

20 YEARS AND 1 MILLION GUESTS LATER

By Stephanie Cosentino

RISTORANTE GEMELLI has been the center of my life for the last 18 years, just as it has been an anchor for Babylon Village commerce since it opened in 1997, 20 years ago this month. The restaurant's romantic beauty and decor creates the kind of atmosphere that real estate mogul Barbara Corcoran (who has eaten here on her way to her Fire Island home) likes to say, "It could make you fall in love." To honor Ristorante Gemelli's 20th anniversary, I, the restaurateur's wife / writer will share the secret of the Gemelli success.

I've always wanted to write about the restaurant. This business, though dynamic, is difficult for a family to navigate. When everyone else is sitting down or going out to celebrate together, my husband is working. Our weekends are typically on Monday and Tuesday and our date nights are more often in the morning or afternoon. Even though it sometimes feels like I'm a single married mom, even though I'm a Leo that does not like sharing her husband's attention, it makes it easier to handle that I know George is doing what he loves to do.

He's not the only one doing what he loves; George's sister, Patricia Schutz, is also his partner and complement in every way. Their relationship is symbiotic; she executes where he envisions, he cultivates relationships where she conducts business, she makes decisions where he scrutinizes details (sometimes frustratingly so). Their highly functional dynamic is the solid foundation from which the Gemelli family's passion for food and hospitality has emerged.

Ambiance is pretty much the first thing I noticed 18 years ago. I was so taken by the beauty, I literally fell in love with the next person I laid my eyes on. It happened to be George. An important aspect of dining, ambiance is proven to enhance the sensory experience. He was a force in the overall design and decor down to actually welding the sconces himself. While they tweak the



interior every now and then, you really see the Italian love for beauty every spring when attention falls to the patio garden. It is in fact SO lovely, I've written a short story almost completely set in this garden. Even though it is twenty 20 feet from Main Street, despite the occasional blaring of ambulance sirens making their way to or from Good Samaritan Hospital, it never feels like you're anywhere but at a Neapolitan hideaway. That it is only there for a fleeting season makes it even more special.

At Ristorante Gemelli there is an intuitive approach to wining and dining. As the wine menu states, George's Pix, is exactly that; it's not a list comprised of wines based on ratings and reviews, though those wines do make the list, but simply on what this tastemaker enjoys. What comes out of this kitchen hasn't been studied in a classroom, it is based on a bloodline that runs through generations of Italian foodies from a culture obsessed with food, beauty and passion. It is based on what my mother-in-law, the iconic Mamma Gemelli would do at home, for friends and neighbors until someone realized she was too good

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not to be shared. What made her most happy was feeding people and making them close their eyes and say, mmm.

It is the glue that holds them together.

It is the fuel that keeps them going.

As Mario Puzo made very clear in his writing, Italians live, die (and sometimes kill) for their family. For the Gemelli family, this includes many guests they've met through the restaurant. Here's my insider tip: While the tablecloths may lead some to believe it's a special night type of place, and it definitely can be, the real charm of this joint comes from the intimacy of a casual weekday evening. Because George works nights, our version of family dinner means my girls and I are regulars by default, but I've come to realize that we're not the only family who considers Ristorante Gemelli their kitchen away from home though. I'm stopping constantly to say hello to other regulars, mid-chew ... and it's wonderful.

George recently did some calculations, and told me, "Steph, over the past 20 years, approximately 1 million guests have sat down in my restaurant." That's quite a number to consider. It is not so common for a restaurant to be able to withstand economic ups and downs or changing tastes and trends, but Ristorante Gemelli relies on one irreplaceable ingredient for its 20 years of success: Love! ■

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