

Tiramisu's creator focuses on customer happiness



Piedigrotta Bakery on the edge of Little Italy offers an array of pastries and desserts. The shop is owned by Carminantonio Iannaccone, a native of Italy who claims to have invented Tiramisu. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

By Maria Wiering

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Dressed in bakers' whites, Carminantonio Iannaccone sat down at a cafe table as the lunch crowd filtered out of Piedigrotta, the restaurant and bakery he owns on the edge of Baltimore's Little Italy. He took a sip of dark coffee from a white cup, clearly spent from his morning in the kitchen.

His day typically starts around 4 a.m.

Asked his age, he replied 68 in August, then leaned in and added: "But I feel like I'm in my 20s."

That's a remarkable statement from a man who has lived quite the life in nearly seven decades. He was born in 1946 in Avellino, Italy, when the country was economically depressed from World War II. The second of six children, he went to work in a bakery at age 9 to help his family provide.

At 12, he lied about his age to get a gelato-making gig in Milan, moving nearly 500 miles northwest from his home near Naples – from the ankle of Italy's boot to its top. Knowing hard work was the only way he would make a living, he learned the art of making pastry and pizza and, by his early 20s, was serving as chief pastry chef and opening restaurants near Venice. He married and soon had two sons.

Iannaccone was good at his work, and restaurants wanted his desserts. After success with a food distribution business, he moved to Baltimore to help a business contact launch an Italian restaurant.

Although he and his wife, Bruna, had initially planned to return to Italy, events compelled them to stay. Now they run Piedigrotta on 1300 Bank Street, where everything is handmade with Italian authenticity.

In the midst of it all, Iannaccone invented tiramisu.

Or so he says.

A Washington Post reporter investigated the claim in 2007 and found it credible, although the dessert's provenance is debated by food historians. With the same dismissiveness he applies to his age, he said of his world-famous concoction: "It's no big invention. It's not an airplane."

He had a similar air when he told the Post reporter that it's "just a dessert," and "not like the telephone."



Carminantonio Iannaccone, an Italy native who owns Piedigrotta bakery on Bank Street, claims to have invented Tiramisu. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

The Iannaccones, however, are clearly proud of the tiramisu, and a sticker with a photo of the Post article is slapped on every box of their baked goods.

Carminantonio's recipe requires making a zabaglione (a custard with Marsala wine), pastry cream and whipped cream; combining them with mascarpone cheese; and layering the mixture over espresso-dipped lady finger cookies. Once finished, it needs to stay chilled; customers receive it wrapped in a cold-retaining sleeve.

Carminantonio said he invented it on Christmas Eve 1969 when working in Treviso. He gave it to Bruna to try over and over again as he perfected his recipe.

Bruna said her days of eating the stuff are long over, but customers haven't grown tired of it - it's still their biggest seller. Curious chefs and foodies alike have claimed it's the best tiramisu they've tasted, and travel websites sing its praises. Customers often come from out of town, and it's even a big draw for the local Taiwanese population, Bruna said. Carminantonio teases that he'll have to visit Taiwan and teach someone how to make it.

The tiramisu is far from Piedigrotta's only offering. The bakery boasts a hot lunch bar, bread, gelato, pastries, cakes and a kaleidoscope of cookies, mixing northern and southern Italian specialties.

Bruna enjoys visiting with her customers and takes time to teach them about the food and desserts.

"I just want to make people happy," Bruna said.

When Carminantonio started the bakery in 2002, it offered only bread and biscotti in a small rowhouse on Central Avenue. Adam Frederick, 50, was its first customer, and he's kept coming back. A member of St. John the Evangelist in Frederick, Frederick works nearby, calls Piedigrotta "his second office," and has developed a friendship with the Iannaccones. Frederick's favorite treats are the cream puffs and seasonal desserts, including the ricotta pie they sell at Easter, he said.

"The atmosphere is unique," he said, comparing it to a cafe in Europe.

The bakery is named for a pizzeria in Milan where Carminantonio worked in his teens. The owners treated him like family, and when he opened his first restaurant,

he named it in their honor. Piedigrotta is a neighborhood in Naples, so the moniker doubles as a link to his childhood.

A crucifix hangs in the bakery's back office. The Iannaccones are Catholic, and Carminantonio has a sense of God shaping his life, like a book, he said. Others write on the pages, but one day God will add the last line: "fine" – the end.

