

## Chefs on the Edge

In May, during the National Restaurant Show in Chicago, we invited three DiRōNA chefs to join Mark Vaughan, Editor and Publisher of *Santé* magazine for a conversation about what's new in their kitchens and how they read and react to trends, including the low-carb craze. Here's a recap of the conversation we had with:

**Frank Eucalitto**, Café Chardonnay, Palm Beach Gardens, FL

**Pierro Selvaggio**, Valentino, Los Angeles, CA/Las Vegas, NV

**Tim Creehan**, Beach Walk Café, Destin, FL

*Vaughan: Collectively we have many years of experience in this room. Though individually you're all at different stages in your career, you each have been extremely successful at understanding your customers' expectations coming in the door and reading their impressions as they walk out. Tell me, what's new in the kitchen for you?*

**Creehan:** We're often behind the trends in our area of NW Florida. Sushi has been a big thing for us. I brought a chef back that worked with me years ago who has since-trained under the leading sushi chef in south Florida. We held a "sushi night" in one of our private dining rooms.

*Vaughan: Is there sushi competition in your area?*

**Creehan:** Everyone's doing it, but no one on the level that we are. We're focusing on the bringing in the real thing—product from Japanese companies and fish from Hawaii—what you'd find in a big market. Designer sushi. We'll see.

*Vaughan: What about you Pierro?*

**Selvaggio:** For 10 to 15 years, we enjoyed tremendous success with the popularity of Italian food, the Mediterranean diet and any-

thing related to olive oil. Publicity of late relating to low-carb diets is definitely giving a big edge to sushi or any cuisine without carbohydrates. No bread. No pasta. No olive oil. So now we are in a situation where we must catch your breath and ask: "How can we make the best of this?" Well, we have always done carpaccio. What can I do to modify and still fall in the level of what is called modern Italian cuisine?

The good news is: Never have I seen such wonderful goods on this market! Thirty years ago, America was a wasteland. Mozzarella was just this rubbery stuff. Tomatoes were red and that was about it. Look where we are today with artisanal cheeses, organic and heirloom fruits and vegetables, farm-raised seafood and, of course, America has always set the standard for meat. This phenomenon of freshness and quality is not going to be another diet that passes by. So the Chinese do what they do. The French and Japanese do what they do and, of course, the Italians — we will always do what we do. We are all a part of the American cauldron. It is beautiful to see it all come together.

*Vaughan: Frank, tell us about Café Chardonnay and your clientele. What's cutting edge in your kitchen?*

**Eucalitto:** When I first moved to South Florida 24 years ago, there was nothing available in Florida. You couldn't even get fresh basil. It's better now. At Café Chardonnay we try to be on the cutting edge of what we can do in that part of the country. With its older demographics, we can't go crazy. After 9/11, our business dropped off dramatically. We are back to where we were, but we upgraded the menu with products like micro-greens and heirloom tomatoes. People today are well educated. It's more about quality than quantity. Chain restaurants are bringing the level of their food up as well.

*Vaughan: More people are eating out on a more regular basis. But if the food isn't good, they aren't coming. To keep them coming to your restaurants, do you push the envelope in your kitchen?*

**Eucalitto:** We do on our specials. The core menu isn't as exciting as I or the chef would like it to be. We have to keep some basic

items on there. To keep things interesting, we offer 8-12 specials a night that the servers have to memorize. That's what sells.

**Selvaggio:** That's right. You push the envelope if you have to. There is always that standard offering of items that may not be very exciting but it is our "bread and butter." And it still has to be good. A finicky market like LA can blow your mind with "What else? Okay. What else?" And then the envelope isn't an envelope anymore. It becomes a website! We are like very high-end tailors. We will mold and adapt accordingly. I tell my people to look at the customers' eyes and how they look at the menu. If they appear lost, how can you help them? Communication is not just by words.



Left to right: Pierro Selvaggio, Mark Vaughan, Frank Eucalitto and Tim Creehan.

*Vaughan: Pierro, has the low-carb craze had an impact on your sales of pasta and bread?*

**Selvaggio:** A little bit. There are enough people out there that say it works. Everywhere you go you see it. This morning at breakfast I noticed the Westin has a whole section on the menu for low-carb. We are in the business to give people what they want. So, at Valentino's we now offer a low-carb degustation.

**Creehan:** Since we are so late in Northwest Florida with trends, anything our restaurant can do to stay ahead of the trends and introduce them first puts us at an advantage. At the same time, we've got that customer that comes in once a year and he expects to see that crab dish he had the last time he was still on the menu.

