

10/21/09

The Providence Journal

Making local restaurants appetizing

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Joe Zito offers a glass of cheer to viewers while filming his TV Maitre d' from Rocco Italian Osteria in Smithfield.

The Providence Journal / Bob Thayer

The uniquely Rhode Island attitude of "I can't eat there! I've never been there!" is what encouraged Joe Zito and Armand DeLuise to create TV Maitre d', a monthly restaurant show now in its sixth year on local television.

Zito is in front of the camera as the affable host and writer. DeLuise and his Video Dynamics Productions work behind the camera. They each have the same job — to make each chef and restaurant as appetizing as can be.

"We take the restaurant and put it in the living room for you," Zito says of his mission. DeLuise explains that their philosophy was based on understanding some people's need to see a place before they are comfortable going there to dine.

Both agree, it's crazy for a team of two to go out and shoot video and interviews for some six to eight segments per half-hour show. They film and interview chefs and owners for four days and then production takes another five days. They also shoot the commercials that run during the breaks to keep the look consistent. In between, Zito writes a script.

Zito doesn't do reviews of the food or the restaurants on the show; rather, he introduces them to diners. "We let people make their own decisions," he says. He has his own style. For example, the restaurant dining room must be closed before the camera comes to it.

"It's an effective way to see a restaurant," he says.

The music, the writing, the camera, all work in a style meant to make a viewer feel comfortable.

The show airs Saturday mornings at 7 a.m. and Sunday mornings at 11 a.m. on WNAC, Channel 64, and at 11:30 a.m. on WPRI, Channel 12. It's also on MYRITV, offered on local cable systems, at 9:30 a.m. on Sunday mornings. TV Maitre d' is paid programming. But Zito now contributes reports to news shows on Channel 12 and Fox's morning lifestyle program The Rhode Show.

The show has also spawned a Web site, Tvmaitred.com and a book, *The TV Maitre d' Cookbook*, written with food writer Linda Beaulieu, featuring recipes from local restaurants that have appeared on the show.

The new edition TV Maitre d' that premieres on Sunday, Oct. 25, and runs through Nov. 21 features Rocco Italian Osteria in Smithfield, River Falls in Woonsocket (which serves Ma Glockner's chicken on Sunday) and then he moves to Federal Hill where he features the new upstairs dining space at Camille's, wines for Thanksgiving with Mark Gasbarro at the Blue Grotto, Costantino's Caffe Ristorante's new passport menu (which spotlights the food of a particular region of Italy each month) and the owners of Siena, brothers Chris and Anthony Tarro, cooking at S & W TV & Appliance, which provides a kitchen for the show's use.

DeLuise chose the name of the show because Zito was, indeed, a maitre d' once upon a time. But for the past 30 years he has been on the media side of the food business. And he does it just so we can all try a new restaurant even if we've never been there before.

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