

FOODSERVICE EAST PRESENTS

SECRETS OF **SUCCESS**

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An ongoing series of interviews with chefs, restaurateurs and foodservice operators, Secrets of Success looks at the paths taken to professional recognition and acclaim.



Joe Cassinelli Chef-Owner, Pizzeria Posto, Somerville, MA By Foodservice East

Joe Cassinelli's Posto in Davis Square, Somerville, recently became Boston and New England's first certified Neapolitan pizzeria. The certification by the Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana passed inspection – a series of demanding tests – this fall. The association which has very specific rules for what constitutes an authentic Neapolitan pizza, recognizes only the Marina and Margherita Verace. For complete details, go to www.pizzanapoletana.org.

FOODSERVICE EAST SECRETS OF SUCCESS

FSE: Your recent certification is a great honor – what can you tell us about that process and how it felt to receive certification?

CASSINELLI: The process is a real challenge. Originally I had wanted to certify Posto when we opened, but after traveling to work with Verace Pizzaiolo's Pepe and Jose from the VPN Americas and a trip to Naples, Italy I knew we were not ready. So we went to work at Posto over the next year to refine our techniques and improve our pizza. On the surface it seems pretty easy, dough, oven, etc. But once you start really paying attention to all the details and listening to other pizzaiolos tell you what makes the pizza so special, all the little nuances begin to consume you and you don't settle for less. Even some of our equipment needed to be swapped out. We imported a new mixer from Italy and boy, what a difference it made. Amazing. We adjusted our fermentation, recipe, oven temp and techniques to open and top the pizza. Not least of all is the oven which we use 100 percent hard wood and cook at temperatures over 800 degrees. After we documented all these changes via photos and videos our application was sent to Naples, Italy and reviewed by the board. If everything looks good the next and final step was to send in the inspector! What a nerve-racking day that was. I really didn't think he was going to certify us, even after all the work we had put in. These guys are tough and they want it done their way. After a few adjustments and a long conversation on the phone with his boss Posto passed. Yes, we are certified but the process never stops. Just like being a chef. The day you stop trying to learn and get better is the day you stop being a chef. Plus they keep you on your toes with surprise inspections and yearly reviews.

FSE: What influenced you to become a chef? Did you spend a lot of time in the kitchen while you were growing up?

CASSINELLI: Becoming a chef was something that I had wanted to do since I was very young. I spent loads of time in the kitchen with my family and I saw how food made people feel! I wanted to be a part of that. When my friends were watching cartoons, I was watching Julia tell the difference between different kinds of poultry or Jacques making a sauce or Yan slicing like mad.

FSE: How did you settle on Neapolitan style pizza?

CASSINELLI: I loved traveling to Italy and through that process I started to really become aware of "traditional techniques" and what they meant to each region and to the people that honor them. In Naples, Pizzaiolos are highly regarded members of the society and take their craft very seriously. Once you try the pizza you know why.

FSE: What have been the major culinary influences in your life that shaped the way you view food?

CASSINELLI: Growing up around food, family and friends. I have fond memories of watching my Nonna dry her pasta on broom handles and mixing her meatballs right on the kitchen table, no bowl needed! Of course my mom always encouraged me as long as I didn't bake. She said I made too big a mess with the flour. Food is always better shared.

FSE: What is the 'secret' of your success?

CASSINELLI: Working with great people.

FSE: Posto has great style and a very urbane feeling? How did you settle on the ambience of the restaurant?

CASSINELLI: It was a very organic process. I actually ended up doing things to the floor and did some of the painting myself. What I wanted most was a space that was easy to be in for a long period of time. I left the kitchen wide open because I really want people to feel like they are coming over to my house and hanging out in my kitchen.

FSE: What do you enjoy most about being a chef?

CASSINELLI: I would say the ability to go in any direction I point myself in. If I want to cook one style or the other I only have to commit my focus to it. It is also the most generous industry out there. Almost to a fault. I know operators that are struggling to tread water in this economy but still give to charities and hold fundraisers for them, turkey drives etc. I love the selflessness that I see in this industry.

FSE: What do you like the least?

CASSINELLI: Without a doubt. Paperwork.

FSE: What piece of kitchen equipment could you not live without?

CASSINELLI: I absolutely love my Le Creuset my mom gave me. Being able to cook in a pot that gets passed from generation to generation imparts a flavor not soon replicated.

FSE: What do you see yourself doing 20 years from now?

CASSINELLI: Enjoying time with my family and going to other people's restaurants.

FSE: When you eat out, what's your favorite food?

CASSINELLI: I love anything prepared with care. It's the people that make the experience. Of course I do love my late night Chinese, but I can only do that when my wife is out of town!

FSE: What's in your refrigerator at home?

CASSINELLI: Unfortunately, not too much. I pretty much live at work. Right now some eggs, white wine, beer and cheese will get me through pretty much anything.