

# Rocco Biale of **ROCCO'S** RISTORANTE PIZZERIA

BY ROCCO BIALE AND LINDA RIMAC COLBERG  
PHOTOS BY TOM MINCZESKI



## **R**ESTAURATEUR SERVES UP VALUE OF “LOCAL”

occo Biale has hospitality flowing through his veins. Born in San Francisco into a large Italian family and raised in Contra Costa County, Rocco helped his father, Mario, and uncle, Rudy, at the restaurants and bars they operated in San Francisco and Hawaii. Throughout his life, he's worked every food service job possible, from busboy and dishwasher, to cook, server, bartender, and manager in restaurants, bars, and nightclubs in Northern California.

In October 1999—after months of construction and a lifetime of preparation—in the tradition of the Biale family, Rocco opened his eponymous restaurant, Rocco's Ristorante Pizzeria, in the busy Encina Grande shopping center at the corner of Ygnacio Valley and Oak Grove roads in Walnut Creek. Rocco's has become a popular neighborhood eatery and destination restaurant for locals and visitors alike.

On a recent spring afternoon, we talked with Rocco, whose comments and observations are woven with smiles and good-humor. At the door, we were greeted with the aroma of Italian spices, the melodic sounds of Sinatra, and a 360-degree viewscape of prints, posters, and hand-painted murals depicting Italian imagery and storylines. On a small green awning, just inside the door, “Benvenuti” says it all: Welcome.

**86°:** Sitting here in Rocco's is a full-bodied experience. Tell us about your restaurant.

**ROCCO BIALE:** Rocco's Ristorante Pizzeria is a family owned and operated restaurant—literally “family operated.” All three of my kids work here: Dante, Dominic, and Nina. And, we're more than just pizza—we have a full pasta menu, sandwiches, and salads, and a full bar. We have a modest wine list with selections from California and Italy. So, “pizzeria” is in the name, but it's a full restaurant with a full menu of Italian flavors.

**86°:** What's your secret, Rocco? What keeps the crowds coming back? What makes Rocco's a fifteen-year—and counting—success story?

**RB:** One of the keys is being hands-on. The restaurant business is a very hands-on business. Being here every day is important. Staff and customers see that I'm here and my kids are here and that resonates through the entire operation. My presence, early in the morning and throughout the day, signals that we're a family, that we're committed, and I know the staff feels the same way. I pay attention to detail, whether it's a food, service, or cleanliness item—they see I'm on top of it. They see thirty-five years of experience at work.

I'm proud of the quality and variety of menu choices, which reflect my heritage. We offer consistently high quality food—reasonably priced, sizable portions, with familiar favorites and a few innovative surprises every now and then. People also come for the ambiance, and they see the face behind the name—and call me by name—and that adds a certain personality to the restaurant and dining experience.

**86°:** As a local entrepreneur—"local" being the operative word—you employ a lot of local teenagers. Tell us about your business model—the culture you've established here. How important is "local" to you?

**RB:** Yes, we do quite a bit of local hiring, often giving local teenagers their first job. Working in a restaurant helps them develop their people skills, build on their strengths, and move on successfully, after high school, to other employment. At the same time, in a business that lends itself to movability, we have many staff members who have been here for many years.

**86°:** And your cooks?

**RB:** For a business that is known for a transient workforce, we have cooks and kitchen staff who have been with us for a long time—many years. They're very good, very loyal, and a huge part of our success.

Most people don't see much of what goes on behind the scenes—what's integral to the finished product. They see the plate, the pizza, the pasta, but not the work that went into that. I'm thankful and appreciative to every member

of the staff for what they do for Rocco's. I do my best to let them know every day, and to make sure they are well taken care of. You ask about "culture"—the culture I hope to foster is one that acknowledges and rewards experience and excellence, which translates into loyalty and long-term relationships. It's that simple.

