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By Meg Fraser

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FOR THOUGHT

Rhode Island's Recipe for Success

TV Maitre d' brings good food to loyal viewers



Walking into Main Street Coffee in his hometown of East Greenwich, Joe Zito waves to the gentleman behind the counter, calling him by name.

It's a familiar routine for Zito, who over the past seven years has become a recognizable face for Rhode Islanders and restaurateurs as the TV Maitre d'.

"How many restaurants have you driven by 1,000 times and for some reason have no desire to sit inside? That's the magic of TV Maitre d'; I put it in your living room," Zito said.

In each episode, Zito profiles restaurants around the state, highlighting the dishes and dining rooms that have made them popular. Good food is important, but Zito says that's not the only thing diners are looking for.

"You've got to have good food to very good food, but you've got to have great service and ambiance to make people feel comfortable," he said.

One thing is for sure, though: Rhode Islanders know what they like.

"People in Rhode Island know good food - because we grew up with good food," Zito said, praising the diversity of cultural cuisines and the expertise all residents seem to share when it comes to the Ocean State's specialty.

"Rhode Islanders know seafood - you're not going to tell them seafood," he said.

He believes service and cleanliness are paramount to finding a recipe for success. And Zito would know - he has been around the restaurant business for more than 40 years.

His father, who calls himself "the real Joe Zito," spent decades running the desk at Twin Oaks in the family's native Cranston. The passion for food that drives the TV Maitre d' was born in that restaurant and in the Zito kitchen. From there, a young Zito worked in every capacity from busboy to waiter and, of course, maitre d'.

Combined with his love of writing and experience in the media, starting a television show seemed like a natural fit. He joined forces with friend and colleague Armand DeLuise to put together the half-hour show, which they write, film and edit.

"This is as hands-on as you get," Zito said. "It's really a dream job now."

TV Maitre d' airs on Fox Providence, Channel 12 and MYRITV, and Zito is a regular on The Rhode Show and for the Sunday news on Channel 12. Most recently, the show has generated "The TV Maitre d' Cookbook," which features recipes from Rhode Island restaurants that Zito has worked with.

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He is quick to point out that his job isn't to review restaurants, but to profile them and allow his viewers to make up their own minds. Still, he sets his standards high.

"My reputation is very important to me, so I'm very careful about choosing restaurants. My word has become a matter of trust between me and my viewers," he said.

Zito says diners give businesses one shot to impress them, which is why restaurant selection is important to him. One bad night could mean lost patronage forever - or, for him, a skeptical viewer.

"I truly believe that it's a live show every day, and when you hire your staff, they need to remember that," Zito said. "Rhode Islanders and people across the country have a lot of choices. Restaurants should feel privileged every time someone walks through the door."

Zito says that's how he feels about his viewers. He is thrilled the show has taken off and he is able to visit approximately 100 restaurants each year.

Many of the family-owned businesses, even the mom and pop pizza places, top Zito's list of favorite haunts. He does not have a particularly discriminating palate, and appreciates everything from fine cui-

sine and sushi to comfort foods and a good steak.

His wife of 34 years, Nancy, still serves up a meal he can't refuse. The couple enjoys cooking together and with their 22-year-old son Mark, and at the end of a long day, Zito's got the appetite for it.

"You'd be amazed at how little I actually eat on a shoot," he said, laughing.

With new restaurants popping up, and countless others not yet visited by TV Maitre d', Zito is showing no signs of slowing down. While a regional or travel food show is a possibility he's not ruling out down the line, for now, Rhode Island is exactly where Zito wants to be.

"There are thousands of restaurants in this state, so that means I'm hopefully going to be around for a long time," he said. "Life is good for me." ■

☞ *Crazy Burger in Narragansett. It's a great place to stop after a day at the beach. It's a BYOB with great menu choices for people for are vegetarians, to people who like meat!"*

- Darcie Di Saia, photo editor