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CENTERPIECE HOT

An American dream come true: Violino's celebrating its 30th anniversary

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star
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Franco and Marcella Stocco, center, with their children Riccardo Stocco and Raffaella Cintron outside Violino Italiano on the Loudoun Street Mall in downtown Winchester.

Jeff Taylor/The

At the north end of the Loudoun Street Mall in Winchester stands an Italian restaurant that exemplifies how hard work and dedication can turn dreams into reality.

Violino Ristorante Italiano was founded 30 years ago by Franco and Marcella Stocco, who immigrated from Italy to become restaurateurs in the United States. The dining establishment that has become a fixture in Old Town Winchester is still in the Stocco family and now run by two of Franco and Marcella's three adult children, Riccardo Stocco and Raffaella Cintron. Daughter Federica Stocco is not directly involved in the restaurant but she works in the food service industry in Richmond and helps out with the family business when she can.

Violino's, as the establishment is more commonly known, serves authentic dishes from Italy, with a particular focus on food originating from that country's northern region. It is Italian cuisine served by Italians, so dining there can make you feel like you're in Italy.

At the same time, Violino's is the epitome of America itself, demonstrating how every citizen of the United States — even those who weren't born here — can build a better life through hard work and dedication.

An American dream

The Violino's story begins in Italy, where Franco and his wife, Marcella, were raising two kids and had a third on the way.

Franco attended culinary school and worked as a chef at several restaurants in Northern Italy. On July 20, 1969, when Apollo 11 landed on the moon, Franco said he went to the roof of a building at his school, stared at the moon and thought: "America is big. One day, I'm gonna be there."

But first, he had to complete culinary school and find work so he could refine his cooking style.

"I worked with different chefs from all over Italy to gain experience," he said. "Every chef has a different technique, a different thing."

While building and expanding his culinary skills, Franco felt stifled because he realized he would never be able to open his own restaurant in a country bogged down by bureaucracy, where bribes were frequently required to get permits from government agencies. He was also frustrated because many of his paychecks from the restaurants where he worked in Italy arrived late, making it hard for him to stay on top of his bills.

In 1985, Franco decided to leave Italy and pursue his American dream. At the time, Marcella was pregnant with their third child, Raffaella, but she was 100% behind his effort to start a new life in a new country.

Two years later, in 1987, Franco was working at two different restaurants in Washington, D.C., when Marcella and the three kids were able to join him in America, thanks to the help of the Italian embassy. Since then, all five have become U.S. citizens.

(Franco shared an amusing anecdote about taking his citizenship test. When asked to name the first president of the United States, he didn't say George Washington. He thought it was John Wayne.)

When the Stoccos came to the United States, Riccardo was 8, Federica was 7 and Raffaella was 2. All three children spoke Italian as their first language, so when they enrolled in American schools, they all had to take English as a Second Language (ESL) courses.

"We spoke Italian at home and English at school," Raffaella said.

Marcella also had to learn English, which she did by helping the kids with their ESL homework and watching public television.

"I watched 'Mister Rogers' [Neighborhood] every morning with Raffaella," Marcella said. "I learned my ABCs very well."

Marcella also needed to learn about America's monetary system.

"When we first arrived, we walked to the grocery store and she didn't know the currency, so she would just put her money on the cash register and the lady would take what was needed," Riccardo recalled.

Franco and Marcella first went into business for themselves in 1990 by entering into a partnership for an Italian restaurant in Warrenton called Fantastico. Franco was the chef and Marcella helped out in the kitchen.

"We couldn't find anybody, so I started to make pasta and cook behind the line with Franco," Marcella said.

While Fantastico was a prosperous venture, the partnership meant the Stoccos couldn't do the things they wanted to do without permission from the other owners. So, after five years, the couple sold their half of the restaurant.

"My mom and dad realized that this wasn't what they came to America for," Raffaella said.

"They came to America to open their own restaurant and be their own owners. It was Franco's dream."

By chance, the family decided to make a day trip to Winchester. Their lives changed that day when the Stoccos took a stroll on the Loudoun Street Mall and found the future home of Violino Ristorante Italiano.

"We were walking on the mall and we saw this building, and it was closed," Marcella said.

"So we peeked through the window and we saw all these tables. Franco said, 'Oh, that can be a good place to open a restaurant.'"

As fortune would have it, the building at 181 N. Loudoun St. was vacant and for sale, and a woman who happened to be passing by told them the real estate agent representing the property was right across the street.

The Stoccos went inside and liked what they saw.

"My mom and dad, they came out to thank the lady who told us, but we didn't see her anymore," Raffaella said. "It was like a guardian angel leading Marcella and Franco to this building."

Using a bank loan and money from friends and relatives in Italy, the Stoccos opened Violino Ristorante Italiano on April 12, 1996, with a specialty in cuisine and wines from Northern Italy.

