



## Pizza and Dom Perignon

# COSIMO'S RESTAURANT GROUP

BY ABBY LUBY

**I**N AN AGE OF HOMOGENEITY, when American businesses offer more-of-the-same selections of clothes, cars and even food, diversity is disappearing. Popular restaurant chains serve up salt-and-peppered hum-drum, and dining out has become less a culinary experience and more something to do so that we don't have to wash the dishes.

Offering a staple like gourmet pizza alongside grilled chicken penne, fried calamari and Tuscan ribeye steak is risky, but it's routine and has fueled the phenomenal success of the growing empire of restaurants in Newburgh, Middletown, Poughkeepsie and Fishkill owned by Cosimo's Restaurant Group.

Brick oven pizza, though, is what put Cosimo's on the map. In 1993, the first Cosimo's restaurant—Cosimo's On Union—opened on what was then a two-lane road in Newburgh. The idea was new to the Hudson Valley at that time, but financial backing for the venture came from Newburgh restaurant owner Cosimo DiBrizzi (who already owned 45 basic, stand-up pizzerias—the 72nd-largest chain in the country. Nationwide sales topped \$25 million in 2002.)

Baking pizza in an oven built out of bricks was the brainchild of DiBrizzi's partner, Nick Citera. The idea was embraced by DiBrizzi, whose first name is now synonymous with brick oven pizza restaurants in the Hudson Valley. "I came up with the concept [of brick



oven pizza restaurants] for the Hudson Valley,” Citera remembers. “Cosimo DiBrizzi said ‘Run with it,’ so we took a chance.”

An aggressive outreach for new culinary trends has played a large role in creating the menu for the Union Avenue restaurant, now facing a busy four-lane highway near I-84 and the Thruway. Before Citera designed the menu, he checked out restaurants across the U.S. and Europe. “I needed to know what I really wanted to do before we opened the first one,” Citera emphasizes. “When we did open, we didn’t just open a restaurant—we actually did a two-day food tasting of 100 items (which had to be narrowed down to 40 items). We invited 110 people and scored each dish with score cards.”

“Wood-fired brick oven pizza” is still on the menu at Cosimo’s on Union, along with the plethora of gourmet toppings (a novelty in the early 1990s) that has made it famous. The Margherita pizza, for example, includes fresh basil, plum tomato sauce and mozzarella cheese; pizza topped with grilled chicken features caramelized onion, artichoke hearts, calamata olives, and fontina and mozzarella cheeses.

Most brick oven pizzas take about three minutes to cook because of the concentration of heat in the small, cavernous oven. The oven consumes about a cord of wood a week, and positioning the small fire in the oven affects



the overall cooking time. Fire-cooked pizza yields a typically crunchy crust.

The success of Cosimo's on Union led to the opening of Cosimo's Brick Oven three years later in Jersey City, New Jersey. The name was used again for restaurants that subsequently opened in Middletown, New York, as well as in Connecticut and Florida. Menus were tailored for each locale, Citera says; in New Jersey, where business lunches produced the heaviest customer traffic, mid-day selections were more varied.

Tailoring the Cosimo's concept to specific clientele and culinary trends remains essential for the success of the restaurants, Citera notes. "Today, the big thing is low-carb dishes. We have a special item on the menu called 'sandwich without bread'—shrimp, pesto, arugula and olive oil, with or without pasta."

Part of Citera's vision for the restaurants was to include decidedly upscale menu offerings alongside the pizza, with, naturally a wine list to match. Inspired by restaurant wine lists from California's Napa Valley, Citera took cautious but significant steps toward upgrading the typical pizzeria wine list. "Restaurants in Napa are eight years ahead in terms of what they understand about food," he says. "The trends here are slower. We decided to start with a limited wine list, with every bottle costing \$17."

