

RESTAURATEURS OF THE CAPITAL



Pietro, above, and his brother Armando Milito have been in the restaurant business in Ottawa for more than 40 years. Tonight, they will be honoured for their many years of service.



Pietro, right, and his brother Armando Milito in 1993.

Pietro and Armando, salute!

Friends will toast the Milito brothers tonight for decades of fine cuisine in Ottawa

BY TONY LOFARO

Bound by family loyalties and driven by a strong immigrant work ethic, restaurateurs Pietro and Armando Milito have made a lasting mark on the Ottawa restaurant scene.

The brothers were teenagers when they arrived in Ottawa from Cleto in southern Italy in 1954 with no knowledge of English but a will-

ingness to tackle any job. They worked together at Locanda — the restaurant owned by Paul Anka's father, Andy — with Pietro as dishwasher and Armando as a bus boy.

After six years there, Armando moved on to La Touraine Restaurant and Pietro became chef at the RA Centre and later the Sheraton Hotel.

Pietro went on to work at the original La Roma restaurant, corner

of Bronson and Somerset streets, while Armando left for the bright lights of New York City, working in some of the city's finest eateries, and serving celebrities such as Jacqueline Kennedy, Anthony Quinn and Bette Davis.

The brothers were reunited at La Roma in 1982 and established it as one of the prime spots for fine Italian food in an era when Italian eateries were few. They went on to open La Strada on Bank Street in 1989, with Pietro running the kitchen and Armando serving as the restaurant's host.

Pietro, 74, stills works in the

kitchen but Armando, 73, retired seven years ago. He recently had a hip replaced and has been in hospital for the last two weeks.

Tonight, the Associazione Culturale Calabrese Savuto-Cleto Club are honouring the brothers with the Calabrese Community Achievement Award for their many years of service in the restaurant business at a gala dinner at St. Anthony's Italia Soccer Club.

"I couldn't speak English but I used to memorize the menu at night by myself. I used to pronounce the dishes over and over and then I would repeat them to Armando," said Pietro Milito in an interview this week.

"I would write down the items on the menu on a piece of paper and stuff these pieces of paper in my pockets. That's how I learned."

The Locanda was among the top restaurants in the late '50s, attracting a steady clientele of the city's elite, including politicians and celebrities.

"Paul Anka would come in the kitchen and I used to kick him out," said Pietro. "He loved to play jokes, he was a real handful."

Armando said choices were limited for immigrants then, and since they were too young to work in construction, the only jobs they could find were in restaurants.

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"We started in restaurants and we got stuck in it which is nothing wrong," said Armando, who was also an accomplished flamenco and ballroom dancer.

"If you know something about restaurants you can work anywhere and make good money. Restaurants gave me an opportunity to make my living and it was interesting because you meet so many people," he said.

At La Roma, Pietro and Armando formed the perfect partnership. Armando, the more outgoing and debonair of the two, greeted the customers, while the shy and retiring Pietro was happy just to be able to whip up Italian delicacies in the privacy of the kitchen. Steve Falsetto was also a partner in the restaurant from 1972 to 1982.

"Pietro tried to work in the front of the restaurant but he didn't last, he went back to the kitchen," said Armando.

"You have to like it, but I have no problem with people I liked to meet them and talk to them," he said.

The hours at La Roma were long, with Pietro putting in 16-hour days to make the restaurant a success.

"I enjoyed my time there but I was so busy I didn't have time to think about anything else," said Pietro. He

claims he was the first to serve fried zucchini, calamari and smelts in Ottawa, which proved to be popular.

Armando, a bachelor, said he enjoyed his 16 years in New York, having worked at restaurants such as the legendary El Morocco nightclub and other restaurants. He said when he worked at Sign of the Dove, another popular New York restaurant, it had a no-smoking policy at its exclusive second-floor dining room. Patrons could only smoke on the terrace. He remembers he had to confront Bette Davis who had lit up a cigarette in the dining room.

"I had to ask her to hand over the cigarette, she didn't like it very much," said Armando.

La Strada continues as one of the finer Italian restaurants located in the Glebe. It made headlines in 1998 when Pierce Brosnan was photographed leaving the restaurant after dining there. The actor was in town shooting the movie *Grey Owl*.

But while Armando no longer works at the restaurant because of his failing health, Pietro's sons, Carlo, Federico and Leonardo now help their father run the business. His wife is Carmela and the couple also have a daughter, Giuseppina.

"I'm looking to slow down a little but and sooner or later I'm going to have to. My age is going to force me to," said Pietro.

Cuisine: Long hours at the restaurant led to success



The Associazione Culturale Calabrese Savuto-Cleto

Congratulations..!

Gino Marrello
President

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