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## Valente's Italian Specialties brings together family, food, memories

New business on Kings Court to provide a touch of community, home cooking



Valente's Italian Specialties owner Marcello DeFeo mans the pasta machine to make rigatoni in his shop on Kings Court.

To hear Marcello DeFeo, the owner and operator of Valente's Italian Specialties tell it, meal time when growing up in a tight-knit Italian-American household was hardly a private affair.

“We had an open-table policy in our kitchen where we constantly had our friends from school, or my dad's clients. My nonna or my mom would invite them to come sit down to eat with us. It was amazing to watch them, since they would fill up on a massive bowl of pasta and not know there was three more courses of food to come,” he said.

Valente was the surname of DeFeo's maternal grandparents, who emigrated to Philadelphia from Bisenti in the region of Abruzzo in the early 20th century. His nonna, Paola Valente, who lived with his family in the Girard Estates section of South Philadelphia, had the greatest influence on his love of cooking, sense of family, and need for his friends to experience the joys he knew on a daily basis.

“We had two kitchens in our house, like many other families, including the basement kitchen which was constantly filled with jarred tomatoes and other amazing things. I would go to school and nonna would pack me a lunch with things like a hard roll with sopressata and parmigiano reggiano and the kids would look at me,” he explained.

DeFeo, who has made a home in Haddonfield since 2009, always had the itch to be on the move. He began work in the restaurant business during his pre-adolescent years at the Jersey Shore and relished the long days and nights and the camaraderie that existed between front- and back-of-the-house staff.

As such, he began to formulate a dream since he was very young to own and operate his own establishment. He worked his way up from dishwasher to line cook, relishing the action and building on his passion. However, life's inevitable pull took him away. After graduating from St. Joseph's University, DeFeo's restless side took hold: he worked as a teacher, then toiled for a local paper in Boulder, Col., and once back in the area, found IT work at several locations throughout the Delaware Valley.

But that need for community and to settle down proved too strong. By the winter of 2008, DeFeo grew tired of city living. Along with the responsibilities of caring for his first child, seeing his wife, Carrie, a nurse, work a 12-hour overnight shift then have to climb four separate flights of stairs just to be able to get some rest spurred him to action.

"When we found out we were having another kid, we thought it was time to move on. We weighed all our options and just fell in love with Haddonfield. We knew it was the right place for us and we couldn't really picture ourselves living elsewhere," he said.

What brought DeFeo back to the comfort and familiarity of the food industry was the memory of a deep, personal loss. After a 10-year battle with cancer, his mother, Sandy, died in June 2004. Shortly thereafter, the elder Valente herself had to move back to Italy.

"It was like losing two mothers at the same time," DeFeo said. "I knew that I wanted to do something to honor her memory."

After Valente died in November 2016, DeFeo realized he ran out of excuses, and set his mind to creating a brick-and-mortar locale. He officially registered the business in January 2017, then began setting up Valente's wares at farmers markets on both sides of the river, presenting the foods he grew up enjoying to the public to gain interest before the shop was ready.

"I knew that Philadelphia's food scene exploded and there were so many restaurants that were such a high risk. I knew I could not be out until 2, 3 o'clock in the morning cleaning a kitchen because I need to get home to my kids," DeFeo noted. "So I need to create a little specialty shop that provided me the perfect balance. I can even have my kids work here."

Valente's had its official ribbon cutting on Aug. 18. Waiting patiently in front of the busy counter was his son, Nino, 9. Working diligently behind the counter was his daughter, Liliana, 10.

"My son does his own thing. Whether or not this is something he wants to do long term remains to be seen. But it seems to be a passion of my daughter's, and as long as it is, I'm happy to foster that," DeFeo added.

Valente's recently expanded its four-day operations to five, adding Wednesday to its Thursday-through-Sunday operation. For more information, visit [www.valentes.us](http://www.valentes.us).

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