Cosimo's on Union Manager Christine Stephenson says the wait staff (Cosimo's "sales representatives," as they're referred to) not only have to know the menu, they also have to be familiar with the wine list. "Once a year, classes for the staff [are designed to] teach them about how wines complement specific foods," she says. "The staff gets paid to attend some seminars (I tell them not to complain—they might learn something). Every Friday at about 4PM we have 'tastings' and we talk about the wine."

Because of the popularity of wine with dinner at Cosimo's, Citera decided to push the envelope—so part of the building's recent renovation included a small,



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exclusive wine cellar downstairs that can accommodate a formal dinner for up to 22 people. “We went crazy with the wine list—we had up to 500 different wines,” Citera glows. “We won the *Wine Spectator* Award of Excellence from 1998 to 2004. We started having seasonal wine dinners.”

Racheting up the wine list helped transform Cosimo’s into a significantly more upscale dining experience while maintaining its family-style image. It also pointed the Cosimo Group in a new direction and helped set the standard for three new restaurants in the Hudson Valley.

Torches on the Hudson, which opened on the revived Newburgh riverfront in 2001, was a joint venture with DiBrizzi and Joseph Bonura, a successful local businessman who had partnered with DiBrizzi in prior years. The partners had purchased three acres on the Hudson River waterfront eight years earlier when another effort to revive downtown Newburgh was underway. By the late 1990s, however, it was apparent that a full-scale commercial development of the city’s waterfront was imminent, and the partners owned a prime chunk of it.

The resulting multi-faceted restaurant is now an anchor for the newly developed, lively stretch of riverfront. In an area of small but chic and upscale dining spots, Torches is “more of a place to go for a great experience, [to] enjoy the views and hear live music,” Citera says. “We were appealing to an after-dinner crowd, so we had a night shift that set up the bar so folks could listen to music. Torches,” he adds, “was Cosimo’s passion.”

Torches’ interior features a 32-foot-long aquarium that holds colorful saltwater fish in 5,500 gallons of water. The aquarium costs about \$6,000 a month for upkeep. “We were creating a different image,” Citera says. A 350-foot pier running the length of the restaurant serves as a “dining dock” that can accommodate up to 60 good-size boats. “We can cater parties on boats—there is no place you can’t eat,” says Citera.



## ***Luis Ferraro, Executive Chef***

*Luis Ferraro's quiet, reserved countenance gives little hint that he is one of the busiest chefs in the valley—splitting his time among five (soon to be seven) very active restaurants. Still, he recently had a few moments to spare and shared some of his thoughts about food and business with us.*

**F**ood for me is passion. Food comes from mom—that's what makes your fundamentals of cooking. I'm Italian, but I grew up in South America. I remember 6 in the morning smelling all that beautiful sauce and soup she was preparing. She's Italian—everybody knows Italians, they cook very well, the French cook well. Every mom from every country cooks well.

In this country people don't cook too much at home. Here, you go into any store and you see all these frozen things, all these boxes. When I go with my mom, I'm always teasing her—Why you have to work? Look at all this food. She says, "Are you kidding me? I'll slappa your face if you get some of this stuff. All these beautiful vegetables, all this beautiful meat and fish. You got to do it at home, cook it—no box, no can, no nothing."

**W**e have Middletown, Newburgh, Torches, Via Nove and Poughkeepsie, and two more coming. The reason why they are successful? Because they know how to do things. We have people here who have been working over 15, 20 years. We have Christine here over 11 years.

