

On the Line: Michael Rossi of THE RANCH Restaurant & Saloon, Part One

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Photo by Johannes Dewald

There was something different about meeting Michael Rossi. It could've been that I was half an hour early, yet he was more than ready to start our interview. I did not know it, but our conversation would expand beyond the questionnaire. It was like an episode of *Inside the Actor's Studio*, except I didn't get to ask what his favorite noise was.

Creating [THE RANCH Restaurant & Saloon](#) has been well more than a year in the making. He has collaborated with master sommelier Michael Jordan, pastry chef David Rossi, and Extron CEO Andrew Edwards in an offsite test kitchen, perfecting a "country" menu with warmth and depth. From the outside, you would never expect the upscale ambiance within.

What are six words that describe your food?

Layers of flavor, seasonal, produce-driven.

What are eight words that describe you?

Driven, open-minded, passionate, perfectionist, hard-working, persistent, teacher, student.

Your best recent food find:

Calabrian chile from Calabria, Italy. It's pretty awesome. It has a slow heat that builds. It's not just hot-pepper-based. We put it in everything -- aioli, sandwiches, folded into tomato sauces. It gives a layering of flavor that makes you wonder where it comes from.

Most undervalued ingredient:

Lemon zest. Acidity adds freshness. We go through, like, 2,000 tasting spoons a week, tasting food all day long. We work to get everybody on the same page by asking one other, "What part of your tongue did it not hit?" Really good food should be analyzed as though it's good wine. We look for complete balance in everything we make.

Rules of conduct in your kitchen:

Professionalism, integrity, pride of product, accountability. Every day, you can walk in there half-way through the shift, and everybody knows what's going on. The staff don't come in and just work in their station. They're working toward their future. My job is to make them all chefs.

One food you detest:

White pepper. I was never fond of the smell. It has a funky aroma to me that's not pepper. I don't even know how to explain it.

One food you can't live without:

All Mexican food -- LOVE the comfort food aspect of it. I think my stomach thinks I'm Mexican. I love hole-in-the-wall Mexican places.

When I worked at Border Grill, I was the only white guy in the kitchen; this was during Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Millikan's *Two Hot Tamales* series, so they weren't in the kitchen at the same time. All the tickets would come in in Spanish. I made 15 gallons of guacamole my first day.

I think Gabbi Patrick is a great friend who makes awesome food. Every time I go to Gabbi's Mexican Kitchen in Orange, I'm very surprised that it's more unique than what I probably expected. She's a fantastic chef who keeps it real.

Culinarily speaking, Orange County has the best:

Young, driven, creative and talented chefs.

What fast food do you admit to eating?

Chick-Fil-A. It is good at what it does.

Best culinary tip for the home cook:

Don't be afraid to season your food.

After-work hangout:

Hanging out with my wife and two boys.

Favorite celebrity chef:

I could name a hundred guys; I could name all the chefs I worked for because they gave me the knowledge to be who I am. But I see somebody such as Michael Symon, and I like his style: simple, true flavors and not overly complicated. He prepares delicious food, cooks exactly like I do -- food that people really understand.

Celebrity chef who should shut up:

Nadia Giosia of *Nadia G's Bitchin' Kitchen*.

Favorite music to cook by:

Linkin Park and 311.

Best food city in America:

San Francisco has a mixture of cultures.

What you'd like to see more of in Orange County from a culinary standpoint:

More chef-driven concepts. When I started in this business 18 years ago, there weren't many chef-driven restaurants in Orange County. I helped Roy Yamaguchi open his location in Newport. That was the first restaurant of its level at the time. We changed our menu every day. I met Andrew Sutton while working there, and he told me about his concept with Disney. I opened up Napa Rose with him, and there was nothing like it. Andy never stops thinking. He never stops creating.

Dee Nguyen of Break of Dawn is keeping it real with his culture, and he is using a lot of his experiences and things he has learned, but he makes everything from scratch. Dean Kim of OC Baking Co. has been a friend of mine for 15 years. He says, "Let's sit down and create something." The wagon-wheel bread we have at each table has seven different rolls in it. We created it because I hate throwing bread away. He gets inside the chef's head and wants to create something cool for us. That's what I mean by chef-driven.

I think the coolest thing in the world is having another chef come to your restaurant. Alan Greeley of the Golden Truffle came in last week. He goes, "Buddy, want you to try this out," and it was some fatback [pig meat] that he fried up with some salt. Those are the types of chefs who inspire me. Those are my friends.

What you'd like to see less of in Orange County from a culinary standpoint:

Less corporate chain concepts.

Favorite cookbooks:

Fresh From the Market: Seasonal Cooking With Laurent Tourondel; *The Flavor Bible: The Essential Guide to Culinary Creativity* by Andrew Dornenburg and Karen Page; and *Frank Stitt's Southern Table: Recipes From the Highlands Bar and Grill*.

When you're not in the kitchen cooking, what are you doing?

Hanging out with my wife and two young sons. We like going to the park and having a picnic. The other day, I was off, and I took the boys to the Asian market, and I made pho. They want to hold the meatballs and go see the fish on the wall. I know my boys will be chefs, and I hope they grow up to be professional baseball players. That's just a dad talking, right? But I know they are gonna be in the kitchen. I want to teach them to garden and realize where things come from.

Weirdest thing you've ever eaten:

Horse tenderloin is really popular in Italy.

You're making breakfast. What are you having?

Huevos rancheros.

You're at the market. What do you buy two of?

Two lemons because I like the acidity in my food and the freshness of the zest.

Weirdest customer request (and did you do it?):

A guest came in who recently had surgery; she requested to have our four-course tasting menu miniaturized. . . . in 2- and 3-ounce portions. It was very strange. She told us before she was coming in, and we prepped everything.