

Chef Chat, Part 1: Lynette Hawkins of Giacomo's Cibo e Vino

By Phaedra Cook Wed., Jul. 23 2014 at 10:00 AM

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Photo by Phaedra Cook

Chef Lynette Hawkins of Giacomo's Cibo e Vino

Chef Lynette Hawkins had already made a name for herself in Houston years before opening her casual Italian restaurant, [Giacomo's Cibo e Vino](#). Hawkins' prior endeavor was [La Mora Cucina Toscana](#). She operated it for 16 years before shutting it down for some very sensible reasons. (We'll cover those details later in this interview.)

Hawkins' Tuscan cuisine was missed, so there was much rejoicing when she opened the new place. Even so, Giacomo's was not an overnight success. Hawkins originally envisioned a counter service setup where customers would order *cicchetti* (small plates) and other items. Customers rejected the setup.

These days, Giacomo's provides table service for both lunch and dinner. Why didn't the initial concept work? How has Giacomo's evolved into a stable, successful neighborhood restaurant after that misstep? Today, get up to speed on Hawkins' restaurant background, then come back tomorrow to learn more about Giacomo's evolution.

EOW: How did you first get into cooking?

LH: Well, I was definitely a late bloomer as far as getting into professional cooking. I had no idea I could make a living at it. I was very interested in cooking when I was a little girl but it was just a fun thing I did with Mummy.

The first time I realized I could make a living at it was when I was a manager at Driscoll Street Café [no longer open] and the chef didn't show up for work. I had to make quiche. I came up with a soup that I'd seen him make before and the customers loved it. I thought, "Well, this is really cool. Maybe I can be in the kitchen instead of just being in the front."

So, I decided that I was going to work in restaurants where I admired their management and food. I went to work for Damian's as the manager but I did a lot of training there in the kitchen to prepare for opening the Carrabba's on Woodway. I was the general manager and--again--the chef didn't show up. I worked there for two years and that gave me the confidence to open [La Mora Cucina Toscana].



Photo by Phaedra Cook

A slice of seasonal pie from Giacomo's: in this case fig with a crumble topping.

EOW: At what age did you start cooking in professional kitchens?

I was 36 years old. I didn't go to school to become a restaurateur. In fact, I studied architecture and got a business degree. The only reason I got into the restaurant business was because I was working in restaurants while I was in college. When I graduated and went to work at a marketing company, it just wasn't my bag.

I missed the camaraderie and excitement of the restaurant business. Working 9-to-5 was really boring for me. So, I actually started working part-time at night just to get back into that excitement and fun. Then, some friends opened Driscoll Street Café and I thought because of my business background I'd be able to help them manage. I quit my marketing job and went to work for them. That's how it all started.

EOW: That's awesome, because the conventional wisdom is that you have to be young to get started in the restaurant industry.

LH: I just didn't know my own mind. I don't know how people know at an early age what they want to do for the rest of their life. I was fortunate that I did find something I enjoyed so much.

EOW: Yet, you were in marketing before you were a chef.

LH: Well, yeah. I had a business degree. There's nothing wrong with marketing. It just wasn't for me. I grew up in Europe. I wish I'd had an inkling... but back in the 1970's, with the exception of Alice Waters and a few pioneers... women weren't chefs. Women didn't go to culinary school. I wish I'd had their instincts because while living overseas I could have gone to culinary school. I could have studied in Paris. I had to learn everything trial-and-error so it's taken a lot longer for me to learn to do things.

EOW: Was Damian's where you decided that Italian was "your" cuisine or was it prior to that?

LH: I was definitely attracted to Italian cuisine because of all the places my family lived, Italy was my favorite. Things definitely clicked for me in Italy. I spend my formative years there as a little girl and also spent time there as a teenager. I loved everything about Italy: the culture, food, architecture, people...

EOW: Why was your family in Europe?

My father was in the oil business. He was a petroleum engineer so we moved around a lot. Back in the '50s and '60s, travel wasn't as easy as it is now, so when Daddy had to go to Angola, he'd be away for three months. We lived in cities that were easy for him to travel from or get visas from. He was always traveling to Africa or the Middle East.