Since Day 1, Franco said Violino's has offered something you can't find in other local restaurants: authentic Italian food.

"I know Italian food; I know Italian tradition and culture," he said. "I saw all the other Italian restaurants around and they had nothing that looked like it would have in Italy. It was mostly American Italian — tradition and culture from New York and New Jersey, and recipes that I never saw in Italy. Even the pizza is different over here."

As good as the food and atmosphere were at Violino's, the Loudoun Street Mall was not as popular in the mid-1990s as it is today, and local diners didn't immediately flock to the establishment.

"It was very difficult in the beginning because nobody knew us," Franco recalled. "It was not easy but, with the help of my wife and kids, we have been open for 30 years. That means we've been doing a good job."

Franco paused for a moment as he reflected on those difficult early years, then looked up with tears in his eyes.

"If not for her (Marcella) and my family, it would have been impossible," he said.

The next generation

Violino Ristorante Italiano is the epitome of a family business. All three Stocco children grew up in the restaurant, working alongside their dad in the kitchen and their mom at the front of the house.

"In the beginning, we were working seven days a week," Franco said. "My wife's job was bigger than mine because she was also responsible for the family, for the kids, for the restaurant and hundreds of customers coming every day."

The children initially had difficulties at school — not with their lessons but because of bullies. Riccardo said he and his sisters were picked on because they were foreigners struggling to learn English.

"It was very hard through elementary and middle school," Riccardo said.

But the kids persevered while building their cooking and hosting skills at the restaurant.

"I made my first side salad when I was 7 years old," Raffaella said.

Meanwhile, Winchester finally caught on to the Stoccos' downtown dining treasure and Violino's took off. The revenues allowed Franco and Marcella to repay all of their debts to friends, relatives and the bank in just 10 years.

After Riccardo graduated from high school, he enrolled in the culinary college at [Johnson and Wales University](#) in Rhode Island and trained to become the Stocco family's next chef. After finishing his studies, though, he did not immediately return to Winchester.

"I had an internship after my culinary school was finished, and they asked me to stay on in Lake Tahoe (Nevada)," Riccardo said. "It was an unfortunate chain of events that led to me coming back."

Those events began when Riccardo crashed and totaled his car while leaving his neighborhood in Nevada.

"I was fine but the car was not, so I had to walk to work [at a Hyatt hotel in Lake Tahoe]," he said. "I still had a job and everything, but I had no car and I was about to sign my lease for another year. And then he called."

Franco asked his son to come back to Violino's and work for him. So, instead of buying a new car and signing a new lease, Riccardo came home.

When asked if they ever felt pressured to follow in their parents' footsteps and work at the restaurant, Riccardo and Raffaella said no.

"None of us were pressured to continue working here as our life's work. Never, never," Riccardo said. "It was my decision."

It's a good thing that Riccardo and Raffaella are happy at Violino's because the restaurant is now in their hands. Franco and Marcella have retired (even though they still regularly come in to help) and given the restaurant to their children. Raffaella now welcomes guests to Violino's and Riccardo is the head chef.

"I did do a summer in the kitchen, which I did not like," Raffaella said. "I shine in the dining room. ... I love watching people enjoy their food; I love talking to people. I've learned a lot from Marcella on how to deal with customers and complaints and stuff like that."

When Riccardo first took over as head chef at Violino's, he said he relied on the lessons he learned from his father and in culinary school while refining his own dishes.

"Then it's like an art, like a painter," he said. "In the beginning, you copy Van Gogh, for example. And then slowly, you develop your own technique."

As for what it's like to work with family members, Riccardo said: "It was never difficult. I was always told by Franco, there's a line between a business and things at home. ... I have respect for my father as my father. I also had respect for Franco as the head chef when I was under him."

"We're a very close-knit family, so it's not difficult working with each other," Raffaella added.

"We enjoy being around each other, even during the busy hours of a dinner shift or on a really late night on New Year's Eve."

Like their parents, Riccardo and Raffaella will someday retire. When that happens, it's very likely that Violino's will remain a family-run restaurant. Riccardo said five of his 10 children are helping out at the business, and Raffaella's two young kids are already learning the ropes.

"They play restaurant at home," she said. " They love coming here to eat and they talk about working here. My son wants to work in the kitchen; my daughter wants to work in the dining room."

"I'm gonna take the same path that my parents took and not pressure my kids to continue at the restaurant," Riccardo said. "I will just see where the cards lay and what they want to do with their lives."

While the road to Violino's success was sometimes rocky, the Stocco family feels fortunate to have been able to follow that road.

"Here I am, standing in my mom and dad's American dream and seeing all the sacrifices they made for themselves, for us and for our families," Raffaella said. "I love to tell our customers the story of how Franco and Marcella got here."

"We've been blessed," Riccardo added, "not only to be here but also to be in the United States."

To learn more about Violino Ristorante Italiano or to make a reservation, visit violinoristorante.com.

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