



**Daniel Maggipinto / executive chef and co-owner of Café Nonna**

*By Alexa Hinton, [ahinton@nashvillecitypaper.com](mailto:ahinton@nashvillecitypaper.com)*

May 21, 2007

In the nine years since Café Nonna opened its doors, the small but intimate Italian restaurant nestled in Sylvan Park has built a reputation as a gourmet gem. The cozy dining area suggests exclusivity while the carefully executed food makes an occasion special.

Tip your hat to executive chef and co-owner Daniel Maggipinto. The New York-native born into a quintessential Italian family, makes everything from scratch — pastas, sauces, dressings, soups and even the gelato, his own recipe.

His marinara sauce, a culinary equation that's part love, part genes, part skill and part a genius' intuition, are bottled and available for purchase. But it took more than the requests of countless diners to spur Maggipinto to cork his mouthwatering masterpiece.

"My daughter had a rare form of brain cancer. She was in treatment for 18 months at St. Jude's — they didn't have a sure-fire way to treat it, so I started this line of sauces to try and raise money to go into a fund for research, that was my motivation," Maggipinto said.

His daughter, Zoë, lost her fight against the cancer just short of her second birthday, but Maggipinto is still crusading in her honor. In addition to donating the proceeds of his sauces, he regularly hosts wine dinners and cooking classes (dubbed "Cooking for the Cure") that also benefit the children's research hospital. Maggipinto estimates his efforts have raised upwards of \$10,000.

"I'll do it as long as I have Café Nonna, and I'll keep trying to add stuff to it little by little and expand it," Maggipinto said.

#### **What types of food were you raised on?**

Classic Italian food. My grandfather's whole back yard was a garden. Summertime came and my grandfather would get his plants ready — he'd been growing them inside — and he'd replant them outdoors. He had a number of tomatoes, lettuces; he sometimes had 50 or 75 different types of pepper plants and herbs.

Also American style foods: pastas, pizzas, meatloafs. There were Italian delis in my neighborhood and the local Chinese place to go to. Pastas were usually served on Thursdays and Sundays. Other days were other types of foods, like grilling out. My dad loved grilling out on the barbecue.

My mother used to make chicken and veal cutlets. Back then we had a butcher who butchered everything for you. And, there was this old Italian guy who drove a truck through the neighborhood. He'd be singing in Italian, calling out all the women's names. He'd come up, roll up the window, and he had all kinds of fresh vegetables — almost like a mobile farmer's market.

Sundays were a big thing where we'd go over to either one of my grandmothers' houses. We'd sit there for hours. It always seemed like our things always centered around eating. There was always a big table set, a lot of conversation and see who could out talk, out volume everyone else.

We had lots of barbecues and parties, that type of stuff. Not like a Belle Meade level, but on a middle income peasant type of way. I remember my grandfather used to get big buckets of clams and would sit there — they'd be on a big thing of ice — he'd be shucking them, putting hot sauce on them and eating them. There was always a keg of beer available. All his neighborhood friends would come over to see him, sit down and talk. They'd bring Italian pastries, have some coffee and do shots of scotch or whatever. It was a fun time.

#### **What are your earliest memories in the kitchen?**

Watching both my grandmothers' cooking and smelling their food. It was almost like the scent would

lift you off the ground, lift your feet, just like in the cartoons when the guy smells the pie and he floats to it.

**When did you realize you had a passion for cooking and wanted to turn it into a profession?**

I was in the Army, sweating my butt off in the desert in Oklahoma when that light bulb went off and I was like, 'What else can I do that makes me sweat? Working in the kitchen!' It's become my career passion and it really drives me. (Prior to Maggipinto's three-year stint in the Army, the environmental studies major worked as a forester in Yellowstone.) Instead of re-enlisting like they wanted me to do, I signed up for culinary school in Manhattan at the New York Restaurant School. It has a new name now. My grandmother and aunt owned a restaurant. My great-grandfather owned it in the beginning. My uncle owned a restaurant and motel in the Catskill Mountains. Cooking is part of my life, it's in my blood.

