

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.



## **Chef Marisa Iocco**

Executive Chef, Spiga, Needham, MA  
By Foodservice East

*The executive chef, Spiga, a charming Italian neighborhood restaurant in Needham, MA, Marisa Iocco grew up in Southern Italy and was, as she puts it, “deeply impacted” by her heritage.*

# FOODSERVICE EAST SECRETS OF SUCCESS

**FSE: Did you cook with your mother or grandmother while growing up in Southern Italy?**

IOCCO: Not really. I didn't have a chance. I was too little when my mother was alive.

I didn't cook with my grandmother, either (when I was young, I was a bit of a rebel and I did not like to follow the rules). But somehow all their recipes and flavors stayed in my brain.

**FSE: How has your Italian heritage impacted your culinary style?**

IOCCO: Italian heritage...it is like a large piece of designer luggage: Beautiful, rich—containing centuries of culture—but also full of criticism and a sense of guilt. Because in Italy, between the religion and our culture, it is—you know—we are taught to be very conscious about everything we do, and that can be overwhelming as a young person. Then when you get into your profession, the sense of guilt can be a trigger. For instance, you criticize yourself more than you compliment yourself.

You think about all the responsibility you take on when something you do is not right for everyone. It is the same thing with my food. If someone came to me and said, "This was good, but-but-but..." I have to work very hard to separate myself from my cooking and someone's opinion. But I try to remain loyal to my principle: Simplicity and elegance in taste. Sometimes it's frustrating and sometimes it is not. So, yes: My heritage did impact my career. Profoundly-deeply- immensely.

**FSE: How have your experiences with your own restaurants and others you've worked at in the United States affected that style?**

IOCCO: My "culinary style" is more about the style of how I cook and run my business, not what I cook, prepared with a refreshed and decadent or artistic twist. "Tradition revisioned" is what I like to say. To speak of how my experiences have affected me, they have done so in many assertive and assorted ways. Sometimes they were Draining. Sometimes reinvigorating. Sometimes liberating. Sometimes insane. My experiences always generate curiosity. They pushed me to maintain a work ethic filled with integrity; even more integrity than has often been necessary.

**FSE: Do you have plans to expand Spiga with units in other neighborhoods?**

IOCCO: Yes...if I found strength in my team and rich flavors in their hearts, parallel with financial believers investing in my vision.

**FSE: What are your favorite items on your menu?**

IOCCO: I cannot mention only one...so let's say three of my favorite are: Artichoke guazzetti, Orecchiette al grano arso, and Organic wood oven roasted chicken (it is super crisp).

**FSE: When you go out to eat, what kinds of places do you enjoy?**

IOCCO: Any, indeed. Any ethnic casual place with good food, warmly prepared and warmly served. I love, of course, eloquent food—extensive and expansive—served by knowledgeable servers. And I enjoy my family and friends' homes. (I love surprises.)

**FSE: What is the "secret" of your success?**

IOCCO: Humbleness and gratefulness, especially with my coworkers. Be curious every day, enough to learn something new and fall in love with it. Remain calm at work as much as possible, and swear a lot at the end of the day only with friends.

**FSE: What do you see yourself doing 10 years from now?**

IOCCO: Have more time for myself, anxiety free (and look in the mirror, for instance, and still look "cool"). Have fun teaching and cooking healthfully with kids. Travel. And still have the chance to say, "What a beautiful day to be alive."