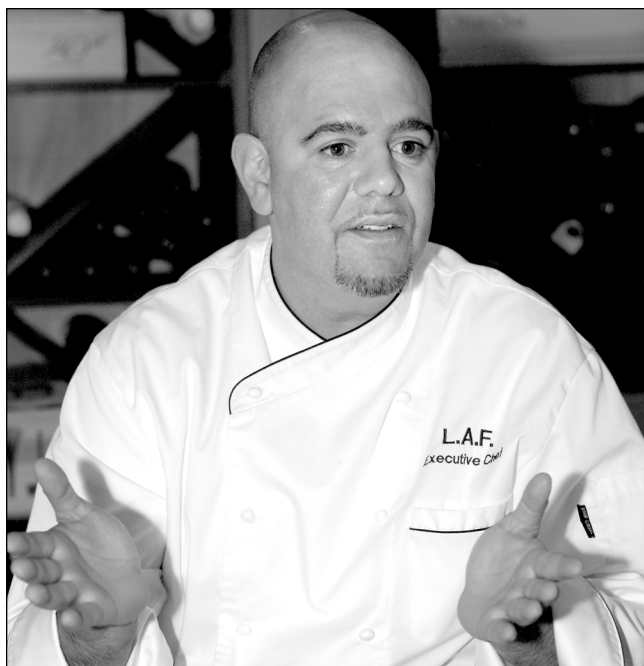
The crew I have here [Cosimo's on Union], is unbelievable. When we got reviewed in the *Times Herald [Record]*, I was not here that day. My sous chef did the dishes and I told him, you know, we got reviewed and everything came from your station. He said to me, "You know what? I bet you I did good." And we got four stars on food. I was very happy because, you know, you're not at the restaurant and your kitchen crew is doing a good job. Not because it's only for me—Nicky is on top of the kitchen, too. He eats here at the restaurant a lot. He knows.

Let me tell you something about Nicky: He could put a white jacket on anytime. He's very good. Many times he cooks things for me that I say, no way. I'm in trouble—I don't know if my job is secure with you or not. That's when we have fun. When he has time. He's busy.

**F**or me, going to a farm is the best treatment, because you're right there with all these beautiful products and your mind is going crazy—What can I do with this?

When I see somebody sautéing spinach or any vegetable and they burn the spinach, that is killing me. It's kind of like a broken heart. I say, you know what you just did—you destroyed the farmer's life. You know how long it took a farmer to grow that spinach? And in 10 seconds you burned it. Next time, pay attention and remember when you're cooking something where it is coming from.

**C**osimo [DiBrizzi], we miss him. He was like a mentor, especially for me. Spending five months with him building Poughkeepsie was an unbelievable experience. I learned a lot from him. I learned the way people respect him and the way people love him. He was very inspirational. Now that he is not with us anymore, he makes everybody stronger—he's watching over us. ❖



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The momentum of the Cosimo Restaurant Group built on the success of Torches. In 2003, Cosimo's Trattoria and Bar opened in Poughkeepsie, with Citera's brother Carlo, another partner in the group, as manager. The restaurant, a 7,000-square-foot Tuscan-style building, houses a small-scale brick oven and offers menus for brunch, lunch, dinner and special wine dinners. The appeal is to suburban families and business people, as well as professionals from nearby Marist and Vassar colleges.

More recently, in June 2004, the partners opened Via Nove, a rebuilt restaurant that includes a glass-wall view into the wine cellar. Less family-style and more adult-oriented than the other restaurants, the corner-lot restaurant in Fishkill includes a large bar and lounge area catering to the late-evening crowd. Cosimo Group's expansion plans now include opening other brick oven pizza restaurants in Orange County and one in Kingston (slated to open in the spring of 2005).

At the height of the season, the restaurant group employs over 500 workers (100 at Torches alone in the summer). Citera says that about 40 to 45 percent of the kitchen workers—25 percent of the chain's entire Hudson Valley work force—are Latino or Hispanic. "They have the eye of the tiger—they want to make something out of themselves," he says. "They work hard for opportunities they typically don't get. None of the restaurants in America would be what they are today without them."

In the Cosimo restaurants, Latinos and Hispanics work mostly on the line preparing the food and washing dishes. If they can speak English they can become servers. Executive Chef Luis Ferraro says he is flexible about allowing other people to cook so they can see what it's like. He often tells a new person on the line, "Move over—let me try slicing veggies while you cook something else," or, "Let me wash a few dishes while you do my job."