Italian was the first food my mother and I learned to cook while we were living in Italy. She was a young bride with a baby girl and learned to cook from our maid. She was a wonderful farm girl who taught my mother how to make soups. The first thing I remember cooking was minestrone or ribollita. I thought it was amazing how all these ingredients became this marvelous, flavorful, pretty, colorful food. I was three or four years old and to me, it was magical.

EOW: La Mora was widely lamented when it shut down. Why did you decide to close it?

LH: A couple of things. I'd finally paid off the mortgage, which was a happy thing, but the building was a money pit. What gave it charm were also the things that were structurally dangerous. The building was beginning to implode because there was a sinkhole underneath it that I hadn't known about. I'd already spent a fortune remodeling it after I'd been open for three years. I thought I'd fixed all the foundation problems, but they were happening again.

After I'd paid off the mortgage, I was going to have to borrow money again [to fix the sinkhole problems]. I'd been approached by developers who wanted property in the Montrose to build condos.

Before, I'd never wanted to do that, but then I started thinking, "Oh, gosh. Do I want to sell this property and take a few years off or do I want to take another loan out?" Plus, my daddy was living with me. He had some health issues and I needed to spend more time looking after him. So, I decided to sell, close the restaurant, take some time off and think about what I wanted to do next.

EOW: When did you open Giacomo's?

LH: September 2009.

EOW: So, you're about to have your five-year anniversary! Have you had any "lessons learned" since you've been open?

LH: I really wanted to get away from full service and focus on the food. Full service is a whole other management "thing" and I don't think I'd ever been very good at that. That's ironic because it was my first background in the restaurant business! I love interacting with my customers but I hate scheduling servers and having to worry about the quality of service they're giving. It's the hardest thing to do. So, that's what I was trying to avoid.

The lesson I learned here was that I had a bad concept when I first opened. The counter service just didn't work. I was very stubborn for a while. For six months, I just kept thinking "I've got to make this work." But it didn't.

Why didn't counter service work at Giacomo's when it does for other casual Italian joints? Come back tomorrow and read Part 2 to find out and learn more about chef Hawkins.



Photo by Phaedra Cook

Chef Lynette Hawkins on the verdant patio of Giacomo's Cibo e Vino

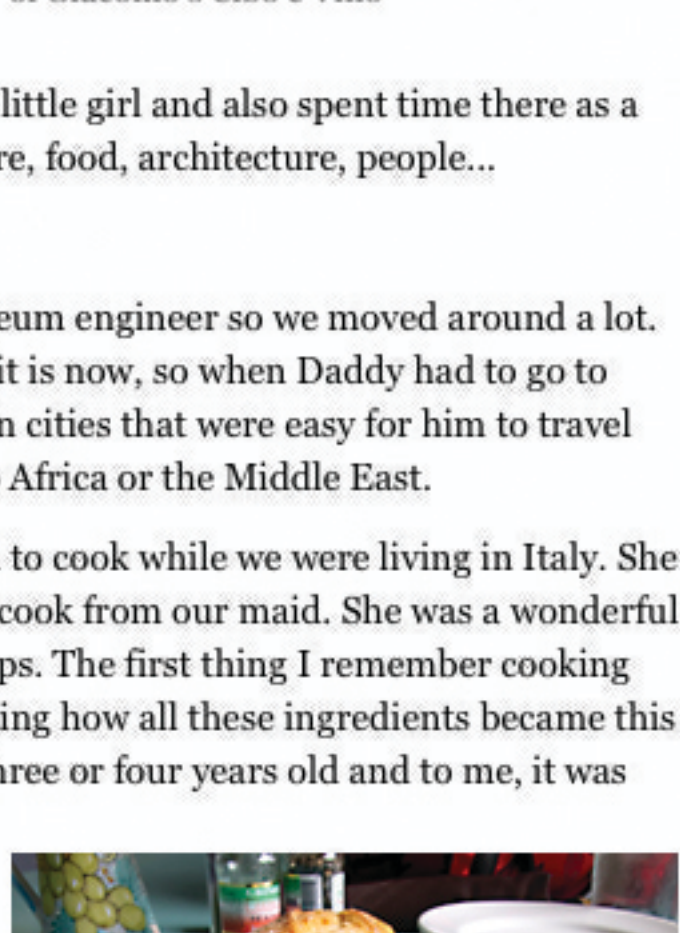


Photo by Phaedra Cook

One of my personal favorites from Giacomo's menu: the turkey tonnato. I adore the rich, tart sauce.