

Et Voila! ... Claudio Pirollo, The Journey

The phrase “et voila!” conjures images of a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

That’s exactly what Chef Claudio Pirollo does every night – creating culinary magic to dazzle and delight Washingtonians at his neighborhood restaurant in Palisades, a local fixture since its establishment in 2008.

Pirollo’s unique brand of culinary magic features Belgian classics such as “moules frites” (mussels with French fries) and “carbonnade a la flamande,” a Flemish stew of beef and beer.

Born in Belgium to Italian parents and named the “Best Young Chef in Belgium” in 1994, Chef Pirollo boasts an impressive culinary pedigree with stints at the 1* Michelin “La Maison du Boeuf” in Brussels and the 2* Michelin “La Maison du Cigne” in Geneva.

Pirollo started working at a young age in his father’s trattoria (gourmet deli) as a dishwasher and eventually was promoted to prep cook. His parents hail from Montecassino in northern Italy – between Rome and Naples. His father was very “conservative” about Italian products and Pirollo has fond memories of the trattoria’s culinary specialties such as fresh pasta (ravioli, tortellini), parmesan cheese, cannellone beans, osso bucco and scallopine. His 72-year-old father and older brother still run the trattoria.

Pirollo came up through the traditional apprenticeship system in Europe and though some aspects sound a bit like hazing, he speaks fondly of his time as a trainee chef which he says was, in essence, a way to separate the wheat from the chaff. His three-year apprenticeship (completed at age 17) resulted in a diploma entitled “accès à la



profession.”

The last two years of his apprenticeship were with a Lyonnaise chef in Brussels (first at the Sheraton and then at the Sode Hotel). Because he could not legally pursue full-time employment until age 18, Pirollo then completed a one-year “patrona” (like a post-apprenticeship) with the same chef.

Pirollo’s immigration status in Belgium had an ironic impact on his culinary career. In his mid-20’s Pirollo decided it was time to work in Italy – his parents’ homeland and his own country of citizenship – and he set his sights on the 3* Michelin Marchesi restaurant in Milan, but his father that reminded him that living in Italy would require him to fulfill his military service requirements. He briefly considered solving the problem by requesting Belgian citizenship (which he did not have despite the fact he was born in Belgium) but ultimately decided to forego working in Italy.

While working at La Table du Palace in Lausanne (which received a Michelin star during his time there), Pirollo “met a girl” – who happened to be one of his co-workers at La Table and was studying at the Lausanne Hotel School (one of the world’s best). She was recruited to work at the Four Seasons in Washington.

Pirollo traveled to DC with his then-girlfriend, and connected with the chef at the Belgian Embassy who introduced him to the Irish Ambassador, who was looking for a chef. Pirollo was offered the job, flew back to Belgium to apply for an A3 (employee of a diplomat) visa, and then returned to DC where he served as the Ambassador’s chef for two years.

Pirollo next worked in Paris for

Alain Ducasse as a chef de partie at La Cour Jardin in the Plaza Athenee (which he described as “very military”), then a sous chef for Michel Rostang at the Meridien L’Etoile.

Despite the star-power in Paris, the allure of DC was too much to resist and soon Pirollo found himself back in the nation’s capital, this time on an O1 (extraordinary ability) visa working for Chef Stephane Lezla at Montmartre.

The French Ambassador’s chef tried to hire Pirollo to fill a role at the French embassy, but the Ambassador insisted that the position had to be filled by a French chef. It just so happened that the Irish Ambassador’s chef at that time was French, and so

IN SEPTEMBER, HE WILL OPEN A SECOND DINING ROOM AS WELL AS A TRATTORIA (A NOD TO HIS ITALIAN FATHER) NEXT DOOR TO THE CURRENT RESTAURANT, DOUBLING THE SEATING CAPACITY.

through a carefully engineered job swap, Pirollo returned to the Irish Embassy where he remained for six years.

In the fall of 2007 Pirollo signed a lease on his current space on MacArthur Blvd, and Et Voila! opened in May 2008.

His wish list for the DC restaurant world includes a culinary

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Zachary Leonardi, Chef de Cuisine at **Ristorante Firenze**, an “authentic Italian” restaurant located at 2 Hanover Rd in Reisterstown, has been named a “Rising Star” by Full Service Restaurant Magazine. The twenty-two year old is the youngest person to be included on the 40-person list. Leonardi’s lineage includes a family of restaurateurs with his great-grandfather, grandfather, great uncle and father all being involved with a number of Italian-themed restaurants and pasta shops. He is currently completing his culinary degree at Anne Arundel Community College. “I literally

grew up in the restaurant business and watched my family members invest considerable time and effort in building a successful operation and making people happy,” explained Leonardi. “I am extremely comfortable in this environment and it seems second in nature to me. I truly love to cook and it brings great satisfaction to know that someone enjoyed the dish I carefully and thoughtfully prepared.” EatFirenze.com

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school (to train young chefs) and a more diverse selection of products (especially more exotic vegetables such as roma beans and verveine/lemon verbena which are notoriously hard to find), but overall Pirolo says things have improved immensely in the DC restaurant world during his years here.

In September of this year he will open a second dining room as well as a trattoria (a nod to his Italian father) next door to the current restaurant, doubling the seating capacity.

Here’s hoping he will continue to bring his inspired cuisine to the diners of DC for many years to come.

BECKI L. YOUNG, co-founder of Hammond Young Immigration, is a business immigration attorney with 20 years of experience in the field. She has represented more than 100 of the world’s most prominent hotels and restaurants, and facilitated the sponsorship of foreign professionals, trainees, interns and individuals of “extraordinary ability.” Ms. Young is an active member of the American Immigration Lawyers Association. She can be reached at 301-917-6900 or byoung@hyimmigration.com.

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