

Chef of the Day

Serving Italian songs with those meatballs

Orly Sigal

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He slices, he dices, he bakes. He prepares six-course Italian dinners. Oh, yeah, he also sings.

Francesco Milana, known as "The Singing Chef," is found only at private parties where he serenades guests with Neapolitan ballads and Italian love songs.

"It's hard to put on paper what I do," Milana said. "I'm your chef for the day -- all yours and more."

Based on Amelia Island, Milana travels to clients' homes and prepares meals in their kitchens. Services include an at-home consultation to select a personalized menu. Choices include escargot in pastry cups; fried calamari with lemon; scallops sauteed with white wine, chives and shallots; asparagus wrapped in smoked salmon; baked eggplant in tomato marinade; veal scaloppini piccata; and tiramisu.

He shops for and prepares the food hours before each party, prints a souvenir menu for each guest, serves the food on white china, cleans up the mess afterward and entertains while waiting for the food to cook.

Depending on menu selection, a five- to seven-course dinner for 10 people averages \$900 and takes three hours, he said. Meals can be lunch or dinner.

Although he prefers home kitchens, he caters business holiday parties, team-building meetings, and other corporate gatherings.

Sit-down meals are capped at 35 guests, buffets and receptions at 60.

Milana exceeded expectations for Scarlet Harbour.

"The whole experience was fabulous," said Harbour, of the party she and her husband, Jim, had during the Bausch & Lomb Tennis Tournament. "He has so much passion, it's just incredible. Every time he sang, I kept asking, 'You're so good, what are you doing here?'"

He also caters weddings at Hoyt House bed and breakfast on Amelia Island, where he also hosts a three-day "Italian Cooking Holiday."

"We just have a great time," Hoyt owner Gayl Blount said. "We wouldn't consider doing [the class] with anyone else."

Milana has catered 10 weddings at Hoyt. He is so popular, people work around his schedule, she said.

Born in Alcamo, Sicily, and raised in Toronto, Milana studied cooking with his family, then graduated from the Lorenzo d'Medici Culinary Institute. He apprenticed with renowned chefs in Florence, he said.

In Toronto, he owned a restaurant and began singing to his customers -- with nary a voice lesson. The idea caught on and Milana decided to leave the restaurant business and enter catering in 1996, when his wife was transferred to Dallas.

He perfected the new business in Dallas, and lessons learned served him well with the next transfer to Nashville, Tenn., he said.

A chance visit to Amelia Island lured them here last year.

He compares his business to wine.

"It's hard to see how people will react," he said. "But, the older it gets, the better it is, and eventually, the more trusted it becomes."

Source: <http://www.bizjournals.com/jacksonville/stories/2002/05/06/story7.html>