

CHEF CONVERSATIONS

In the kitchen with Francesco Di Caudo of Basilico

BY JEN SMITH / PHOTO BY LOUIE VICTA



Chef Francesco Di Caudo began working in restaurants and cooking in his small Italian village in Randazzo, Sicily, when he was 11 years old.

"I never liked asking my parents for money," he says. "But at the time, I loved Scottie Pippen from the Bulls and wanted his Nike shoes. I started working in a pizza place, cleaning the floor and dishes. From there, I started to like being in contact with customers, even if I was just 11 years old."

His early career endeavors quickly transformed from necessity to passion. He specialized early in a culinary education, as one can do in Italy, and traveled around during the summers "staging."

He landed in Las Vegas at age 20. A connection from his chef-mentor in Italy led him to an opportunity at Zeffirino in The Venetian. Throughout his two decades in the valley, he traversed some of the city's most lauded restaurants, including Ferraro's and Anima, before opening Basilico in 2022. At the southwest hotspot, he crafts dishes inspired by his Italian roots.

What's a dish every visitor to Sicily must try?

Sardines with pasta, olive oil, garlic cloves, wild fennel and spiced bread crumbs. It depends if you're a person who wants raisins and pine nuts [on the dish], but in Sicily, we don't do that.

Is there a dish you will always cook traditionally?

If you have good ingredients, they will speak for themselves. Sometimes, I use Japanese ingredients. Once, we had an octopus [where] I was using Japanese broth, Greek technique and the flavors of Sicily. One of the things I teach my cooks is to respect the ingredients, not overdo it.

Does your daughter have a favorite dish?

[Solange] is my fiercest critic. When she was a baby, I was [making] stuffed bell peppers [with] zucchini and eggplant. She still remembers that dish. It is comfort food and a way to spend time with my daughter in the kitchen, teaching her how to chop and clean veggies. She asks me for that once in a while.

Basilico, 6111 S. Buffalo Dr., Ste. 100, 702.534.7716. basilicolv.com.