

Chef Chat

Chef Chat, Part 2: How Do You Pronounce Giacomo's, Anyway?

By Phaedra Cook Thu., Jul. 24 2014 at 10:00 AM

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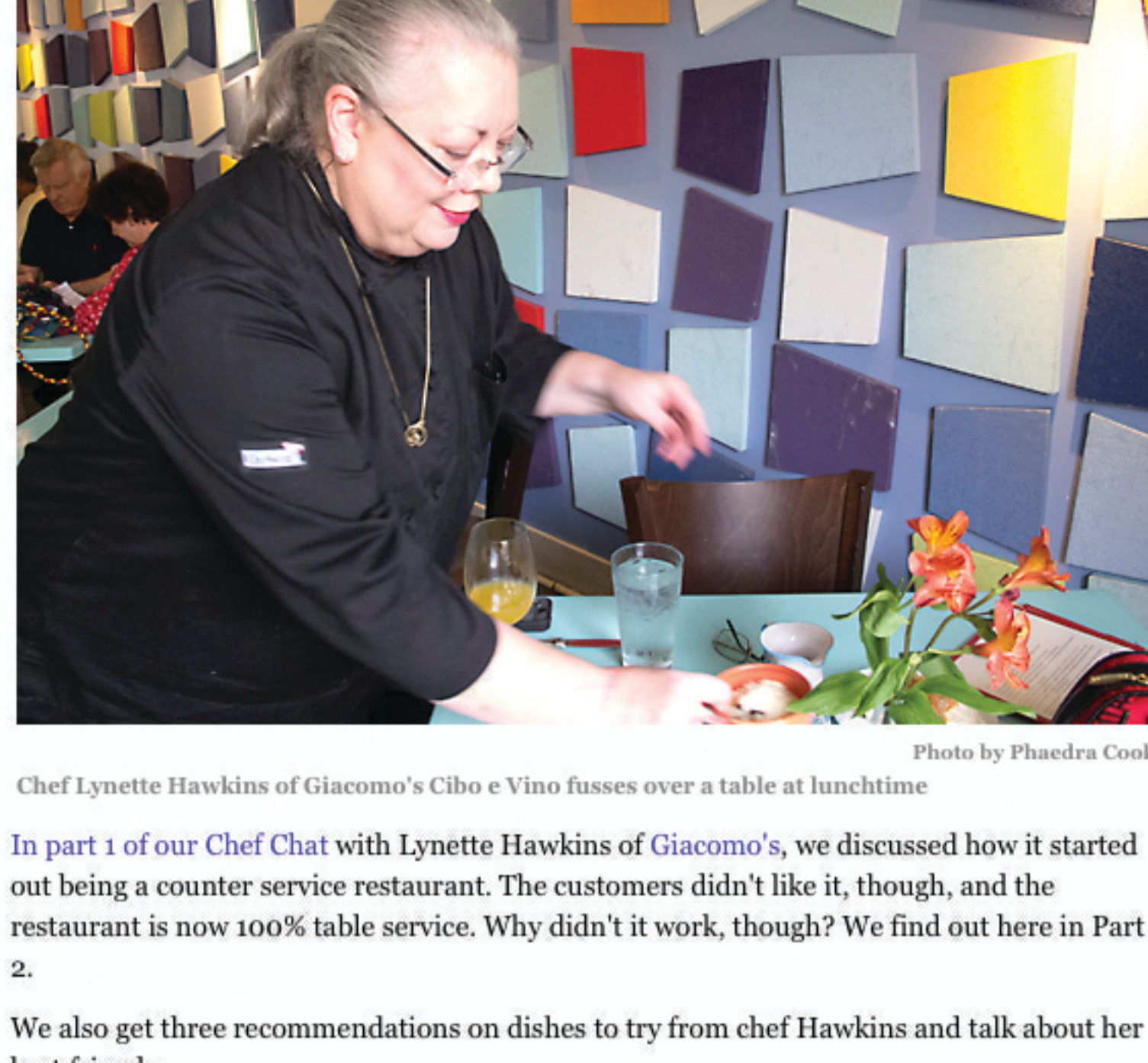


Photo by Phaedra Cook

Chef Lynette Hawkins of Giacomo's Cibo e Vino fusses over a table at lunchtime

In part 1 of our Chef Chat with Lynette Hawkins of Giacomo's, we discussed how it started out being a counter service restaurant. The customers didn't like it, though, and the restaurant is now 100% table service. Why didn't it work, though? We find out here in Part 2.

We also get three recommendations on dishes to try from chef Hawkins and talk about her best friends.

EOW: There are a couple of Italian places in town that have a counter service model (like Paulie's, for example) and it seems to work. Why didn't it work here?

LH: I think my big mistake was that I put [the names of the dishes on the menu] in Italian. Paulie's is simplified. It's in English and recognizable. Silly me, I have

"orecchiette Giugione" and no one can pronounce it much less figure out what the hell it is. I don't know what I was thinking. I was used to La Mora and forgot that "Oh,

gosh. People understood the menu because the waiters were there to translate it for them." They had time to peruse the menu and weren't nervous because they were

standing in line and people behind them were urging them to move on! That was a big mistake. Looking back on it, I wonder how I could have been so obtuse!

At the time it didn't even occur to me but now I know that's [the key] to successful counter service places. My menu needed to be explained. People needed to sit, relax and look at the menu at their leisure.

When I first opened, the counter service people were asking for lasagna, spaghetti and meatballs, pizza... Pasta Carrabba... (laughs)



Photo by Phaedra Cook

Chef Lynette Hawkins under the "pass" at Giacomo's Cibo e Vino

EOW: Oh, my!

LH: Yeah, we got a lot of Pasta Carrabba requests.