**What was your experience prior to opening Café Nonna?**

I worked throughout the Northeast — Vermont, Maine, a couple of five-star hotels in Manhattan. When I worked for Restaurant Associates, a big catering company, I got the opportunity to go to China with the chef I was working for. We worked there for a couple of months on a special project teaching the chefs at a five-star hotel in China how to cook American food for some kind of trade event it was hosting.

When I came back to New York I took a job as part of the team opening the hotel part of the Disney Park that was in Paris. I lived in Paris for almost a year and then I traveled all through Europe.

Then I headed back to the states and was the executive chef for the Hearst Magazine Corporation for their dining room and catering. That's where I met my wife. She's from Knoxville and had lived in Manhattan for a decade — she was a modern dancer and a flight attendant.

We moved to Nashville so that she could be closer to her father who was sick and because it was easy for her to transfer down here and commute to New York. I opened up a restaurant called The Dancing Bear on Church Street. It was in a neighborhood where people don't go. I am from a city where it doesn't matter where you are as long as the food is good. I decided to shut it down even though we got good accolades for the food because I just couldn't bring people down for the food. When I had that restaurant, some people who had eaten there come to ask me if I wanted to open up a small Italian restaurant. I said, 'Yes.' In the early stages I bought them out. Bob Sillers and I are the owners.

**What is your philosophy toward Café Nonna's menu?**

I do basically peasant comfort food here. It's not eclectic or frou frou. It doesn't have a lot of different types — it's not part Southwestern, Japanese and Russian. It's straightforward food. I love that type of food.

**What dish are you most proud of?**

There are so many I am passionate about, but I get a lot of phone calls about the lamb shank — people constantly call and ask to be on a list to be notified when I put it back on the menu. People also rave about our pizza. I have a guy who orders it to-go four times a week. It's the love that I put into it that makes it stand out. I am also proud of my gelato. It's my Italian American version of gelato. I came up with the recipe myself. Watch out Ben and Jerry's.

**What do you eat on a normal day?**

I eat pizza, a lot, and a sandwich that we make here that has sausages, peppers and mushrooms. It's a childhood favorite. Salads, soups — our Tuscan bean soup or my wife may make a chicken soup at home. Being a man, I like eating quiche as well.

**What is in your refrigerator?**

Cold pizza, different types of jellies and hot sauces, yogurt for my kids, left-overs and Chinese food containers.

**What's in your CD player?**

Since I have two kids (Carter, 9, and Oliver, 3), probably some variation on Winnie the Pooh. Lately, since I am only in my car to-and-from work, I listen to 99.7 or NPR to get a full-circle view of what's happening around.

**What would your last meal be?**

I would say a re-creation of Christmas or Thanksgiving at my grandmother's house, which involves a number of courses and usually starts at one o'clock and ends at eight or nine o'clock. Lamb, lasagna, anti pasta, fruit and cheese, Italian pastries, a soup, an Italian egg drop soup, canned spicy peppers. The reason I got the knack for jarring is because my grandmother would jar all the vegetables my grandfather would grow. She'd get aggravated because he was constantly growing stuff and she thought she was doing it forever.

**What is your guilty food pleasure?**

Milk and cookies — doesn't matter what kind, just as long as they are hard and crisp, good for dunking. I also have this thing when it is watermelon season — I can't stop myself from eating the whole thing.

**What would you be if you weren't a chef?**

Maybe something exotic, like an undercover agent or on the other side of that, Mr. Mom.

**What is the significance behind the name Café Nonna?**

Nonna means grandmother in Italian. To honor my two grandmothers who inspired me and raised me while my parents were working, I named it Café Nonna for them.

**What is something you would never eat?**

Opossum.

**What is your favorite kitchen item?**

I like using the mixer for making soups and sauces. The gelato machine would be a favorite lately. Anyone out there who wants to donate one to me can. The good ones are expensive.

**Where do you go out to eat?**

King Yang, or we grab sandwiches and go to the park for a picnic because I want my kids to have room to run around. I like going to different Chinese buffets. Even my youngest loves the Chinese buffet. You ask him where he wants to go and he says, 'I want to go to the Chinese restaurant to eat.' We go to places where kids are wanted. I also like eating at Mambu.

● **Read this article online:**

[/index.cfm?section=12&screen=news&news\\_id=56278](/index.cfm?section=12&screen=news&news_id=56278)

Copyright 2000-2004, The City Paper LLC.