

People

Ryan Comerford

an impassioned "foodie" puts his talent where his heart is

By Susan Stewart

He grew up in the kitchens of hard-working immigrants in the restaurants of downtown Toronto. And that, says Ryan Comerford, has been the key to his success as one of San Luis Obispo's youngest entrepreneurs.

"Their work ethic built Toronto," he says. "And by the time they had earned their own restaurants, they had a lot to teach."

Comerford is the owner and general manager of Fairways at Dairy Creek and CateringUnlimited.com. He is in the process of taking the management reins at both the Dairy Creek and Morro Bay Golf Courses from his father's capable hands. And he has high hopes for "The



(photo by Albert Gibson)

View at Morro Bay," the restaurant he is renovating to serve the burgeoning market for banquet facilities. At 29, he has come a long way fast.

At twelve, he took his first job peeling potatoes in the basement of a busy fish 'n chips joint in Toronto, owned by a middle-aged Chinese couple.

"I just loved the Woos," says Comerford. "They taught me so much!"

He graduated from peeling and pre-frying the potatoes to waiting tables when he moved to Nevada's, an Italian restaurant, where he quickly became floor manager at just 17.

"I'm a big guy," he explains, "so I looked older than I really was."

Two more upscale Italian restaurants, Peppino's on the Beach and Florentine Court, followed Nevada's, both with the old-school, European method of teaching young restaurateurs and chefs: my way or the highway and no sniveling allowed.

"These guys had temper tantrums on a daily basis," Comerford recalls. "They thought nothing of chasing me around with a meat cleaver."

At 22, with his taste buds fully engaged and his passion for food driving his decisions, Comerford was on his way to Europe to apprentice under the great chefs when he landed in San Luis Obispo. He had come West to say good bye to his father before embarking on his culinary education. But his father had other ideas. Why not stay on awhile and help him with the demands of the golf courses?

"What I discovered was that the celebration aspect of the business was lacking," said Comerford. "It's fundamentally important to support the restaurant that provides that element."

So he bid the contract to establish Fairways at Dairy Creek and much to his surprise, he won it. That was four years ago. Today, Fairways is a thriving concern, serving out-of-the-ordinary breakfast and lunch dishes to a satisfied crowd of the county's movers and shakers, plus the usual mix of working folk and golfers. Comerford's breakfast menu features ample, four-egg omelets, house-made salsas, and lots of sides. Lunch menus have added a nod to his Italian restaurant roots in the hand-pressed, stone-fired pizzelles—each one with the Italian name it was born with: margherita, prima vera, pollo pesto, and carne. Fragrant humus with pita bread, and albacore egg rolls with pomegranate sauce bring Greek and Chinese flavors to the appetizer list. And an array of entrée-sized salads, piled-high sandwiches, and juicy burgers give diners all the choice they could ask for. This is no ordinary golfcourse diner.

And neither is the staff. Chefs and wait staff overlap into Comerford's off-site business, CateringUnlimited.com where he serves the full gamut of catered events,

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Ryan Comerford, wielding clubs and pans with equal finesse at Dairy Creek.

from weddings and bar mitzvahs to film and commercial shoots. For Hollywood types and brides-to-be alike, high quality offerings and split-second timeliness are paramount. Comerford says his staff is up to the task and then some.

"I'm good at choosing the right people and then empowering them," he says. Deviating from the humiliating and

sometimes scary training techniques of his European and Asian predecessors, Comerford believes that respect and encouragement go a much longer way toward fostering excellence.

"In addition to great food and service, my goal in both the restaurants and the catering business," he says, "is to provide opportunities for my chefs so that they can afford to buy houses in the communities they work in."

Recently, Comerford's CateringUnlimited.com served over 5,000 at the Garden Festival, featuring Mediterranean dishes from every temperature zone.

"We love to be challenged," he added, "either by the logistics of the location, or by the special or unusual requirements of the menus. I'm in this business to make people happy."

Eventually, Comerford plans to expand the business to live up to its name-unlimited. Envisioning a network of catering staffs and locations throughout the nation, he is looking to fill the increasing demand for quality catering similar to the concept used by such companies as flowers.com. Built on quality, credibility, and consistency, CateringUnlimited.com would provide a uniform standard of service and exceptional food quality, available anywhere at the click of a

mouse.

These days, Comerford is busy learning the ropes at the golf courses. Wielding a set of clubs as readily as he works a sauté pan, he is full of enthusiasm, relating the history of the green hills around him with reverence and respect. Co-owned by early dairy ranchers, the Guidettis and the Gallardis, Dairy Creek is both a historically and an environmentally sensitive place. An early menu featured Joe Guidetti's homemade sausage recipe. And carefully spaced perches have been installed to ensure the comfort and safety of the resident hawks and eagles.

An unabashed food lover who will hop a plane to try a new dish from a favorite Chicago chef, or drop a king's ransom at Valentino's in Las Vegas, Ryan Comerford continues his culinary education in the great American cafés and eateries.

"I'll admit it," he grins. "I put food ahead of almost anything."

Seven years ago, he forestalled his European culinary adventure to stay here and work instead. It was a long trek from Toronto to San Luis Obispo, and an even longer one from humble potato peeler to California restaurateur. Like the immigrants of his native Toronto however, when it comes to the pursuit of excellence, Ryan Comerford doesn't let a little thing like distance stop him.

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