Although several of his chefs, including Ferraro, are Culinary Institute of America graduates, Citera believes that



## ***Sage-potato gnocchi with lobster, butternut and delicata squash***

### **Ingredients**

2 pounds gnocchi  
2 pounds lobster meat  
1 pound diced and roasted butternut squash  
1 pound diced and roasted delicata squash  
1 cup extra-virgin olive oil  
½ cup chopped sage  
8 ounces butter  
2 cups chicken stock  
1 cup grated Grana cheese  
Pumpkin seeds

### **Gnocchi**

5 pounds cooked and riced russet potatoes  
1 pound all-purpose flour  
Finely ground salt and black pepper to taste  
¼ cup minced sage  
3 eggs  
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil  
1 cup Parmesan cheese  
Nutmeg to taste  
*Yield: 8 portions*

### **Method**

1. Peel the potatoes and boil them, starting with cold water, until fully cooked.
2. Strain potatoes and allow to dry for 15 minutes.
3. Pass the potatoes through a food mill while still hot and spread out to cool.
4. Mound the potatoes and surround them with the flour and salt and pepper. Make a well in the center of the mound. Add sage, eggs, oil, Parmesan cheese, and nutmeg in the middle of the well and whisk until blended. Knead the dough without overworking. Break off a small handful and roll out on a floured surface. Cut into ½-inch pieces.
5. Test by dropping the gnocchi in boiling water. When they float for 1½ minutes, remove, shock, and check for consistency by taste.
6. Cook gnocchi as specified above (cook and shock, toss with olive oil).
7. In a sauté pan, heat olive oil. Add lobster meat and sauté until golden brown. Add cooked gnocchi and caramelize slightly.
8. Once gnocchi is caramelized, add butter, roasted squash, and one pinch of sage.
9. Once butter is melted and squash is warmed, add the chicken stock and emulsify.

*Plate and garnish with pumpkin seeds and Grana cheese. Serve immediately.*

—Luis Ferraro, Cosimo's Restaurant Group

## ***Veal chops stuffed with prosciutto, fontina and sage***

### **Ingredients**

4 marinated veal chops  
1 cup canned Italian plum tomatoes  
4 thin slices imported prosciutto  
5 ounces thinly sliced fontina  
8 fresh sage leaves  
All-purpose flour as needed  
3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil  
4 tablespoons unsalted butter  
¾ cup dry white wine  
1½ cups chicken stock

### **Marinade**

1 quart olive oil  
8 black peppercorns  
1 bay leaf  
2 ounces fresh parsley  
½ ounce fresh thyme  
½ ounce fresh rosemary  
Peeled cloves from a 1-ounce head of garlic  
*Yield: 4 servings*

### **Method**

1. Prepare the marinade by placing all ingredients except oil in a blender.
2. Add two ounces of oil and run blender until product is smooth. Add remaining oil slowly.
3. Pour marinade over meat and marinate at least 1 hour.
4. Pass the tomatoes and their liquid through a food mill fitted with the fine disk.
5. Butterfly chops: Lay them flat on a cutting board and make a horizontal cut through the meat all the way to the bone.
6. Open the two sides of the butterflied chops, and with the smooth side of a meat mallet gently pound each side until the veal is about ¾-inch thick.
7. Place a slice of prosciutto, a slice of fontina, and 2 sage leaves on one side of each veal chop.
8. Fold the other side of the chop over to completely enclose the filling. Pound around the edges with the toothed side of the mallet to seal the stuffing. Repeat with the remaining chops.
9. Season chops with salt and pepper, then dredge in flour.
10. Heat oil and butter over medium heat until butter is light brown.
11. Add the chops and cook until golden, about 4 minutes each side. Remove the chops from the pan and drain the fat. Return the chops to the pan and add the wine and some butter. Boil until reduced by half. Stir in the tomatoes and stock and simmer. Baste the chops with the sauce until they are cooked, about 12 minutes.

