



IF SEAFOOD HAS A NAME
IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY,
IT HAS TO BE

CHEF TONY'S

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN

When opening a restaurant, bar, or tavern and you decide to use your own name and likeness out front, there is definitely a heightened sense of responsibility to deliver tasty food, great drinks, and top-notch customer service. Just ask Tony Marciante who operates not one, but two Chef Tony's Seafood restaurants in Montgomery County – one in Bethesda and the other in Rockville.

"The buck always stops with you," he said, during a recent interview with the Beverage Journal in our ongoing series chronicling Maryland and D.C. eating and drinking establishments named after their owners or family. "If it's called Texas Roadhouse, no one really knows who [the proprietor] is, do they? But when your name and your face are on the front, you have to field calls for all kinds of things. Of all the people we serve every day, 99 percent are going to leave happy. But there's always going to be something that happens – that 1 percent – and they're going to want Chef Tony!"

A former Executive Chef for the upscale McCormick & Schmick's seafood restaurant chain, Marciante believes in keeping things straight-forward, even simple. "We've been doing high-quality



Tony and Sonia Marciante of Chef Tony's

Mediterranean seafood for 17 years in a relaxed environment. We're not a super high-end bar either. [Chuckling] We're not shaving our ice cubes daily or anything fancy like that. We have a drink called a Tony's Tea, which is a modified iced tea, vodka, peach schnapps kind of thing. We do a number of martinis, including an espresso martini, that are well-liked. We have a couple of gin-based drinks that are especially refreshing in the warmer months and pair well with seafood. We do try to be playful and have fun. Cocktails can be a lot of fun. People need a break from life, and they want to escape with something interesting. So, we try to provide that."

He continued, "Like our food, we try to keep our beverage service simple. We highlight the flavor of each drink, the freshness. I am not a fan of too much complexity in food or in drink. We use really good brands. They're not the highest end, but they are certainly not the \$5 a jug type stuff either. We also like to offer value. We could probably raise our prices, but we like regularity. We want our guests to be regulars and come back time and again, both for our food and for

drink. We'll make price increases where we have to, but we try to stay reasonable."

If you talk to Marciante long enough, you are won over by his reasonable good sense, his love of the job, and his commitment to his clientele. One of the biggest joys of his chosen occupation is indeed customer service. He stated, "I love when we create something, whether it's beverage or food, and the guest really enjoys it. Seeing someone enjoy your product and enjoy your environment, that's the best. I believe that when you get together over food and drink, it's a really magical experience even if it's a simple sandwich and iced tea for lunch. We're creating memories of some sort, and that creates a warm spot in my heart."

But the job is not without its share of challenges. At the moment, Marciante said business is going very well. But he is aware of certain headwinds blowing in from the near-future. "The workforce is changing," he said. "As a veteran of the restaurant industry now, I'm concerned about how many quality people will get into the business willingly and appreciate the amount of hard work it is. It's hard

work with challenges every day. As time goes on, I am worried that it will become harder and harder to find good employees."

He added, "There's also the technology angle. Back in the day, a customer would raise his or her hand and say, 'Can I speak to a manager? I didn't like my fish or my soup or whatever.' Now, people run and go online and don't even give you the chance to correct it. We always want to get you what you want. It's not



like we start the work day saying, 'Let's see who we can piss off today!'"

When dealing with such change, Marciante always believes in returning to the basics. He often falls back on counsel his late father once gave him: "He would tell me, 'Just because it can be done doesn't mean it should be done.' There is a lot of stuff that we can complicate our business with. But sometimes, you just need to keep it simple. I am a person who does like to stay on the cutting edge of things, but not to where it over-complicates things."

And, yes, the best advice he still takes to this day is "always remember that it's your name on the door. When you put your name on a business and you sign on the dotted line for that loan, you are going to a whole other level. You suddenly have to remember a thousand things a day. You go to sleep thinking about the business, and then wake up and immediately think about it then, too."

And for those reading this who want to open John or Jane Smith's Restaurant one day? Marciante advises, "You have to ask yourself, 'Do I really love this work?'" That's because owning a business is 10 times whatever your current job is. You have to know all of the jobs to be an owner, too. You don't want to put your business in someone else's hands, then they leave and you're stuck. And most importantly? I would never open a restaurant if I wasn't a chef!" ■



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