

Rich Pèpe

1952

BAKER, RESTAURATEUR, BUSINESSMAN

WRITTEN BY RICH PÈPE

Italy's most famous winemaker, Marchese Piero Antinori, says of Rich Pèpe: "Creative and passionate, Pèpe is a modern-day Ambasciatore of Italian Food and Wine, and through his restaurants, travel ventures and cooking classes teaches people about the Italian lifestyle and its culinary heritage, sharing his 'passione' for all things Italian."

"Io sono Italiano." (I am Italian). Like anyone from an ethnic family, I am very proud of my heritage. All my grandparents emigrated from Napoli in southern Italy and came through Ellis Island just before World War I. With them they brought their love and respect for Italy, its culture, cuisine and warm, lively traditions.



Growing up in Hoboken, New Jersey, some of my earliest memories were of our annual family gathering to make the homemade wine. Both sides of my large Italian family would get together--the men in charge of the winemaking, and the women in charge of making jam and jelly from the fresh grapes brought in from California. During the day lots of last year's wine was tasted, Italian songs were sung, jokes were told and laughter filled the air. I could only imagine that this is what life was like in Italy and am proud that my family brought a little bit of the "old country" with them to America.

As a young boy, I had a favorite pastime with my 28 first cousins: Over a bowl of macaroni we'd talk of ways to become successful and "live the American dream" just like what our immigrant grandparents sought when they came to America.

My dad's name was Gennaro Giuseppe Pèpe. He was a rough, tough, proud World War II veteran, and, for me as a young boy growing up, it was like living with a drill sergeant. From an early age, he inspired me and my siblings to "go out and get a job, and don't rely on others for favors."

I like to say my first job was as an altar boy, albeit I didn't get paid for it. But I learned to show up for work dressed, on time and prepared to perform my duties. I even learned a foreign language, Latin. And if I worked the weddings and funerals, I got pretty good tips! A few years later, like many young boys, I had a successful neighborhood newspaper route, and like the U.S. mail the papers would be delivered come rain or come shine.

Two of my older siblings worked at the local bakery in my town, and finally at age 13 I got a job as a dishwasher there. I worked 32 hours per week during high school, and by the time I graduated I was a full-fledged baker. After high school I didn't have the opportunity to attend college, so I continued to work at the bakery until I decided to seek my own "American dream" and headed west for California.

In 1973 at 21 years of age I arrived on the Monterey Peninsula with a suitcase and \$600 in my pocket. I was immediately inspired by the bounty of the land and sea here and the friendliness of the local people. My first job was as the baker at the Asilomar Hotel and Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove. What a nice job it was, baking breads and cakes while overlooking the Pacific Ocean!

I rented a room in Fisherman's Flats, which was so full of Italians and Sicilians I thought I had moved to Italy, not California! Soon I was playing tennis with the Aliotti brothers, Dr. Jerry Carnazzo was my GP, Dr. Tony Ricciardi was my dentist,

and, because I was a baker and interested in food and wine, I had the honor to be invited to many of their homes for dinner.

Very much like Monterey, Hoboken was chock full of Italians. There, daily life revolved around the Hudson River and the docks; it was a small factory town with just about every business serving the shipping industry. On the Monterey Peninsula, with so many businesses connected to the fishing and canning industries, I felt right at home.

A few years later I moved to Carmel and worked for Frank Garnero at Wishart's Bakery on Ocean Avenue. (Frank's brother Chet owned a bakery at Del Monte Center; he became a great friend.) As hard as the work was--starting at 3:00 a.m. and going strong until noon--Frank and the Garnero family appreciated my dedication, treated me well and welcomed me into their family.

When I was growing up, my grandparents were like gods to me. One grandfather had a barber shop and the other a shoemaker shop; both lived within walking distance to me. I saw them as proud, upstanding men, respected in their community, not wealthy, but independent business owners who were able to provide for their families. I knew one day I wanted to follow in their footsteps. In 1977 I finally went into business on my own when I bought The Granary Natural Food Store and Bakery in Pacific Grove.

Still simmering in me was a desire to attend college, something I had never had the time or money for. So, in the early '80s I signed up for classes at Monterey Peninsula College. That's where I met Sandra Tosh, and in 1986 we were married. After the sale of the Pacific Grove Granary we returned to Carmel to buy Wishart's Bakery, and in 1986 we bought the only other bakery in town, Carmel Bakery. I am no stranger to getting up early, and the motto for me and my baking crew is "We bake while you sleep."

Sandra and I didn't waste any time building our family. Christian was born in 1989; and when our second son, Gian Antonio, was born in 1990, we opened our first little Italian restaurant in Carmel and named it Caffè Napoli, after the city where all my grandparents emigrated from in Italy.



