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## Camillo's works by adding warmth to menu

When one of my best friends turned 50 recently, I had to find the perfect spot to celebrate on this appropriately shaky day. I needed a place that was not too pricey but cozy. I needed a little haven that offered something we could all use more of on a daily basis — heart.

In my mind, Camillo's Café in the Princeton Shopping Center had the right mix and warmth for the occasion. And, while the décor is cozy and the menu is authentic, it is the tall man with the lovely Italian accent in the floppy chef's hat that infuses Camillo's Café with the ambience that makes it special.

This is a chef — his full name is Camillo Tortola — who has no problem using the word love when describing one of his favorite dishes, Mozzarella D' Buffalo. He says the first reason he opened up his kitchen so people could watch him cook, is that he can see his customers and “make sure they are OK.” The second reason for the open kitchen, he says, is that people love to see a chef cooking. The third is, “it is not just what you taste, but what you see,” he explains.

Since purchasing the café a year ago this month, Mr. Tortola and his partner Roberta Pughe, have transformed it from a low key café to a hopping destination with a growing lunch crowd. Most Friday and Saturday nights they seat approximately 100 people for dinner each night, which is prepared by Mr. Tortola and his assistant in full view of the diners.

### FAMILY BUSINESS



Diane Landis Hackett

The newly renovated space is replete with cognac colored wood floors, a raft of framed posters and objects for your eyes to absorb, as well as signs in Italian selling olive oil and breads by Camillo.

There is also a new set of sliding doors that will open the restaurant up for alfresco dining in the warmer months. And then there is the glimpse into Mr. Tortola's past via a mural of the village of Miranda, Italy, where he was raised. The mural, painted by Vincent Di Paolo, includes the church in the square and the café, where Mr. Tortola first dreamed of coming to this country.

Mr. Tortola lived in New York City for years before returning to his small village in 2003 to care for his ailing mother. Upon her death, he came back to this country but had lost his New York apartment so he decided to start fresh. He chose Princeton because he had a friend here who is now his partner in the business and in life, as he says.

But his Italian roots are ever present in all that he does. Not only is the crest from

his village on every plate, but he uses his grandmother's original recipe for Tira Misu, (just eggs and marscapone cheese, no liquor). And, like his grandmother, he does not use recipes but rather tastes his food and adds a pinch of this and a touch of that until the flavor is just right. “It's your mouth that knows,” he remembers his grandmother telling him.

He is quick to credit his grandmother and grandfather, who raised him, with providing him with the courage to do all that he has done so far. A photo of the two hangs in the entrance to the restaurant. They are strong and proud looking with more than a little resemblance to Mr. Tortola himself.

But it is not enough to be welcoming and serve good food. There has to be a standard of excellence and quality that permeates what is offered.

Enter Melissa Dill, Mr. Tortola's floor manager of one month, who has worked in the restaurant business for 25 years. She runs the numbers and the wait staff, checking the quality and service. She embodies Mr. Tortola's belief that you can't attract a professional crowd, unless you employ professionals.

When my husband and I ate there, it was Ms. Dill who made sure to exchange our wine glass for beer glasses so we could drink our tall Belgian beer, and it was Ms. Dill who checked our table several times to make sure we had what we needed. But, it was Mr.

Tortola who came out from the kitchen to give hugs and handshakes and talk about the meal, and then answer our questions about his heritage. The balance between the two personalities definitely seems to work well.

When asked about his favorite dishes, Mr. Tortola has trouble singling one out over another. Then, he slowly and somewhat excitedly comes up with a list: Osso Bucco, which is a veal shank braised for hours with caramelized onions and carrots. Then there are the veal chops with porcini mushroom sauce. There is also a dish called Pappardelle, a pork sausage ragu with shaved pecorino cheese on top. While these dishes are his creations, he says it is the customers who will truly define the menu.

“I like to be as accommodating as possible. If you have a dish in mind that you love and I have the ingredients I will make it. I want you to come to Camillos to enjoy yourself,” he says.

“People use a restaurant for a lot of reasons. They come for comfort because they had a hard day. They come for my Pappardelle. Or, for romance. It is all a compliment to me,” he says, leaning back in his chair and smiling a genuinely contented smile.

*Diane Landis Hackett's Family Business column appears monthly in Princeton Business Journal.*