



THOMAS FARRAGHER

From humble beginnings to the chef Hall of Fame



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JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Denise Graffeo, making eggplant Parmesan with her husband, Tony, at their Saugus home, earned Hall of Fame honors.



Comments

SAUGUS — Like many Hall of Famers, she had younger days full of the indignities that come with life in the bush leagues, the place where you learn from mistakes, the place where greatness is a distant dream.

For Denise Graffeo, that place was a restaurant in Haverhill called the Tap.

In 1974, she was 24 and newly divorced. She lived on the top floor above that restaurant, working a grueling morning-to-night schedule, scarcely feeling sunshine on her face for six months.

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She carried 50-pound boxes of grease to melt in the deep fryer. She peeled potatoes, made her own french fries, and served club sandwiches on 12 kinds of bread.

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Her feet hurt. She looked sickly. And, for the first time, she had found herself.

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She was the new chef. And she loved it.

“This was my first experience in the world where it was all up to me,” said Graffeo, who became the first woman elected into the American Academy of Chefs Hall of Fame this year.

“I was going to succeed because I would not let myself fail. I’m all pumped up because I had a cookbook from the Culinary Institute of America. It wasn’t much. But it was mine.”

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When the trumpets sounded in a hotel ballroom in Orlando in July, and Graffeo took hold of her husband’s arm for the long walk down the center aisle for her Hall of Fame induction, she struggled to contain her emotions.

Her thoughts drifted to the line cooks, dishwashers, waiters, waitresses, and dining-room managers who helped shape the contours of her career.

“I set about putting together my past life,” she told the crowd that night. “Page by page. Menu by menu. Course by course.”

What a banquet it has been.

“People used to ask me: How did you last so long in the restaurant business?” she told me as we sat in the kitchen at her home here the other day. She laughed as she delivered an answer tinged with irony. “I would tell them: ‘Men! There’s men everywhere! I have no problem finding men.’ ”

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Graffeo was born in Lynn 67 years ago this past Sunday. She grew up in Salem, the oldest of five children. Her father, a Peabody leather factory worker, lost an arm in an industrial accident when she was just 13.

Her grandmother, who cleaned houses for wealthy families in Swampscott and Marblehead, also happened to be a wizard in the kitchen.

“She could make a grilled cheese so good it would make you cry,” said Graffeo, recalling the little girl who stood in that kitchen and watched. And learned.

After graduating from Salem High School in 1968, she headed for an insurance firm on Beacon Hill, where a dead-end secretarial job awaited. In 1973, the place closed. She moved home. And, soon, she began her career in kitchens where, indeed, there were plenty of men.

Her job in the Tap’s kitchen segued into four years as sous chef at Kernwood Country Club in Salem.

By the time she walked into the Ritz-Carlton kitchen in 1979, she was one of a handful of women working among 50 men. She also learned a valuable lesson: Never let them see you cry.

“Two years, I cried,” she said. “Always in the locker room. In the maids’ locker room.”

She remembers colleagues who bumped her, who sabotaged her stock pot, who counted on the complicity of managers who displayed no sympathy. Her thick skin saved her.

“I had the Tap behind me,” she said, referring to her start in Haverhill. “You’re not going to kill me with this stuff because I could do the job. I wasn’t going to give them the satisfaction. I knew the sous chef who hired me had my back because he didn’t want me to fail because if I failed, he wasn’t going to look good.”

Look good?

One glance at her Wall of Fame at her tidy home here affirms a career of distinction. She’s got the hardware — framed and mounted — to prove it.

The first female president of the Epicurean Club of Boston. President of Boston’s chapter of Les Dames d’Escoffier, an international philanthropic group of female leaders in the field of food. Merit badges and medallions everywhere you look.

“She doesn’t take any prisoners,” said Rico DiFronzo, the executive chef at the Union Oyster House and the national vice chairman of the American Academy of Chefs, who nominated Graffeo for her Hall of Fame distinction. “To survive in this industry, you have to be tough sometimes and other times you have to be gentle. She knows how to persuade people and get things done.”



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Anthony Graffeo walked downstairs passing his awards on the left and Denise's awards on the right.

During the 26 years she ruled the kitchen at Marblehead's Eastern Yacht Club, she honed her skills, and she learned how to lead.

“Don't forget: Eastern Yacht Club was a male-oriented club and she had to prove herself,” said William “Twig” Burke, a club officer who applauded Graffeo's appointment as its executive chef in 1982. “And she did prove herself. She was tough in the kitchen but she got respect. You can yell and then take a long break.

“She didn't take a break. She stood there on her feet all damn day. She was like the orchestra leader.”

She led by example. And she knew how to leaven tough work with a mixture of mischief and mirth.

Burke said her Aladdin-themed parties, her stunning buffet tables, the time she helped enlist a platoon of “pirates” to storm a beach party are the stuff of club lore. No club member will forget that “body” emerging from a casket buried in the sand — a gag to enliven a clam bake.

Along the way, there was a parade of people who worked under her, who learned from her, who followed her into kitchens of their own.

One of them was a teenager named Seth Moulton, who started as a bus boy, moved up to waiter, and learned never to complain about the heat in Denise Graffeo's kitchen.

“Do your job and don't complain,” recalled Moulton, now a congressman from the North Shore, who back then was living with his parents in Marblehead. “She demanded excellence and expected that from both herself and her team.”

Moulton said he can still see in his mind's eye the moment he knew he had met Graffeo's exacting standards. “She put her arm around me and gave me a big hug and said she was proud of me,” the second-term Democrat recalled. “That meant a lot because I was proud to work for her.”

Graffeo's knees finally gave out on her in the kitchen. She retired in 2008, but she remains active in professional organizations and is still on the advisory board at North Shore Community College, where she had been an instructor.

And she wasn't kidding about all those men in all those kitchens.

One of them was Tony Graffeo, himself a Hall of Famer, whom she met 30 years ago and married 13 years after that.

Tony, who worked in kitchens throughout Boston, blinked back tears recalling that night in Orlando last summer. His wife on that stage. The only woman in sight. One of a select few — no more than three a year — selected for the Hall of Fame.

“It was a big deal for me to walk her down the aisle,” he said, standing next to his wife in their kitchen here. “I was very proud of her. I’m still proud of her.”

And then it was time to head out to the garden. There was eggplant to be harvested.

Denise Graffeo had a wonderful dinner in mind — a meal fit for Hall of Famers.

Comments



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Denise Graffeo threw an eggplant she just picked to Anthony.

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