Pèpe at Carmel Bakery holding pretzels hot out of the oven.

People often ask me what gave me my passion for food and the inspiration to cook. Well, both of my grandmothers were exceptional family cooks, each with her own individual style. Watching them in the kitchen cooking and feeding our multi-generational family and seeing how they were held in such high esteem was all the inspiration I needed.

At Caffè Napoli I began making some Italian dishes, hung some family pictures on the walls and played Sinatra songs, which was mandatory because Frank was originally from Hoboken and my father's good friend from childhood. As a matter of fact, Frank's mom, Dolly, was a midwife and delivered my dad and all of his siblings into this world.



At the time there was only one other Italian restaurant on Ocean Avenue. My place had no sign outside, no phone number, only a little blackboard sign in the window. Then one day I went out and bought an Italian flag and hung it above the front door. That little flag and all it symbolized was the spark this little place needed. Success followed, and in 1993 around the

Pèpe with ravioli.

corner on Dolores Street we opened its sister restaurant, Little Napoli.

In 2000 I created and collaborated with Italy's most famous winemaker, Marchese Piero Antinori of Florence, Italy, to successfully open Pèppoli in Pebble Beach at The Inn at Spanish Bay. Could I be any prouder that a former dishwasher from Jersey was accepted by these two iconic and world-renowned brands, The Pebble Beach Company and the Antinori family of winemakers, as a partner?

Fellow Italian Jack Galante and I opened the first two wine bars in Carmel in 2008, Galante Vineyards and Vino Napoli. That has prompted the opening of a total of 20 other wine tasting rooms in the village today. Jack and I have worked hard over the years to ensure that Carmel-by-the-Sea is the mecca for all wine tasting in Monterey County.

When my son Christian graduated from Loyola Marymount University in 2011, he came home to help open our Vesuvio Trattoria in Carmel and crafted the menu and the wine and spirits list. The second generation of our family business had finally begun to take shape. And when Gian Antonio graduated from Cal Berkeley, he also joined the family business a few years later. Sandra and I are proud that our two sons work with us full time and have been an integral part of our businesses. All major decisions are made by a family vote.

For anyone who doesn't know the Pèpe family bakeries and restaurants, they are easily recognizable by the signature Italian flag hanging in front of each and every one of them. I like to say I'm proud that I started an Italian renaissance in Carmel, as today there are 12 Italian restaurants in the village.

All of my food and wine ventures give me reason to often travel back to my roots in New Jersey and Italy, visit my relatives and get ideas and inspirations to bring back to continue to improve on my "little taste of Italy" that I present to friends and

visitors at my establishments on the Monterey Peninsula. Our organic limoncello called PèpeCello is made in Sorrento, and our spicy red pepper tapenade, the PèpeBumba, which translates to Pepper Bomb, is made in Calabria, and I import both into the United States for my restaurants.

Over the years I have been active in many community and civic organizations and activities and currently serve as a board member on the Carmel Chamber of Commerce, the Carmel Mission Foundation and Italian Heritage Society of the Monterey Peninsula. The achievement I'm most proud of is the creation of Visit Carmel, the marketing organization that promotes tourism for Carmel-by-the-Sea and for which I act as chairperson. My family helps support many non-profits, such as the Boys and Girls Club, the Carmel Youth Center, Court Appointed Special Advocates or CASA, and the Kinship Center just to name just a few.

When I think back to my first job as a dishwasher in a Hoboken bakery, I could never have imagined then that history would repeat itself many times multiplied and that I'd be the largest employer in Carmel with seemingly half of Carmel High School's kids coming to work for me, often in their first jobs. Sandra and I are proud



Pèpe has received many awards for his outstanding community service.



Pèpe, Sandra and Congressman Jimmy Panetta.

that we are able to influence these young people in a positive way and teach them valuable workplace skills.

By the time I was 19 years old I had the opportunity to travel to Italy three times, visit my family there and understand the power and pride of having Italian roots. Sandra and I made it a point to ensure our children had that chance to know their family in Italy, and we're so proud they share our passion for all things Italian. Both sons studied abroad in Florence and also went to pizza school in Napoli. We feel there is no better way to honor my grandparents immigration to America than by staying in touch with my Italian family.

It's my utmost pleasure to proudly pass along and share our family's Italian lifestyle and traditions through my restaurant, bakery, travel and hospitality ventures. *Viva Italia!*



Trevi Fountain, Rome.



Tene Shake and Pèpe, a salud!

ITALIAN HERITAGE SOCIETY HONOREE 2018