And going back to the "local" idea: I believe people often make dining decisions based on the fact that an establishment is locally owned and operated—that applies to any business. People like to patronize locally owned and operated businesses. There is credence to patronizing a local business, which, in turn, supports the local economy, by hiring and purchasing supplies locally. For instance, we offer several local beers, including three from Black Diamond Brewery, and we offer Shadowbrook wine, our local Walnut Creek vintner. We also tap local musicians for our Thursday and Saturday live music nights—there's a lot of talent in our own backyard.

**86°:** Care to share any news coming from Rocco's kitchen, or trends in the restaurant industry?

**RB:** Sure. My son Dominic and I spent the better part of last summer in Savona, Italy, about thirty minutes from Genova—we were there to relax, unwind, and reconnect with our Italian cousins. We stayed in a very old apartment—eleven floors, no elevator. What

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we lacked in amenities, we made up for in convenience. We were a block from the ocean and near several cousins, in whose homes we spent a lot of time. My cousin Irene Cuneo owns the popular Leccalecca gelateria—"leccalecca" means "lollipop." My cousin Raffaele Moretuzzo, a pilot for an Italian airline, was our personal guide throughout our stay. He was very generous and accommodating. Raffaele is our link, our familial connection, between Italy and America, and he made our trip the experience of a lifetime. With what little Italian I know, we were able to maneuver our way around. We brought back some new menu ideas that we're slowly trying to work into the menu, which, by the way, is easier said than done. But, we were inspired, and you may see those new dishes on our menu in the near future.

As far as trends, I believe in the future we'll see restaurants, specifically here in California, move toward a European-based, service-included model. That's where our industry is headed. It will start with the higher end restaurants, then trickle down through all establishments.

**86°:** You are as well known for your community contributions as you are for pizza and pasta, Rocco. How do you give back to the community, and where does that desire to give back come from?

**RB:** One of the many lessons I learned from my family is that when you treat people right, it comes back in a positive way. We have earned a reputation for helping our community through our signature gift baskets that we donate for auctions, raffles, and other events. It's not uncommon to have a dozen or more baskets filled with an assortment of food and souvenir products from the restaurant here at any given time. We also discount and donate food for community groups, and we sponsor many sports teams and youth groups. Yes, this gains Rocco's some visibility, but more importantly, we're helping our neighbors. They have been very, very good to us, and we want to do this to show our appreciation.

**86°:** One last request: Tell us about Rocco's distinctive décor!

**RB:** Wow! Well, yes, there's lots of it, and I do take a lot of pride in the décor and ambiance of the restaurant. Though I've lost actual count, I'd say there are more than 1,000 framed prints and posters and memorabilia on the walls. Every piece hanging in the restaurant and bar was hand picked by me and placed in a specific location by me, and each piece has a certain value and meaning to it—it came from somewhere or it's a tribute to somebody or something or there's a memory involved. As I say, I'm very hands-on—even when it comes to the décor. A nail doesn't go into the wall without my say so.

*For more information visit, [www.roccospizzeria.com](http://www.roccospizzeria.com). Send comments about the article to [editors@86mag.com](mailto:editors@86mag.com).*



## ROCCO'S FUN STUFF

- Tables christened for close friends and long-time customers dot the establishment.
- The Dominator, an all-meat combo pizza, is named for Rocco's son Dominic; Dante's Inferno, a Greek-style vegetarian-based pizza, is named for his son Dante; and Mario's Combination is named for his father.
- 28 televisions are tuned to local, college, and pro sports.
- A VESPA DRIVEN IN THE 1960 MOVIE LA DOLCE VITA HANGS FROM THE CEILING.
- Italian movies play throughout the day on a large, 58" monitor in the main dining room; at each table, the movie lineup is tucked under glass next to the Sinatra lyrics.
- Rocco is a board member of the California Restaurant Association, Concord Bocce Federation, and Walnut Creek Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Bureau; and he is a proud member of the Colombo Club, San Francisco Italian Athletic Club, and Sons of Italy.