

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

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Photo by Johannes Dewald

Wine pairing is just one of the topics covered in this segment of *On the Line*. THE RANCH Restaurant & Saloon's Michael Rossi also confesses to a little line dancing. [Part one](#) is a good read, but we get a better understanding our of subject in today's edition.

"Everything that we can do in house, we do," he says. That includes pickles, barbecue sauce -- you name it. Rossi's not ashamed to admit he views blogs and restaurant menus from around the country and world every day, looking to see what people are doing, so

he can keep his brain stimulated. Combine that mindset with Andrew Edwards' dedication to customer service, and you have an equation for exceeding the expectations of their clientele. The Extron CEO walks around every table during service to solicit feedback for making dining experiences even better.

**Hardest lesson you've learned:**

Never assuming you know it all.

**What would your last meal on Earth be?**

Colorado lamb, then finish with some Garrotxa, a goat cheese from Catalonia, Spain. For sure.

**Who's your hero, culinary or otherwise?**

My sons, Maddox and "The Champ," Luca. They were born in the same year, nine months apart. My little boy, Luca, was born at six months, or 27 weeks, on Christmas Day. The doctors told us he was going to have cerebral palsy. Well, he just turned 2, and he's perfectly normal. He's the opposite of what they told us he was going to be.

**Tell us about your food-service-industry background.**

When I finished culinary school in San Francisco -- which I didn't even know existed until a friend suggested it to me -- I got to work at Roy's in Maui for a few months, then had a short stint at Border Grill in Santa Monica before heading to a chef school in Italy on scholarship. After that, I remember working in Pompeii for three months straight without a day off. I lived across the plaza from the ruins, but I never got to see them.

After Roy's in Newport Beach, I worked for six years at Napa Rose, where I met Michael Jordan. I wanted something different after that, and I became the executive sous chef at Angel Stadium. Then I got the opportunity to be executive chef at Ambrosia. The RANCH opportunity happened after that.

**Favorite places to eat (besides your own):**

Napa Rose.

**How are you and your pastry chef, David, related?**

He's my brother. This isn't our first venture; we have always worked together. He's more than just a pastry chef -- he smokes our chicken, makes our bacon, etc.

**What does it mean when the restaurant serves wine in a "non-intimidating" style? Fourteen thousand bottles of wine governed by master sommelier Michael Jordan seem a little intimidating.**

We are wine-country cuisine. The food is written to go with wine. We're really looking for a perfect paring with food . . . not necessarily the most noted wines or most expensive. We want to find the perfect balance between the food and wine in a comfortable style and atmosphere.

I think when you eat something and you take a drink of wine, there has to be that synergy in there. And just as with food, wine is very temperamental. It's different and unique in its own way.

**Tell us about the ranch in the Santa Ana mountains.**

Last year was the first year we planted on the farm. We planted 400 tomato plants. We have 90 different varieties -- corn, squash, cucumbers and beets. I can go on and on. It's something that will help support our restaurant here by driving home our concept. But it won't be all of our produce. We harvested about 2,000 pounds of tomatoes last year in every color. We canned them, puréed them and froze them.

**Did Andrew Edwards have any special requests when it came to planning the menu?**

Absolutely! He is very involved in every dish and every detail.

**Do you two-step or line dance?**

Being around all that country music must make you tap your feet. I have dabbled in it.

**What dish would you tell newcomers to THE RANCH to try first?**

Our sweet-potato gnocchi with Petaluma rabbit and popovers with our house-made preserves. Popovers are hard to make in a restaurant. You have to drop temperature half-way through to get a certain rise in it. It is so comforting to have when you put our jam or some creamery butter we get from Sierra Nevada on them.

**What would you be doing if you weren't in this business?**

Not having as much fun as I am having right now.

**What advice do you have for those who might be thinking about a career in food?**

Think twice. It takes a lot of commitment. When you're not born with the skills, you have to practice every day.

**What do you see yourself doing in five years? Ten years?**

Workin' the RANCH. We still have the sixth floor to build -- our private-event space, private dining rooms and 200-plus-seat banquet facility.