: It's been a lot of fun over the years, let me say, meeting different celebrities. Michael Jordan was here, Emmett. Emmett Smith? Michael Irving, yeah, Emmett Smith. Oh my gosh. wonderful by the way he was just like you would imagine and you've seen on different shows i'm not i'm not a big football watcher but i loved him on dancing with the stars

yeah great personality right well it's it's it's a hundred percent real wow oh that's great and so when drake came We did have notice for him to come and we did have to make some accommodations.

Now, of course, he's Drake, right? It's, [00:24:00] it's,

Dalia: he's Drizzy.

Gino: Yeah.

Dalia: I love this. I mean, it's always fun to have like a little brush with fame, especially if you're not expecting it. But the fact that they came back, that just speaks to the service and the product that you're providing. And you were prepared to provide without knowing that.

They were coming. Yeah. Anybody would get when they came here. I mean, anybody's not going to go through the back door, but it's the same food that you would have served to anyone. So that's amazing. So anybody who comes here gets the Drake experience, the Prince experience in terms of the food.

Gino: Of course. And the service and everything else. I mean, every person that walks in here is as important to me as the next person. I mean, that's what the basis is. of hospitality, the basis of what we do. You know, you walk in this building, this restaurant, we've been here for 40 years. This is my home. Yeah. You know, so it's like welcoming people into my home.

It is. It is [00:25:00] special. It makes me want to cry. When personalities come in, it is, it does make it special. It is a nice experience for us. And I hope for them and, you know, as, as, uh, History shows.

Dalia: That's so cool. You're always ready. It's like, it is like your home. And in terms of I think about my home, am I ready for company?

If my neighbor popped over right now, is it a mess? Do I have something I can serve her? You know what I mean? And it's like you are always ready for company.

Gino: Um, dining is a, it's an experience where families come together. It's really. A godly thing, you know, it's celebrations, memories happen, and as long as we can keep providing a platform where people make memories, I think we'll be here for a long time to come.

Dalia: Oh my gosh, Gino, it was so great to talk to you. Thank you so much.

Gino: It was really nice talking to you as well, and nice seeing you again. Thank you so much for being here. Taking time.

Dalia: Here's to the next full week.

Gino: Yeah, God bless.[00:26:00]

That was Gino Tiozzo of Donatello Italian restaurant in Tampa. And I know your mouth is watering. You want to see the food. You want to see the restaurant and the people who've eaten there. You can find those photos on our social media. Just follow us on Facebook or Instagram at The Zest Podcast. I'm Dalia Colon.

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