EOW: I'm sure Johnny was very flattered. Coincidentally, he was mentioned in our prior Chef Chat with Roy Shavartzapel of Common Bond!

LH: Oh wow!

EOW: Now, you've got quite a wine focus. What's the best way to explore what you've got here?

LH: I offer a lot of wines by the glass... I mean, a lot. I know it's at least a third of the list. I also offer three-ounce pours. I try to have diversity so I have something for everyone, even though my focus is mainly Italian. But I still have the necessary California Chardonnay and Cab because that is what people are comfortable with.

EOW: Pronounce your restaurant name for me.

LH: Gee-ock-a-mo.

EOW: Great. I've been mispronouncing it for years.

LH: Yeah. Some people pronounce it Wok-a-moes.

EOW: What? Like "guacamole?"

LH: Yeah, I know! They must think it's a Mexican restaurant.



Photo by Phaedra Cook

Three favorites at Giacomo's: porchetta, semolina gnocchi and tortelli

EOW: What are three of your favorite dishes here?

LH: Probably the porchetta. It's actually mock porchetta because we make it with pork butt, not the whole suckling pig like they do in Italy. It has the same flavor profile, though: rosemary, fennel, pepper. We slow-cook it until it's meltingly tender. Also, the half-moon ravioli. I love our *tortelli* with the Swiss chard stuffing. My other one... maybe the semolina gnocchi. That's a childhood favorite of mine and it's very comforting. It's like adult baby food.

EOW: Who are your customers?

LH: We happily have a diversity. All age groups. On any given night you'll see young people in their 20s and 30s. You'll see young parents with their children, middle-aged people and older people. It's pretty equally distributed.

We get a lot of people from the neighborhood and have become quite the neighborhood spot. Some nights, it's almost like a cocktail party because everyone knows each other. It's very gratifying because obviously these people have told each other about Giacomo's and all like us and our food. It's a happy thing. [It was] slow to evolve. It took about three years to get established as a neighborhood place.

EOW: That's important to note. A lot of restaurant owners and investors don't understand they'll have to pony up for longer than they'd hope.

LH: That's right. A lot of places, like the original Carrabba's on Kirby, hit the ground running and are packed from Day 1. That's a little harder to achieve these days. There are so many more restaurants, so many good restaurants and so many ways of getting the word out about restaurants. There's just a lot more competition. I'm not very adept at social media, so I'm at a disadvantage.

EOW: Yeah, I don't think you're on Twitter, although you are on Facebook.

LH: I do a bit but I have a friend who helps because I'm not good at it. I don't spend a lot of time at the computer. I'm intimidated. I'm the only person who doesn't know how to do Facebook.

EOW: Are there any people in Houston's culinary industry who were a good influence on you?

LH: Yeah, I've always been a fan of Monica Pope. She inspired me to go beyond my little Tuscan world and experiment with other ingredients. She's so adventurous. When I used to go to T'afia [now Sparrow Bar + Cookshop], there were so many things on her menu that I didn't know what they were or where they came from. I got introduced to all sorts of wonderful things so that encouraged me to be a bit more explorative.

At Giacomo's, because I'm not limited to Tuscan or even regional Italian cuisine, I've ventured out to Mediterranean. It's exciting to try new spices like zatar, sumac and Aleppo pepper. It's fun and I love these exotic ingredients. I can venture out of my comfort zone and my customers have become receptive to that.

I also learned a lot from the Mandolas and Carrabbas on how to run a restaurant. I learned the importance of relationships with vendors, using quality ingredients--don't cut corners because you'll feel the effect. Always use the highest quality ingredients. How to keep a nice, clean restaurant. How to take care of your customers.

I've also been a big admirer of Charles Clark [of Ibiza, Coppa and others] and John Sheely [of Mockingbird Bistro]. I love their work ethic. They inspire me because they are so successful but they are still so hands-on. I think that's what it takes, especially these days when there is so much competition. You can't go on vacation and expect your people to run everything for you and maintain success. Your customers want to see you there.

If I take a night off, I hear about it the next day or the day after. You'd think I'd taken a week off!

EOW: It's kind of a golden handcuffs situation.

LH: Yeah, but you gotta love it and I do love it. I'm so fortunate that finally I'm in a position to enjoy the business. The first three years were a real struggle and I was more motivated by fear than love. Every day I'd get to work and pray that it was going to be a busy day. Now I come to work joyously because I do expect good business and now all I have to worry about is doing a good job, cooking good food and hoping my staff shows up.

EOW: What niche does Giacomo's fill? What makes it unique?

LH: I think people understand the food now. I think they can recognize the flavors. My food is not complicated. It's comforting and I offer a variety. People can come in two or three times a week and have something different each time but it doesn't challenge them. There's comfort and flavor.

EOW: I happen to know that you are a great animal lover because I first met you through HOPE (Homeless & Orphaned Pets Endeavor), a non-profit fostering organization. Are you still involved with animal welfare causes?

LH: I still donate to animal rescue organizations and I am working on making the patio dog-friendly.

Animals still just appear on my doorstep sometimes. My most recent rescue is a crippled Chihuahua that one of my waiters found. I lost my old yellow Lab, Giacomo, about three years ago but I found another one. His name is Puccini. The Chihuahua is named Piccolina and she's about the size of Puccini's ear! They sleep together right next to me.

EOW: What do you want people to know about Giacomo's, especially if they've never been here before?

LH: I try to always come up with new, tasty dishes to keep everyone excited about Giacomo's. I try to support local farmers and purveyors of protein. The value of that is that you have better flavor. My meat is all pastured. I use Texas Longhorn beef for my meatballs and Bolognese. I use pastured pork from Black Hill Ranch. Eggs come from happy chickens and all you taste that in the food. It's such a different flavor. When you have good ingredients, you don't have to manipulate them too much.