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Amid the chaos of 2020, Cheryl Wilder and partner Hal Nichter watched the news together, saddened by the pandemic's negative impact on the restaurant industry. They

also saw a silver lining: the opportunity to breathe new life into one of the many restaurants choosing to close their doors as a result of the pandemic's exhausting wake. They already had the perfect hospitality team in mind: Cheryl's brother, Scott Wilder, and his wife, Sabrina, both seasoned chefs.

"Scott has been in the restaurant industry for 30-plus years," says Cheryl. "With Scott and Sabrina as the back and front of house; Hal, who has many years of experience in budgeting, planning, and financial oversight; and me with my marketing background, we felt we had a good team."

Cheryl and Hal then set their sights on finding the perfect spot—one within a closely knit community known for its character and heart, with a following of diners who are invested in the success of locally owned and operated enterprises. Hal came across a restaurant in Harleysville previously known as Brazzo Italian Cuisine. After discussing the opportunity with Cheryl, the partners agreed that they had found exactly what they had been looking for.

Cheryl promptly texted Scott and Sabrina: "Pack your bags, we bought a restaurant." Scott and Sabrina had been living hundreds of miles north, in Maine, but they leapt for the chance to helm a kitchen all their own.

"Cheryl texted us on a Tuesday," Sabrina shares.

"A week later, we were down looking at the restaurant, and within the next two months, we'd uprooted our lives for the opportunity."

The team took ownership of the property on November 1, 2020, and rebranded as Bella Fiona Ristorante, chosen because it "rolls off the tongue," Sabrina says. The team has been making magic ever since.

TASTE OF THE TOWN

Having turned **Bella Fiona Ristorante** into Harleysville's hottest new BYOB, the Wilder–Nichter team continues its greatest adventure yet.

by **LEIGH STUART** | photography by **JODY ROBINSON**



The team behind Bella Fiona Ristorante (from left): Scott Wilder, Sabrina Wilder, Cheryl Wilder, and Hal Nichter

"I always wanted to do something with my brother and sister-in-law, but the timing was never right," Cheryl says. "With this, everything clicked and fell right into place. People thought we were crazy, but in six months we've doubled our business, and the community has really adopted Scott and Sabrina."

Scott has continued to offer many of the Italian-inspired dishes that customers had come to love from the previous establishment, with a few unique twists of his own. Popular dishes include Pork Costata, Penne alla Rosa, and Bellafredo, among others. At the same time, he continues to expand culinary horizons across the menu. One hit that customers in the Philadelphia suburbs might not expect from an Italian eatery: chowder.

"People have been loving Scott's specials, especially the chowders on the weekends," Sabrina shares. "Customers aren't really used to that in this area. And we have some people who call on a Friday morning just to see what the night's special will be."

From sweet corn and crawfish chowder to lobster bisque, these offerings hint at things to come.

"I want to build a foundation of trust with our customers," Scott says. "Some people want comfort food, some people want to have a dish that transports them, and we try to accommodate that. We still offer Italian comfort food, but also infuse other cuisines, giving our customers a chance to be introduced to new refined entrées as well."

The Wilders describe the community support they have received as invaluable. They treat that bond as sacred.

"The customers have been amazing," Cheryl says. "That's been the biggest delight in this whole thing—how the community has embraced us. Sabrina remembers everything about everyone, and if she knows you like something a certain way, she'll do it



for you. It makes it feel like family.”

Montgomery County resident Tim McGowan agrees. He cannot say enough about the menu and the overall experience at Bella Fiona. He considers Bella Fiona something of a hidden gem, heaping praise on the shoulders of the culinary team.

“I can’t wait for the weekends when [Scott] features his signature soups,” says McGowan. “If forced to choose one word to describe his soups, it would be ‘exquisite.’ Consistently the best I ever had—period. But that’s just the start.”

The entrées rival or surpass the finest Italian restaurants in Manhattan, according to McGowan.

“Scott scours the region for the best ingredients, then works his magic to prepare what are the best dishes you’ll find in the Delaware Valley,” he adds. “Superb service [and] top Manhattan entrées at Harleysville prices—you can’t beat it.”

Bella Fiona continues to adapt to guidance meant to protect the health and safety of guests and staff. In accordance with government regulations,

the restaurant is slated to welcome guests at 100 percent capacity by Memorial Day.

“I hope this article will do two things,” Cheryl says. “One, introduce us to the people in the community who don’t know us yet—let people know we’re here—and hopefully inspire them to come and try some great food.

“The second part is,” she continues, “we hope we can show that despite what we’ve all been through, we can come through it and creatively move forward.” ■



Bella Fiona Ristorante

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