**Selvaggio:** You have an edge. You are always looking ahead so that you are prepared.

**Creehan:** True. I do have the luxury of looking back at a trend to determine if it is really going to stick.

*Vaughan: Tim are you marketing your new sushi menu in a big way?*

**Creehan:** We are in the process. You have to be delicate so that the customer doesn't think there is a concept change. For us, the events of 9/11 had the opposite effect on our market. Instead of getting on planes, people could drive to Destin. We saw our numbers go through the roof within three weeks. The only area where I didn't have any growth was in bottled wine sales. So, I did away with corkage fees and dropped my pricing down to a 2X mark-up across the board and my wine sales are now 60% up and I've got happy customers. At the end of the day it's the average check and the perceived value of the experience that we care about.

**Selvaggio:** The others have been asleep and you are pinching them.

*Vaughan: What about the phenomena for small plates?*

**Eucalitto:** More people are ordering more from our appetizer menu. Instead of having soft shell crab appetizer and a dinner entrée, they might order the soft shell appetizer and a salad topped with lobster. Some of our regulars at the bar are more interested in trying and tasting new wines so they'll spend \$200 - \$250 on wine and have a \$15 dollar appetizer. Like Tim, it's the overall check that we watch.

**Creehan:** Last week I was analyzing my average lunch check and I just couldn't seem to make it go up. I talked to the servers, focused on the menu and looked closely at the appetizers. I took a bold move and cut the cost and the portion of every appetizer in half. I wanted to force people to try an appetizer without sacrificing the entrée. The servers have to make sure they communicate when someone orders the appetizer that they understand that the new appetizer menu truly consists of one- or two-bite plates. The average lunch check went up \$5 a head. It's also a good tool for marketing your menu. I see this concept happening also with wine.

**Selvaggio:** Eighteen years ago I opened a restaurant called Primi, which of course means "first courses" in Italian. In the beginning it was very successful but eventually we had to readapt the concept because of the location. (Studio people like big meals.) Plus

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we found that this type of menu is very labor intensive and requires a lot of storage space. Now I see others revisiting the same concept. Perhaps today—because people are more adventurous, aggressive—it will work.

*Vaughan: What do you want people to walk away with when they leave your restaurant?*

**Creehan:** I like it when they say "I've had tuna in dozens of restaurants. That's the best preparation I've ever had." That's a big compliment.

**Selvaggio:** We complain about the customer. They drive you crazy. But at the end of the day we cannot do without them. We have to put a smile on their face.

There are two important moments in the ceremony of "in and out." When a customer comes in, the smile must be from us. They must feel welcomed. At the end of the meal, our reward is the smile on the customer's face. Then we know we did our job.

And, for some customers, the fact that they don't complain at all is a good sign.

*Vaughan: What about employees? In operator focus groups we conduct at Santé, people always want to talk about employees. What do you look for in an employee?*

**Selvaggio:** Good employees are half of the battle. You try to do the right training. A restaurant is not like a movie where you can shoot a scene and say "cut." At a restaurant there is no "cutting."

**Eucalitto:** As a fine dining restaurant, we offer our employees a future. Whether they're a bus boy or a waiter, they can aspire to one day be a chef. At Café Chardonnay the pastry chef started as a dishwasher. The general manager was a waitress. The chef was promoted from assistant chef. Many of our employees have been with us for years. The main thing is keeping them motivated. Shift the accountability over to them. They have to come up with some of the ideas. In fact, that's what they're working on this week while I'm

in Chicago. They are developing a list of things that we can do to make our restaurant a better experience for our customers.

*Vaughan: What advice would you offer to someone starting out in this business?*

**Selvaggio:** First: You have to know what you are doing. Second: There is no free ride. You have to be prepared for endless hours. The restaurant business doesn't start at 5 in the evening. It starts at 5 in the morning. Third: Start small and learn from your mistakes. When you look for a lease, make sure you have room to grow. This will give you the parameters you need to expand the kitchen or put in a bar later. Mostly I tell young people entering the restaurant business, "Look the money will come. But first do the job."

**Creehan:** You have to ask yourself: Do I have the passion? Will it be okay to miss a planned family vacation? Or, if the phone rings on Christmas Eve and the grease trap has backed up will I be willing to go in to solve that problem? If the answer to ANY of these questions is NOT "Yes" then you have to do some serious soul-searching.

**Eucalitto:** The passion has to be there but I would also say "Be realistic." Listen to the people who say it's going to cost you \$50 a square foot to open in your area. You're kidding yourself if you say "I can do it for \$10." When you're attracting investors, it's natural to want to underestimate the costs. You also have to remember that it's not just about the money. It's about wanting to please the customer.

**Selvaggio:** When I make commencement speeches I tell the story of when I went to see Yul Brenner in the King & I. Before the play began, an announcement was made that this would be Yul Brenner's 2,315th performance. After the play, I think to myself, "This guy was brilliant. How can that be?"

It is a story of endurance. Last night's performance is all that we are accountable for.