After musing on the soul and the role of chance and providence, he again dismisses the idea, like his age.

After all, he still feels like there's a lot of life ahead.

The Ur-Tiramisu

(Carminantonio Iannaccone's tiramisu recipe, as shared with Chef David Rosengarten in 2006.)

Courtesy of drosengarten.com

DAY ONE

For the zabaglione filling

Yolks of 10 large eggs

1 ¼ cups sugar

1 ½ cups sweet Marsala

½ tablespoon vanilla extract

Zest of one large lemon

1. Place egg yolks, sugar, Marsala, vanilla and lemon zest in a large mixing bowl. Working with an electric hand mixer or an immersion blender, beat until the yolks have been fully blended and the mixture is smooth, about one minute.
2. Pour mixture into top of double broiler, and fill the bottom pot with room temperature water. Place the top pot on the bottom pot, turn heat on to low, and cook the egg mixture, stirring constantly, for about five minutes all together. It's ready when the egg mixture resemble a thick custard sauce; it may bubble and boil a bit as it reaches that texture.
3. Remove top pot from heat, and pour the zabaglione into a bowl. Let sit on a counter until the mixture reaches room temperature. Then cover it and reserve in the refrigerator overnight.

For the crema pasticcera (pastry cream)

1 cup sugar

2/3 cup all-purpose flour

Zest of one large lemon

½ tablespoon vanilla extract

Yolks of six large eggs

4 cups whole milk

1. Place sugar, flour, lemon and vanilla in a medium-large, heavy bottomed sauce pan. Add the egg yolks and one cup of the milk, blending well with an electric hand mixer or an immersion blender. Blend until smooth, about half a minute.
2. Place saucepan over very low heat and cook the mixture, stirring constantly to prevent curdling. While stirring, incorporate the remaining three cups of milk, one cup at a time. After about 10 minutes of constant stirring, the mixture should be thick (twice as thick as the zabaglione), free of lumps and beginning to bubble. Remove from the heat and transfer to a bowl. Let sit on a counter until the mixture reaches room temperature. Cover it, and reserve in the refrigerator overnight.

DAY TWO

For the whipped cream

4 cups heavy whipping cream

1 ¼ cups granulated sugar

1 tablespoon vanilla extract

1. Place the whipping cream in a large mixing bowl. Add the sugar and vanilla extract. Beat with a large whisk until the whipped cream holds stiff peaks. Reserve.

For the assembly

2 cups mascarpone

5 cups espresso, cooled

½ tablespoon of rum extract

1 cup granulated sugar

50 savoiardi (ladyfingers)

2/3 cup unsweetened cocoa powder

1. In a very large bowl, combine reserved zabaglione and crema pasticcera, blending with a wooden spoon until just mixed together. Fold in mascarpone and whipped cream, working with a wide spatula. Mix gently but well, until mixture is smooth. Reserve egg-and-cream mixture in refrigerator.
2. Place espresso in a large, shallow pan or serving dish. Whisk in rum extract and sugar.
3. Quickly dunk 25 ladyfingers in espresso, about one second for each side. The cookies should be moistened, but not soggy. Right after dunking, place each of the ladyfingers on the bottom of a 13 ½ inch long, 10 inch wide and 2 ½ inch deep baking pan or serving dish; the 25 lady fingers should fit in a single layer. Cover them with half of the reserved egg-and-cream mixture.
4. Repeat the process with the remaining 25 ladyfingers, building a second ladyfinger layer on top of the first. Top with the remaining egg-and-cream mixture. Working with a spatula, smooth the cream over the top so it looks even.

5. Place cocoa powder in a fine mesh strainer. Sprinkle it over the top of the tiramisu, evenly distributing a layer of powered cocoa.

6. Cover tiramisu carefully, and refrigerate immediately - preferably in the rear of a very cold refrigerator. It will start to set after a few hours—but I think it stands up best, and tastes best, after 4-5 days in the fridge.

SERVING DAY

(Day three, four, five, six or seven)

Remove chilled tiramisu from the refrigerator, and serve immediately. You may scoop it out of the baking pan with a spoon and serve it in bowls - but I far prefer working with a knife and a very large spoon to remove squarish portions of tiramisu and place them, free-standing, on dessert plates. Tiramisu looks best and tastes best when each individual piece is standing up, like a piece of cake.

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