

the wall of the dead

A PHOTOGRAPHIC PANTHEON TO A RESTAURANT'S BELOVED CAST OF CHARACTERS *By Mary Stone*



Since Rocco opened in 2008, the Italian restaurant on Monroe Avenue has honored the people who have influenced it and passed on. Some 20 photos dot the wall opposite the bar commemorating customers, contractors, suppliers, sources of inspiration, relatives and others who made an impact on a restaurant many customers consider a home away from home.

The first photograph to go up was of the man who designed the place—Art Inguagiato—who died in the winter of 2008 before he ever got to see Rocco open. The next person was Phil Adams, a regular who worked in the local wine and liquor business.

“[Phil] was a really great guy and a great friend of Art’s too,” says Mark Cuppolo, chef and co-owner. “They were wine buddies because Art was a wine aficionado... Art was an aficionado of everything.”

Mark’s father is on the wall, as is the wife of his business partner, Dan Richards.

Some customers, when they come in and find someone they’ve lost on the wall, break down in tears, Mark says. It’s the feeling that others remember their loved ones; sometimes it’s the realization that the customers who loved Rocco were loved back. The Wall is not morbid in that sense. Instead, it makes Rocco’s feel even more like home.

Mark says Rocco, especially his kitchen team, is his family. “Since I spend so much time there; I don’t have children, and I don’t get to see my sisters all the time. [My wife] travels during the week,” he says. “So, that’s what I do for my family life.”

Photographer Garry Geer has documented the familial atmosphere at Rocco for years. There, he says, you don’t feel lost or ignored, and that stems from Mark.

“Mark is a superb chemist who understands the marriages of various tastes to make a meal so satisfying,” Garry says. “It is not just in the gourmet style sense, but rather a feeling of nourishment, that makes one feel they are cared for—as if at home.”

Local chefs are attracted to that, which has made Rocco a sacred haunt for restaurant workers in the city. “They like the simplicity, the familiarities—yet it’s not the food they worked with all week,” he says. Some have personal connections with his staff, many of whom Mark calls ‘lifers.’ The food business is their profession. “I always say, ‘There are restaurant people, and then there are civilians,’” Mark says.

Two years ago, Mark used his connections in the food industry to launch a podcast about the local restaurant scene. He enlisted the help of two employees to edit, engineer and post the recordings, which so far include 15 one-hour interviews, mainly with



Opposite page, Mark Cuppolo, chef and owner of Rocco and Rella restaurants on Monroe Ave. Clockwise from top left, A few steps from the entrance, a wall of photographs honors the people who loved Rocco and Rocco loved back; the Rocco team; Left to right, Chris Slye, Val Clapp, Mark Cuppolo, Chris DiPilato and Michela Perry.



local chefs and restaurant owners.

The Prep Work Podcast (prepworkpodcast.com), Mark says, is an opportunity in many ways for him to get to know his friends better. The podcast doesn’t generate revenue, he says. It’s just for his own enjoyment and to promote his restaurant—in addition to his guests’ businesses.

A lot of the people in the business are in it because they don’t like to sit still, Mark says. They like the pressure, the action and never knowing what’s going to happen next.

Mark is a case in point. Last year he opened a second restaurant—Rella—a few doors down from Rocco. A small plate, wine and seafood bar, Rella is named after Mark’s wife Cindy, whom Rocco’s barman lovingly calls Cinderella.

Restaurant people, Mark says, are in the job oftentimes because of the family atmosphere behind the scenes and because they enjoy the adrenaline-fueled lifestyle.

“People fall into this [profession] one way or another, and they like it,” Mark says, “and the fact that they don’t like sitting at a desk pairs up perfectly with restaurant work because you are always moving, moving, moving.”

Photography: Garry Geer