

suburban life

Renowned restaurateur Franco Federico is proud to open his latest eatery, **La Dolce Vita da Franco**, where he promises an experience unlike any other. page 86

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The Sweet Life

Renowned restaurateur Franco Federico is proud to open his latest eatery, La Dolce Vita da Franco, where he promises an experience unlike any other.

by MATT COSENTINO | photography by JODY ROBINSON

This year marks the 40th anniversary of Franco Federico's first trip to the United States, and looking back now there is no way he could have envisioned his version of the American Dream turning out quite like this. A fixture on the local dining scene for close to four decades, he has enjoyed an even more successful family life, with a loving marriage and two grown children he can't help but gush over.

Before all of that came to fruition, however, the only thing he knew when he first arrived in Bucks County at the age of 19 is that he had found the place he belonged.

"When I first came from Italy, I came to Doylestown," he says. "I just fell in love with this town. It reminded me of my hometown, and there were a lot of beautiful people here. So I decided to stay and I realized I could run a business here."

Of course, it was a bit of a trial-and-error process for Federico to find his true calling. Educated and trained as an industrial chemist in Italy, he came to the United States to pursue a career in the oil industry, but the company he was working for soon went into bankruptcy. He found a job as a

waiter in a pizzeria and had stints as a mechanic and in construction before getting an opportunity to operate Dominick's Pizza in Plumsteadville for owner Frank Mannino.

The experience proved to Federico that he could go out on his own, and that's exactly what he did. Now, 38 years after opening his first restaurant, he is rolling out his latest eatery, La Dolce Vita da Franco, on Main Street in Doylestown. While the borough is heavily populated with residents of Italian descent, he says the area is surprisingly devoid of Italian eateries that have true authenticity. His new venture will fulfill that niche in the borough.

"I don't know if I'm feeling excitement or nervousness," he says with a laugh. "It feels like it's my first time even though it's my 24th restaurant since opening the first in 1982. Back then it wasn't as demanding; today there is so much competition. But some restaurants just look for quick service; they lack authenticity and they put the quality to the side, which is not good. My quality is superb. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it."

Federico learned that lesson as a young boy growing up around food and the restaurant business in Italy's Calabria region. His family

owned a café where he would tend bar to give his older brothers a break, and his pay would be unlimited pastries to satisfy his sweet tooth. Later he worked as a waiter in a restaurant in his hometown of Luzzi, endearing himself to the owners with his willingness to go above and beyond in his duties.

It was at that restaurant where he met his mentor, master chef Giovanni Middea.

"He is the most amazing guy I ever met in my life," Federico says. "I watch all the cooking shows but I've still never seen a chef like him. He taught me everything I know. I watched him like a hawk and became like a little brother to him, going with him wherever he went."

"He's still around and I talk to him all the time. Whenever I need support or I need some tips, I give him a call or reach out on Facebook. He always says, 'Look what I created,' and it's true. I have an addiction to this industry now. I don't know how I've been doing it all these years."

Although he has an extensive background in restaurants—he also currently owns Ariana's Ristorante Italiano in North Wales and Fountain Side Seafood & Grill in Horsham—Federico says La Dolce Vita da Franco is unlike any of the other establishments on his résumé. It brings together all the high points he has taken away from his 23 previous restaurants. Not only is it a fine dining destination for every occasion from a romantic night out to a family celebration, but it also contains an Italian market with the finest imported ingredients and a bakery with fresh bread baked daily and an assortment of pastries.



La Dolce Vita da Franco also has homemade gelato and an espresso bar. Its catering services are available for weddings, bar mitzvahs, corporate events, and more.

“I wanted to create a very European place,” Federico says. “You can come in and enjoy dinner, as well as your ice cream and desserts. You can also pick up your oil and vinegar and things for the house, or you can get gift baskets for the holidays. Everything comes from Italy except for the Coca-Cola. The whole idea is to create something not too many people have and offer products that not too many people can offer.”

The menu features everything from fresh homemade pasta to seafood, steaks, and wood-burning pizza, as well as gourmet sandwiches. Federico is excited for patrons to cap off their meal with a gelato panini, which he compares to an ice cream sandwich made with brioche, various flavors of gelato, and fresh whipped cream. His influences range from beyond his background in southern Italy.

“I cook all kinds of food, from Neapolitan to Sicilian,” he says. “We have so many regions in Italy and every single one is so different. I don’t even have a favorite. I love everything about my culture: the ingredients we use, the flavor combinations, everything from desserts to antipasti to the main course and the pasta course.”

This has been a trying year for Federico, as he had a major health scare in February and underwent triple bypass surgery. The COVID-19 pandemic has been the most challenging obstacle he’s faced in the restaurant business, but his newest eatery provides outdoor seating and has strict safety protocols in place for limited-capacity indoor dining. His access to two patios in the center of town will enable him to continue the outdoor dining experience even under inclement conditions, under tents and with heaters.



Through it all he has remained passionate about food and bringing a smile to his customers’ faces. They will certainly share his joy upon walking into La Dolce Vita da Franco, inspired by the famous Italian movie. While the restaurant is BYOB, Federico offers complimentary wine to all patrons who may have left their favorite bottle behind.

“La Dolce Vita means ‘the sweet life’ and it’s a great translation because I have all the sweet products and I am living the sweet life, for sure,” Federico says. “I’ve been doing this for 40 years—that’s a lifetime. Most people don’t even last three or four years in the restaurant business. At the end of the day, I like to see the cash register full

so I can run my business and take care of my employees, but I most enjoy creating a dish out of nothing and making my customers happy with the highest quality of food.” ■

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—FRANCO FEDERICO,
OWNER OF LA DOLCE VITA
DA FRANCO



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