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# New Jersey

MONTHLY

## TABLE HOPPING

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### A True Taste of South Philly in South Jersey

Customer requests for sandwiches led to Cilento Sandwich Co., an offshoot of Valente's Italian Specialties.

By [Jenn Hall](#) | March 4, 2020



The Niccolo at Cilento Sandwich Co. Photo by Jenn Hall

Marcello De Feo grew up in a South Philly Italian household. His mother, Santa Bianca, came to America from Abruzzo when she was a teenager. “I’m first-generation Italian,” De Feo says. “My Nonna lived with us from when I was born.”

Looking back, she looms large in his food memories. Each day, Nonna Paola would pack his school lunches. “I didn’t realize how spoiled I was. I’d go to school and my lunch was this amazing roll with things like Parmigiano-Reggiano and soppressata with balsamic vinegar.” Not bad for lunchbox fare, but there was a catch. “Some of the other kids would stare at it...and you get to that awkward age when you feel uncomfortable.”

The young De Feo went home and made a request. He wanted an American lunch, just like the other kids had. “The next day, I open up my lunch at school and it’s two pieces of white bread with microwaved Cheez Whiz in the middle,” he laughs. “I was like: ‘Alright, Nonna. Well played. Well played.’”



Marcello De Feo. Photo by Jenn Hall

Given these roots, the fact that he would one day run Cilento Sandwich Co. in Haddonfield—a take-out spot known for stellar cheesesteaks—could seem like destiny. For De Feo, it remains a surprise. “I was never looking to start a sandwich business,” he explains. His enduring love is the take-out restaurant in which Cilento resides: Valente’s Italian Specialties. There, De Feo riffs on the dinners Santa and Paola prepared—from soulful handmade pasta to chicken cutlets.

Yet the in-house cheese and charcuterie case, situated right by the bread (from Sarcone’s Bakery in the Italian Market in Philadelphia), got people thinking. The people wanted sandwiches.

“We were like: ‘No, we’re not going to make sandwiches.’ And they were like: ‘You literally have the bread right here and everything I want on it.’” De Feo relented, crafting a small menu that felt true to Valente’s: Porchetta, roasted eggplant with ricotta (named for Nonna). It could have ended there, but customers (again) had other ideas.

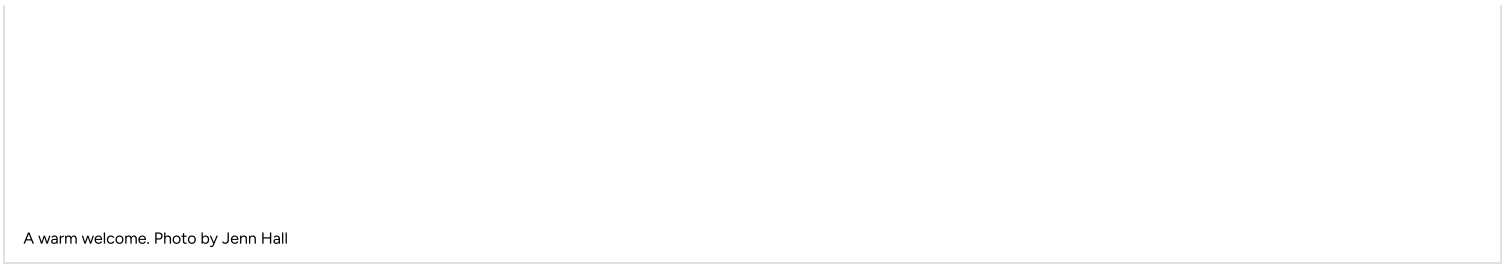
“The most common request was cheesesteaks. I felt like: Valente’s and cheesesteaks? I don’t know that I feel comfortable doing that.”

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Growing up in South Philly, he had eaten his fair share. “You get the sense of what works and what doesn’t.” Hesitation was more about clarity of vision. So, he held firm, until he heard about ghost restaurants. Increasingly popular in the GrubHub era, they exist online, but don’t have a brick-and-mortar footprint. “We tried it out and it grew. The cheesesteaks...it was really weird, to be honest. I never expected it to take off.” These days, folks from New York to Maryland make the trip to try them, he says.

There are a few things that make De Feo’s cheesesteaks special. There’s the Sarcone’s bread, for one—a requirement for a respectable cheesesteak in these parts. “Great bread can make a sandwich even better,” De Feo says. Freshness is the other part of the equation. “We don’t buy the cheapest cuts of meat. [They use eye round.] We don’t buy frozen stuff. We slice the meat fresh to order and we’re very hands on.”



A warm welcome. Photo by Jenn Hall

Since launching in the summer of 2019, Cilento Sandwich Co. has grown big enough that De Feo says a brick-and-mortar location is likely for 2020. He's also thinking about merging the sandwiches from the two brands under one umbrella. This is good news: It means his favorite, the Niccolo, will be on the same list as the cheesesteaks—though you can order online from both menus today. As a kid, De Feo lived down the block from the original owner of Nick's Roast Beef (a beloved spot in Northeast Philadelphia). He taught De Feo the recipe. "We make our own roast beef and we slice it fresh to order, then cook it in au jus. It's on Sarcone's bread with horseradish and cherry peppers. To me, it's a bit of nostalgia."

Though their origin stories are different, there are intersections between the two businesses. Nostalgia, for one thing. But it's really about creating memories. "In my mind, food connects people," De Feo reflects. That can be about special occasions just as much as school lunches and casual get-togethers with friends. Often, De Feo says, folks will order their cheesesteaks just the way they like them, ask for them to be cut into small pieces and share them with friends over a beer at neighboring **King's Road Brewing Company**. It's just like De Feo learned from his mother and grandmother: Food is at its most powerful when it connects people in community.

**Cilento Sandwich Co.**, 7 Kings Court, Suite 102, Haddonfield; 856-298-1937. Open for lunch and dinner, Tuesday-Sunday

TABLE HOPPING

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