

Ralph Conte mixes it up in Providence

By Portia Little

Ralph Conte, owner of Raphael Bar-Risto in Providence, insists that his customers come not just to eat, but for "the whole show."

And, while it's true that the classy restaurant is the place to people watch, top billing clearly belongs to the cutting-edge food and exemplary service.

Enscorced stylishly in what was the former train station, Raphael's innovative menu features cuisine from the different regions of Italy. "My whole heart and soul is in the Campania region near Naples," said Conte, who as a boy watched his grandmother prepare traditional recipes from his family's ancestral home, and later apprenticed with his culinary professor uncle there. After working in restaurants all across Italy, he returned to Rhode Island to open his first restaurant 23 years ago.

With his focus now on developing new menu items, Conte adds his own artful flair to dishes such as Raphael's Signature Lobster Fra Diavolo, Clams Zuppa, and Potato Gnocchi with Veal Spezzata, which are prepared by his chef de cuisine, Rob Harrison. You must save room for the desserts, which are TDF, including the luscious Banana Rum Baba Flambe, a Pear and Walnut Tart, and Lemon Mascarpone Crepes, to name just a few.

"We go for the gentle touch," said Conte. "It's a matter of sensitivity – if you use ten ingredients it becomes overpowering, but to use just three makes a dish light and flavorful."

His attractive and fanciful dishes have earned him accolades in the culinary world. He has received honors from the prestigious James Beard Foundation, including

being nominated in 2000 as a Rising Star Chef of New England, and in 2001 for their Best Regional Italian Cuisine award. In 2003 he was invited to take part in a collaborative dinner at the James Beard Foundation House in New York along with the Wine Maker of the Year in Italy. Also, articles about Conte and his restaurants have appeared in Food & Wine, Bon Appetit, and The New York Times. He has appeared on Food Network, taught at La Cucina Italia, and given culinary tours of Italy.

Now customers come from near and far to enjoy the sophisticated but comfortable ambience at Raphael – on any given night you are apt to find national and local celebrities, TV and movie stars, sports figures, politicians, and academics at the award-winning restaurant.

The décor is chic and classy, and on each table a tall

glass bottle filled with amber-colored red pepper oil perches like a glowing candle. The oil, with its sensuous tomato-garlic flavor, is a popular item that can be ordered from the restaurant's website. "Some people like to fry their eggs in it," noted Conte, "or to use it as the oil in their popcorn machines."

Several times during the year celebrity chefs and authors come to Raphael for book signings and dinners. Such luminaries as Mary Ann Esposito of Ciao Italia, Guiliano Buglialli, Michele Scicolone, and Franco Romagnoli have appeared there in recent months.

For those seeking more casual fare, the Tunnel Bar features star-quality items such as the snack bar food, fried cappellini sprinkled with Parmesan cheese, and what has been called "the best grilled pizzas in Providence."

In fact, Conte, who has owned and operated five successful restaurants, is a pioneer of wood fire cooking and is among the first chefs to offer dessert pizzas.

And while the restaurant business has its rewards, at the end of a busy night, Conte returns to his home in Jamestown, a place he considers a haven of peace and beauty. In the summer months he enjoys growing fresh herbs and tomatoes in his garden to use at the restaurant.

The Raphael Bar-Risto menu can be viewed on their website, www.rafaelbarristo.com.

Call 401-421-4646 to make a reservation or for information on private parties, catering, and gift certificates. Fax: 401-421-4698. 1 Union Station, Providence, RI 02903 across from Waterfront Park.