—Luis Ferraro, Cosimo's Restaurant Group



*With the chain restaurants going up every single year, we have to try to stand apart. We have to continue to appeal to all segments.*

it's worth training staff in-house to become cooks, rather than bringing someone in from the outside who has a preconceived idea of how to prepare food. "The CIA kids do get external experience," Citera remarks. "But the students are sometimes difficult because they haven't had as much real experience as the people we train from the ground up."

Citera believes that investing in staff (including health insurance and retirement accounts for key people) is one way to keep loyalty in the company. "We never compromise our restaurant by saving money with staff," he says. "Most of our people have been with us for 25 years. Some of our key people [have] become partners; when somebody proves themselves we reward them—it just makes us stronger." Anthony Polanco, for example, worked at the Middletown restaurant as a manager for a number of years; he recently was promoted to partner.

When opening a new restaurant, cooks and chefs are "loaned" from one of the established restaurants for a smooth opening and transition. Ferraro oversees the process and remains in the new eatery until it gets off the ground. After that, he communicates weekly with the new chef about the seven or eight daily specials.

The restaurants, on average, sell 25 percent pizza and 75 percent other dishes. Cosimo Group restaurants purchase meats and some produce from food distributors; fresh produce comes from Hunts Point daily.

Local produce purchased from area farms is estimated to be about 10 to 15 percent from the end of August to the end of September. "We pick up vegetables like eggplant and peppers from Valley View Farms in Otisville and Windsor Farm in New Windsor, Stone



Christine Stevenson



Church Farms for fowl, and the Pine Island area, which is great for onions," Stephenson says.

Roadside stands also are tapped for seasonal vegetables like corn, zucchini, romaine lettuce, apples and Hudson Valley cider. "This year was a good local tomato crop but last year the local tomatoes were too waterlogged," Citera adds. "Generally, it's a great local crop. Sometimes, though, local farmers don't want to deal a lot with the local restaurants—they can get better money from restaurants in Manhattan."

When Torches opened, 70 percent of the menu was based on beef. During the mad cow disease scare, meat prices jumped dramatically upward. "We kept buying beef at the escalated prices," Citera remembers, "but we didn't reflect it in the price on the menu. Now, for most of the restaurants, we focus on non-beef products."

According to Citera, the success of the brick oven pizza, the newer restaurants and the evolving concept of the Cosimo Group relies on remaining upscale but casual. "With the chain restaurants going up every single year, we have to try to stand apart," he says. "We have to continue to appeal to all segments."

Intent on making a name for the Cosimo's restaurants beyond their reputation for great pizza, Citera surrounded himself with the right culinary talent. Indeed, it appears that at least some of his efforts have begun to pay off. His team of chefs took home the Grand Award at this year's Taste of the Hudson Valley International Wine and Epicurean Arts Festival, considered the premier event of its type in the

region. Cosimo's Trattoria presented a Chianti-stained duck ravioli with a demi-glace of Hudson Valley foie gras—and won the 2004 Sonnenschmidt Award for Culinary Excellence (along with the Best Overall Cuisine on the East Side of the Hudson Award). Torches took the award for Best Cuisine on the West Side of the Hudson, along with the Gourmet Award for Best Food and Wine Pairing.

That Sunday in November was a very good day for the Cosimo's group, which made for a very, very happy boss. ✕

### ***COSIMO'S RESTAURANT GROUP***

#### **COSIMO'S ON UNION**

**1217 Rt. 300 (Union Ave.), Newburgh  
(845) 567-1556**

#### **COSIMO'S BRICK OVEN**

**620 Rt. 211 East, Middletown  
(845) 692-3242**

#### **COSIMO'S TRATTORIA**

**112 Delafield St., Poughkeepsie  
(845) 485-7172**

#### **TORCHES ON THE HUDSON**

**120 Front St., Newburgh  
(845) 568-0100**

#### **VIA NOVE**

**1166 Main St., Fishkill  
(845) 896-2255**