

Joe Grande  
A Passion for his Community  
by  
Brian Campbell

One thing that you learn very quickly about Joe Grande, is that he is a very passionate man. He is passionate about his family, his restaurant, his community, his love for bocce and his love of art. A natural romantic, Joe has demonstrated his love for his wife, Alfina, by doing things like learning to sing so he could serenade her for her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, or taking her on an Outlander Tour of Scotland because she loved the books.

His love for art can be seen just by looking at the interior walls in Mona Lisa Ristorante. “When we opened the restaurant in 1983, one of the first things we did is to make sure that the walls would accommodate art,” Joe said. “That is why our dining room is called The Gallery.”

Even the name is well suited to an Italian restaurant that displays local art on its walls. “The name was already chosen by the previous owners, but we decided to keep it,” Joe said. “Mona Lisa was easy to spell, to pronounce, everyone knows who she is, and she is a great art piece. It’s also a very good name for a restaurant.”

Joe had studied art, but felt that he wouldn’t be able to provide for his family as an artist. This way he could get the best of both worlds, as he could display his own art in the restaurant. However, he admits that his work hasn’t made it on to the walls lately.

“My daughter, Giuliana, coordinates with local Winnipeg artists,” Joe said. “She is a Fine Arts student and she teaches art. We sell the art work in the restaurant and charge the artist 10% and give the money to The Art Form, for kids who can’t afford art lessons.”

When the restaurant initially opened in 1983, Joe had different partners. Now his partners are his family. He explained, “My wife, Alfina, works in the background, making decisions and looking after the financial part of the business. My other two

daughters, Elena and Angelina have both gone to business school and they both have decided that they would like to run the restaurant.

“I am very happy that they have decided to carry it on,” Joe added with a smile. “I’m sure that they will have their own ideas, and I have no doubt that they will do a better job than I have.”

Although he expects his daughters to run the restaurant better than he has, Joe has done an exceptional job over the years. This is evident in the loyalty of his customers. That loyalty has been earned over the years, and Joe is still working to earn it. “The people that come in here are number one,” he said. “We get to know who they are and what they do. We watch their families grow up, we see them get married, have children and grandchildren.”

Of course, a restaurant is defined by the food it serves, and one of Joe’s passions is making sure that his customers are always happy with it. “One of the reasons our food is good, is because I get to eat it all,” he said with a laugh. “I get to experience the food that we make, and if there is something wrong with it, we change it. I know that if I enjoy it, everyone else will too. Because I am in the house and I experience the food and see my cooks and see what we put in the recipes; that is what makes a great recipe for a restaurant.

“I believe that as long as someone puts all their time and effort into what they are doing, they can’t go wrong,” he added. “I think that is a good model for anyone to use for their business.”

As much as Joe’s customers have been returning generation upon generation, his employees have been growing along with them. Much of the staff is family. “I enjoy having relatives work in the restaurant and I feel they have my back,” he said. “My sister Lena has been with me for many years. My Uncle Franco came over from Italy and is working here. My nephew, Angelo, learned how to make pasta, how to manage the restaurant, and he met the love of his life here and got married and they both work here. My Mom is the hidden chef. She comes in the middle of the night and makes sure that everything tastes the way it should. We still have secret recipes that the chefs who work during the day don’t know, because we prepare some of the spices at night.”

Needless to say, Joe’s job description has changed as the restaurant grew. He started out being the pizza cook, the driver, the dishwasher, the server, etc. But eventually it became impossible for him to continue doing everything. He said,

“The reason I got out of the kitchen is because my guests wanted to talk to me, so I’d go talk to them and ended up burning food. So I had to stop doing that.”

Being a restaurant owner has given Joe the opportunity to feed many of his passions, and one of those passions is bocce. Joe said, “20 years ago, my father and I were sitting in the restaurant having an espresso, and since it was early in the afternoon, it was quiet, so we decided to start a game of bocce along the side of the building. A customer came by and asked what we were doing and if they could join in. They enjoyed it so much they asked if they could bring friends the following week to have dinner and learn to play bocce. From there it grew and grew, and now we have 27 teams and it keeps growing every year.”

They now have two bocce courts alongside the building, and Joe even talked to former mayor, Sam Katz and had the side street renamed Angelo Grande Bocce Way. Joe said, “So my father said, ‘so when I die are they going to take the name away?’ I said, no dad, they won’t.”

Although Joe was born in Italy, he considers Winnipeg his home and does his part to give back. Over the years he has supported a number of local charities, including helping to raise money to build the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. “The Museum needed support at a certain time, and I wanted show people that I believed in the project. I believe that Winnipeg needs a beautiful building like that,” he said.

“We created the Stomp event, where guests get to make wine with their feet, for the Museum for Human Rights. Now we do it for a different charity every second year. It is quite a production, too much to do it every year. Besides, it takes that long for me to drink all the wine.”

Winnipeg has many charitable causes and, although Joe would love do support all of them, it simply isn’t possible; so he tries to pick a cause that is close to his heart. At this time, that cause is Alzheimer’s, because Joe’s father has it. “We are collaborating with Riverview Health Centre to do a fundraiser for Alzheimer’s,” he said. “We are having a bocce tournament at Riverview Health Centre, and as a major sponsor, we will be providing food and helping them build the tournament. It was super successful last year, and it is going to be even better this year.”

Joe is also passionate about his home in Tuxedo, mostly because it still surprises him that he is living here. He said, “I never thought that an immigrant from a little town in Italy would ever live in Tuxedo, because it is such a beautiful neighbourhood.”

Although he has many friends in Tuxedo, he believes that his dog, Zorro, has more. “Everybody who has a dog in Tuxedo knows Zorro,” he said with a laugh. “He is always in the yard, and they all stop and have a chat with him.”

Joe has a number of things he is proud of: his family, his business, his home, and his pride and joy, his classic 1959 Cadillac; he also beams with pride when talking about his wife’s garden. “My wife has an incredible time planting and putting out flowers in her garden. She spends a lot of time in the yard.”

Joe is very proud of his life and especially of his adopted country. He is living a life that he barely dared dream about and loves living in a country and a community that has allowed him to live it. “To be able to come to this country and build a good business and raise your family,” he said, “I feel that it important to show pride in this country. On Canada Day, we had Canada flags in our flower beds and on the side of our garage.”

Joe doesn’t see it necessary to separate his business life from his personal life. “I believe that a anybody’s job or business, or anything they decide to do, becomes part of their life. It becomes part of you, it has to be part of you, or else you can’t do a good job at it. How can you separate the career that supports your life? You can’t!” Joe said. “And you have to love what you do. I could not do what I’m doing and not love my job. I deal with people every day. If I don’t love the people that come here, they will know it. And then they won’t want to come here.”