

# OMBRA Cucina Rustica

## a dream come true for popular island chef

**M**ichael Cirafesi was working as executive chef at one of Hilton Head Island's highly regarded Italian restaurants in October of 2010 when he got the call.

It was from his mentor, distinguished chef Nunzio Patruno.

"He brought it to my attention that I was almost 40 years old and needed to be on my own, find my own restaurant," Cirafesi said.

The student agreed with his teacher.

His passion for Italian cuisine, his natural talent and 24 years of hard work in several respected kitchens had brought him much acclaim. Now, he was ready to reap the financial rewards of owning his own place.

Michael Cirafesi and Nunzio Patruno came together again, this time as partners to open OMBRA Cucina Rustica in the building that formerly housed Antonio's restaurant in the Village at Wexford. The two realized they had found the perfect spot and spent the next 12 months transforming the building into the Tuscan farmhouse look the two had envisioned. The floors were constructed of reclaimed wood. The walls put up were a mixture of reclaimed brick and Tuscan limestone. Colors were inspired by a photo from an old Tuscan architectural book.

"The whole place was completely gutted – from the front door to the back door," Cirafesi said. "Everything had to be re-painted, replaced and redesigned. We wanted to make this place special and unique."

Cirafesi's dream came true on Nov. 17, 2012, the day OMBRA Cucina Rustica opened for business.

The menu is filled with classical regional Italian cuisine. Many dishes were created hundreds of years ago, passed down from generation to generation. Cirafesi hopes customers can appreciate his food's authenticity.

"Our Prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano is authentic, it's from Parma," Cirafesi said. We use very high-end, true-blue ingredients. All the products we use are Italian products."

The menu is filled with classical regional Italian cuisine. Many dishes were created hundreds of years ago, passed down from generation to generation.





The dedication to his Sicilian heritage gives OMBRA a unique selection of fish not found in local waters, such as turbot and spigola from the Mediterranean. Freshness is a top priority.

“If it doesn’t look like it just fell out of the water, it gets sent back,” Cirafesi said.

The ravioli changes every couple of days and is based on the season. When interviewed, it was filled with mortadella and toasted pistachios. One of Cirafesi’s favorite menu items is the beef carpaccio.

“I learned that straight from Nunzio, 18 years ago,” Cirafesi said. “No one makes it better. I’ve never had a carpaccio like that, even in Italy. The veal carpaccio is the same thing. It’s just outrageous.”

The homemade potato gnocchi with wild mushrooms, gorgonzola, cream and prosciutto has been a customer favorite. The dessert menu is highlighted by an eggless vanilla custard called Panna Cotta alla Vaniglia. There is also Cirafesi and Nunzio’s signature soft-centered chocolate soufflé cake served with vanilla gelato, called Bombato di Cioccolatino.

Cirafesi’s passion for Italian food also applies to OMBRA’s vast selection of Italian wine. He has self-tested and approved the best brands from all of Italy. His standards are high -- for each three bottles selected, he estimates 10 are rejected.

“Tasting all that wine sounds like a fun job but it really isn’t fun at all,” Cirafesi laughed. “Italy has 20 regions and all of them produce wine. The problem is, people get hooked on one region, say Tuscany for example, and that’s all they know. My idea was to promote all these great wines that come from other obscure areas of Italy as well. I’m just infatuated with Italian wines and all the different types.”

Cirafesi, 39, developed his love for food growing up in a small suburb of Philadelphia. He spent many days in his grandmother’s kitchen, seven doors down, and vividly remembers harvesting food from the family garden for his mother to prepare.

He started cooking professionally for a local Italian restaurant at the age of 15. After high school, he was clas-

sically trained at Philadelphia Culinary School. His first job after graduating was on Philadelphia’s western suburbs. It was a high-end, high-volume place called Primavera, and it was owned by his idol -- Nunzio Patruno.

After one year, the head chef at Primavera recognized Cirafesi’s potential and recommended he train under Patruno himself at his swanky downtown restaurant – The Monte Carlo Living Room.

“I decided to go and I ended up staying for 10 years,” Cirafesi said.

He left Patruno’s nest in 2002 and flew south for an opportunity to be executive chef at one of Hilton Head’s top Italian restaurant. In 2010 under the culinary expertise and leadership of Chef Michael Cirafesi, the restaurant was awarded by OpenTable as one of the top 50 Italian restaurants in the United States.

“I credit all that to what was instilled in me by Nunzio,” Cirafesi said. “When I came here 11 years ago, no offense to other restaurants, the Italian food was not authentic. All I did was cook the exact way Nunzio taught with the exact same ingredients. I used the exact same techniques and style he instilled in us. I brought that from Philadelphia to Hilton Head and it just exploded.”

Cirafesi has opened his new restaurant with the same strategy, except this time, Patruno is his partner. The 150 seat Tuscan style restaurant includes a nouveau Italian bar featuring specialty Italian cocktails and wines by the glass. Cirafesi also hosts chef tables, cooking classes, and his famous wine dinners.

“We wanted to create this beautiful restaurant and really promote the Italian culture with the best food and best wine in town,” Cirafesi said. “We cater to the connoisseur that enjoys an array of eclectic Italian wines and we also cater to somebody who wants to come in, have a glass of wine, half of a pasta, and go home. Both of those customers will be loved the same way.”

**Hours are 4:30-10 p.m. seven days a week.  
Reservations are recommended but walk-ins are welcome. For more information, call 843-842-5505.**

