

Toby's Coffee Bar owner has big plans for Rosie's

by **Jacoba Charles**

Six years ago while stopped in a traffic jam in Arizona, Christian Caiazzo glimpsed a car looming larger in his rearview mirror just before it slammed into his bumper. As his car drifted to the highway median he found himself unable to move, his arms curling involuntarily into his body.

The crash paralyzed Caiazzo for four days, leaving him with a spinal injury that abruptly ended his meteoric career as a chef. It also led him to Point Reyes Station, where he has spent the last six years reinventing himself.

Caiazzo owns Toby's Coffee Bar, a catering company and a stand that makes grilled cheese at the Point Reyes Farmers Market. Today he is in the process of purchasing Rosie's Cowboy Cookhouse, realizing his lifelong dream of owning a restaurant.

Early inspiration

Caiazzo grew up a gangly kid with a lawn mowing business in Suffield, Connecticut. He thought he wanted to be a baseball player, but when his parents left him home he spent his time baking cookies.

At age 14 he worked as a line cook at the local country club, running the kitchen for a month after the moody head chef quit.

"I spent hours flipping through cook books trying to figure out something I could make," he said. "The biggest thing I did was a seafood chowder. We put it on the menu, it sold out right away, and people wanted more. From then on I was hooked."

Nonetheless, he went to business school at Northeastern. "Honors students from Connecticut weren't supposed to be chefs," he said.

His life changed during a train ride from his job waiting tables back to his campus. In a flash he realized that he had to pursue cooking, and he dropped out of school the next day. He was 20 years old.

Eschewing cooking school, Caiazzo spent eight months as a line cook in Boston until a chef looked him in the eye and said, "You've come this far, now what are you going to do?"

Cooking career

Compelled by the cooking scene in San Francisco, Caiazzo drove across the country in a Volkswagen Cabriolet. He bought dress pants and a tie at a Salvation Army, showed up downtown, and asked strangers where the good restaurants were.

He got a job as a line cook at Lascaux, the second place he walked into. After a year and a half he applied at Postrio, which was rated number one in Zagat.

Caiazzo began as a pizza cook, one of the lowest-ranking positions among the

86 cooks in the kitchen. Within a month he was promoted to grill chef and within six months he was sous-chef, second only to Wolfgang Puck and Annie and David Gingrass. He was 23.

"I took notes of where everything was in the kitchen, and I went home and studied and read cookbooks," he said. "I worked as hard as I possibly could."

After two years at Postrio, Caiazzo continued to climb his way up the culinary ladder. He moved to New York City, where he worked as sous-chef at a series of upscale restaurants, including the national James Beard Award-winning Union Square Café. He helped open Arlo's, a joint on the Upper East Side that earned a 22 from Zagat and a review in the *New York Times* that called it the best brunch in New York.

"Crazy as it sounds, I wanted to try opening a restaurant in New York as a trial, since I knew I wasn't going to stay there," he said.

After a half-year stint as a private chef on the yacht of a vegan insurance company owner, Caiazzo returned to San Francisco in 1998. He spent his first year back as chef de cuisine at Globe, where he found his own Italian bistro style.

"It was all about finding the joy in simplicity," he said. "Trying to make stuff as good as possible with the fewest ingredients is kind of the Italian way. It was kind of trendy at the time but I felt like I was on the cutting edge of it."

Caiazzo reached the pinnacle of his career in the spring of 2000, when he was hired to start up Twenty Four, an innovative new restaurant near the ballpark.

The restaurant got good reviews, and Caiazzo met his future wife Jennifer Monin while shopping for ingredients. She was selling asparagus and artichokes at the farmers' market on weekends, while earning her doctorate in acupuncture. But he had to stop working at Twenty Four to let a knee injury heal; later the same year a second accident damaged his spine.

Path to Point Reyes

A cheesemonger job at Cowgirl Creamery, and the quality of local food, first drew Caiazzo and Monin to Point Reyes Station.

"We're both political, food-wise, and we wanted to live in a place that wasn't the usual chain-store town," Caiazzo said, adding that he had always wanted to learn more about cheese. He stayed at the job for three years, and Monin moved her acupuncture practice from Mill Valley.

"When we first moved I was freaked out because there was nowhere to get a latte in the morning, or to have sushi," he said. "But the more we hiked, explored the area and got to know people, the more we fell in love with it."

The couple got engaged on their first day in town, under a willow tree in the back yard where they lived on Third



Christian Caiazzo is managing Rosie's as the sale pends. Photo by Beth Babicz.

Street. A year later they were married on Limantour beach, and now they have a 4-year-old daughter Hopi, and a one-year-old son Gianni.

A new recipe for Rosie's

When Caiazzo got a call a few months ago from Rosie's longtime owner Pat Healy asking if he was interested in buying the location, the answer was an easy "yes." He has long seen the space as a good match for the restaurant he envisions.

Caiazzo's goal is to serve what he calls rustic Italian cuisine, made with food from local suppliers. "Using up everything in the fridge, and using everything around you, is more Italian than putting red sauce on everything," Caiazzo said.

Rosie's is likely to be unchanged until September while Caiazzo and Healy close the sale, transfer food and liquor licenses, and finalize menus.

A seasonal dish for groups is likely to be on the menu, with braised meats and greens served family-style from large earthenware vessels.

"In the springtime it would be a little lighter—braised chicken with baby artichokes, spring onions and green garlic with potatoes," he said. "Then in the fall that might change to lamb shanks with red wine and celery root."

Another dish Caiazzo is thinking of is "beans and greens," a variety of slow simmered beans—borlotti or cannellini or ceci—mixed with the braising greens that thrive in the West Marin climate.

Whether he is working with foragers who bring in huckleberries and sea beans or with local farmers, Caiazzo wants to focus on ingredients grown close to home.

"This can be a showcase for things that people have grown or collected," he said. "We want local, organic food to be a thing people take for granted."