



Chef Dino Santonicola works in the kitchen at Pizzeria de Marco in Bethesda.

ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Dino Santonicola: Pizza master

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

Imagine strolling the streets of Naples and coming across a local pizzeria. A young man is tending to the ovens, wielding his pizza paddle. That could well have been chef and pizza expert, Dino Santonicola. The Naples native performs the same culinary tasks at Bethesda's new pizzeria, Pizzeria da Marco.

Considering that Santonicola started his kitchen career at the age of 13 in a neighborhood pizzeria, it is no wonder that his pizza skills are in demand. "I started in a pizza place down the street from my home," he explained. "I was just hanging out there and the staff were friends. I asked if I could help out in the kitchen."

The youngster went to school in the morning and spent the afternoons washing dishes and delivering pizzas. Management decided to train young Santonicola, who spent one day a week and the weekends learning the pizza ropes. "It was a long process," he added.

After graduation, Santonicola enrolled in a local culinary school. "It was the best school for pizza," he said. "I got to work in the kitchen."

When a friend asked him to move to Seattle several years ago, Santonicola left behind Naples for a whole different culture and lifestyle. He later moved to D.C., another foreign place to him, but one which he has come to enjoy.

He has also gained some per-

What is your comfort food?

Pasta. I love pasta with tomato sauce, basil, the simple one. I grew up with pasta.

What has been the greatest influence in your cooking career?

You have to learn pizza from Ciro from Naples. He's the one who does it with pizza. He said, "If you burn the pizza, you pay for it." You make the dough and you have to stay in the room until it is done. You really need a lot of patience. You really work and do not complain.

Which is your favorite restaurant?

Assaggi and Da Domenico. But I don't have much time to eat out.

What's in your fridge?

I have got everything. It's all from Whole Food. Lots of drinks, and there is always pasta and olive oil.

What are your essential ingredients?

Tomatoes and olive oil. This is the greatest combination. I really eat lots of tomatoes.

IF YOU GO Pizzeria da Marco

- » **Where:** 8008 Woodmont Ave., Bethesda
- » **Info:** 301-654-6083
- » **Hours:** Lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday to Friday; dinner, 4 to 10 p.m. Sunday to Thursday, 4 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday

spective on the differences between Neapolitan and American pizzas. "With Neapolitan pizza," he said, "the dough is really soft, and our ovens are really hot. American pizza dough is really hard." For his prize pies, Santonicola uses flour, fresh mozzarella, Marsano tomatoes, and follows the traditional

techniques, adding that he does not toss the dough in the air as many popular movies depict, but kneads it carefully on a marble slab. The result? A delicious, soft crust.

The restaurant offers pizza as a main course, topped with meat, prosciutto, salami, artichokes, olives, sausages, rapini, pepperoni, or whichever selection the customer chooses. "We actually do Neapolitan pizzas," he said. "And to do that, you need a guy from Naples."

A pizza maker for about 22 years, Santonicola has no regrets about his career choice. "I will always be a pizza maker," he said. "Not a cab driver."

Will he return to Italy? "Not until I am about 55 or 60," he said, pointing to a photo of his grandmother holding buffalo mozzarella.

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

Networking through wine

What do you do when you are a stranger in a strange land (not that Utah is that strange, mind you) and want to meet people with similar interests? Why, host a wine dinner, of course.

On a recent family vacation to Park City, Utah, I asked friends of ours who live there to invite a group of their friends over for dinner one night for the purpose of meeting new people — by sharing and drinking wine. In the interest of full disclosure, I made sure that the guests knew that I was a wine columnist who wanted to write an article about the social power of wine.

I suggested a wine theme (Rhone varieties) and set a menu (Cassoulet) for the evening. Each couple was asked to bring a bottle of wine and a dish to share. It amazed that seven complete strangers (to me) jumped at the chance to share an evening over wine.

We started the evening off with a domestic version of a classic white southern Rhone wine. The **2009 Tablas Creek Cotes de Tablas Blanc (\$20)** may be from the Central Coast of California, but the blend of viognier, grenache blanc, marsanne and roussanne still tastes like its French cousin, with a bouquet of peaches, nectarines and a touch of honeydew.

Viognier is a traditional white Rhone varietal, and in the hands of founder/winemaker **Casey McClellan, the 2009 Seven Hills Viognier Talcott Vineyard (\$20)** from the Columbia Valley of Washington state is delightful. Fragrant scents of orange blossom, beeswax and honey on the nose are captivating. The flavors of orange rind, tropical fruits and creamy peaches are kept in check by the bright acidity.

I feel fortunate that one of the guests brought a **2009 E. Guigal Cotes du Rhone Blanc (\$12)** white wine from France to compare and contrast against the domestic versions. A blend of viognier, roussanne, marsanne, clairette and bourboulenc produces aromatics of orange rind, roasted nuts and honey. Flavors of almonds, baked apples and tangy minerals join together on an unctuous frame and glide into a rich, long finish.

The **2005 E. Guigal Chateauneuf-du-Pape from France (\$40)** is the red wine version of the above-mentioned wine, and has more than eight different grapes in the blend, including grenache, syrah and mourvedre. The wine sports a dark cherry red color and a spicy nose of smoked cedar wood and cigar tobacco. The palate is light-styled but offers complex flavors of black cherry, dark plum and notes of saddle leather. The pretty finish is

round, soft and memorable, thanks to the smoky notes at the end.

No Rhone wine tasting would not be complete without an offering from the northern Rhone Valley. The **2005 M. Chapoutier Sizeranne Hermitage (\$55)** was an excellent ambassador. This syrah-based wine is dense and rich with aromas of black currant, black pepper and spice. On the palate, concentrated flavors of dark cherry, blackberry, dried herbs and vanilla dominate all the way through the long, silky-smooth finish.

The evening resulted not only in new friendships, but also served as a testament to the power of wine in bringing people together and developing a bond that will last many years to come.

So, the next time you're planning on spending some extended time away from home and want to meet new people, consider the social aspect of wine. Whether you're a novice or an experienced collector, meeting other fellow wine enthusiasts is a wonderful way to meet new people and, at the very least, a great excuse to open up a few bottles of wine.

