



# ICONIC DISHES: GUSTO 101

Janet Zuccarini, the CEO and owner of Gusto 54 Restaurant Group, walks us through the dishes that have made Gusto 101 a Toronto staple to this day.

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**T**ORONTO IS NO stranger to Italian restaurants. Many have stood the test of time (even by T.O. standards) and many have not. This begs the question, how does the new Italian kid on the block stand out?

Back in 2009, Janet Zuccarini asked herself that very question when she purchased a dilapidated 1950s-era auto body shop on Portland Street. “It took me until 2012 to open; it was a big project,” says the CEO and owner of Gusto 54 Restaurant Group. In case it’s not obvious by now, the “it” she is referring to is the beloved Gusto 101.

“King West was on the cusp of turning into a bustling neighbourhood, but it wasn’t quite there yet. I wanted to build a neighbourhood restaurant that would be a fixture, and an extension of people’s kitchens,” she explains.

Zuccarini kept the spirit of the old auto body shop by preserving the original beams and cinder blocks, and incorporated modern touches like that eye-catching (unless you’re a bird) retractable glass rooftop.

“The demographic is quite young so I wanted it to be this good value restaurant with a buzzy vibe.” Nearly a decade later, it’s safe to say Gusto 101 has become exactly that — the dollar-an-ounce wine may have had something to do with it.

“We were the first to have wine-on-tap in Ontario. Then I had this marketing idea that hit me literally in the middle of the night: What if we sold it at a buck-an-ounce? Nobody was doing that. My friend is our winemaker and we do it in-house. We had lineups out the door when we first opened,” Zuccarini recalls.

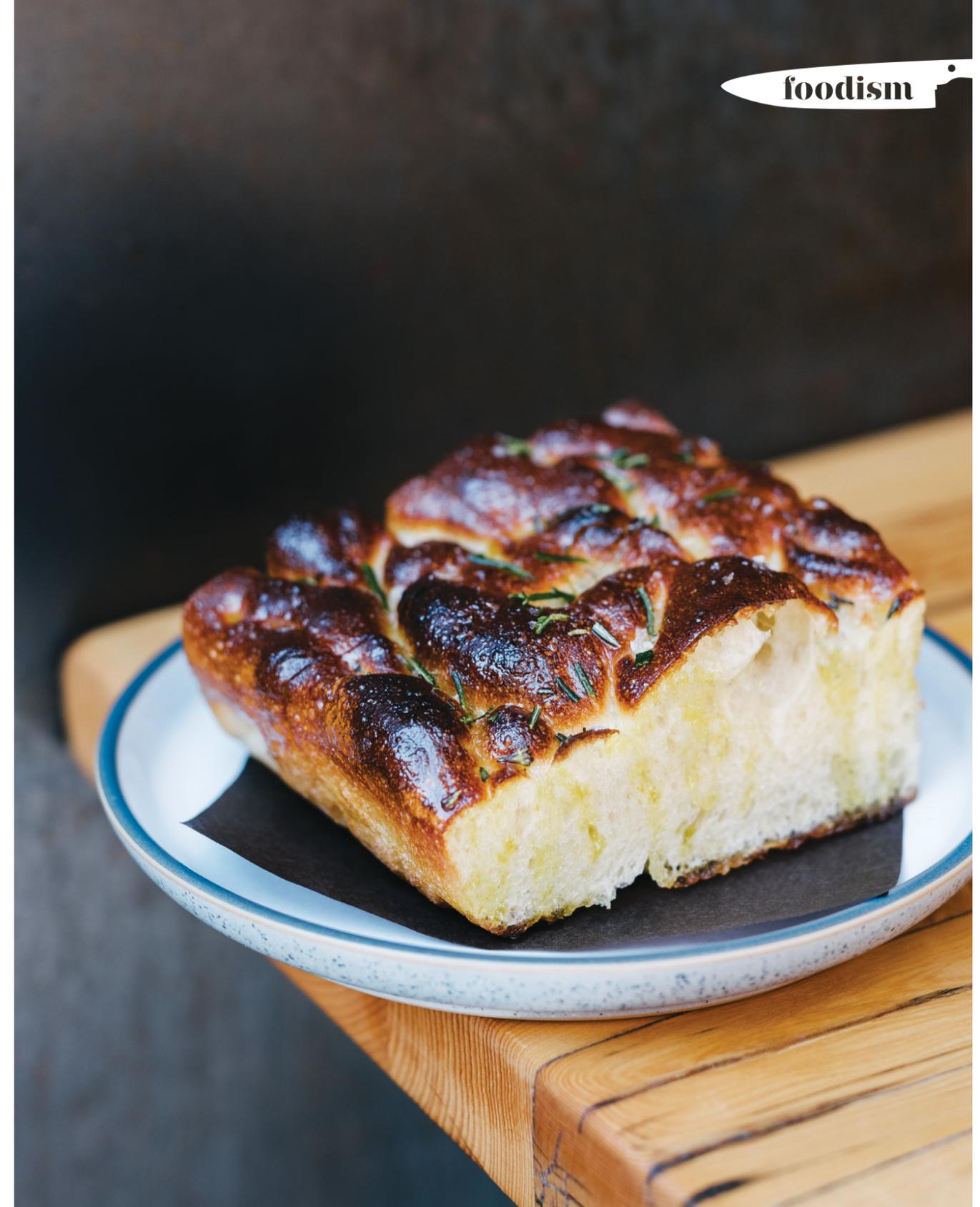
The vibe may be buzzy, but there is a warmth and homemade comfort to the dishes. It’s what keeps the lineups coming. “People come back to restaurants that have soul,” says Zuccarini. And everyone from thirsty, paycheque-to-paycheque millennials to Michelle Obama and Martin Scorsese have walked through those garage doors to experience the Gusto effect for themselves.

In no other dish is this effect more prevalent than in the Cavolo Nero, a.k.a. the

kale salad. Before you go thinking that no good story ever started with a salad (which is mostly true), this small plate of greens has defied all the odds.

“I brought the kale salad to Toronto in 2010. No one had it on their menu. In fact, someone took it off our menu because people weren’t buying it. And I was like, ‘Listen, it’s because no one knows what kale is, put it back on the menu.’ And today we sell 60,000 kale salads a year. It’s one of our best-selling items.”

Zuccarini credits this success to constantly looking around and ahead. “I do a lot of travelling, I dine out, I see things. I saw the wine-on-tap in California. I was in the Hudson Valley in New York State and I had a kale salad and was like ‘What is this? I gotta bring this [to Toronto].’ We keep moving forward to stay relevant, but also keep the classics. I think it’s a fine balance.” Gusto makes it look effortless. Zuccarini continues: “The restaurant was supposed to be easy. Gusto means ‘tasty.’ And that’s all I was trying to deliver: a tasty neighbourhood restaurant.” ▶



## Focaccia

“It’s just really classic with olive oil and rosemary. I was trained in Naples, Italy to make pizza and focaccia at the AVPN (The

True Neapolitan Pizza Association) which is where everyone gets certified. I sent my executive chef there — I send people occasionally to Naples to get their certification.

The focaccia is done in a very classic way with double zero flour imported from Italy — very simple. I just love it. I don’t like focaccia any other way but olive oil and rosemary.”