

Café Diplomatico Story

Café Diplomatico was founded in the spring of 1968 by Rocco Mastrangelo Sr. The café opened with the mission of wanting to connect with the neighbourhood as a lot of Italian immigrants missed their home in Italy. Originally the establishment opened as a café for people to stop and mingle, something that is common within Italy. It was usual for men to arrive at the café early in the mornings to have an espresso and talk with other men in the neighbourhood before starting their day. Yet, a café was not the Rocco's first business venture as he had previously owned a high-end Italian clothing store that failed because it did not fit the needs of immigrants at the time. Rocco is from in a small town in central Italy called Anzano di Puglia.

Rocco was a Sergeant Major in the military and had no intentions on leaving his post to immigrate to Canada. Although Rocco's family immigrated to Canada and faced many struggles starting a new life, in this case Rocco was asked by his mother to leave his post and help the family. The name Café Diplomatico reflects Rocco's military background. Rocco had a very strong tie to Italian culture and through his military work believed in Italian nationalism. Thus, when he moved to Canada his goal was to share the Italian culture with Canadians.

Café Diplomatico attracts a family crowd, and many old customers continue to stop by the restaurant to this day, even if they have moved away from college street. They attract a large diverse group of customers as they are open from 8am to 2am selling different foods throughout the day. This has also made them a hotspot for tourists. Interestingly, Café Diplomatico was the first patio in Toronto where espresso and gelato could be consumed. Throughout the years the patio expanded as the restaurant also expanded their offerings.

Originally the offerings were just espresso and gelato, however pizza has been added to the menu, as many other items, and has been their best-selling item over the years. The establishment offers breakfast in the mornings, and it was Rocco's little brother Paul that introduced the idea of having a North American breakfast offering. It was also Paul that introduced a Canadian section of the menu that included burgers, chicken fingers, wings, fries, onion rings, and so forth. This allows the restaurant to cater to a larger group of people. Their breakfast runs from 8am to 2pm and is a very popular menu. As a result of the new immigrants in the 1960s wanting items that were specific to Italy, many of the dishes reflected the region Rocco originated from. These dishes were being made at home, brought to the café, and sold through a hot table style. A few dishes served at Café Diplomatico include lasagna that has a layer of spinach, parmigiana which is made with eggplant and zucchini, and as s time went on, they focused on items North Americans were more familiar with such as veal sandwiches, panzerotti, meatballs, and so forth. Recently more traditional items have been added back onto the menu as the food scene in Toronto changes.

The clientele was drawn to Café Diplomatico through word of mouth as the neighbourhood was quite excited about its opening. They also attracted customers by asking people walking by if they wanted to try an espresso or gelato, while inviting them in.

It has become easier for the establishment to create authentic Italian dishes over the years as more local grocery stores are carrying good quality Italian ingredients. Items like tomatoes are imported from California or Italy, along with cheeses like parmigiana. Café Diplomatico uses Canadian mozzarella as well as pasta. They import from large growers in order to maintain consistency with the flavour of their food.

For the restaurant's 50th anniversary they celebrated by bringing back the old prices for menu items. For example, they charged 30 cents for the espresso, 50 cents for the gelato, under 1 dollar for the cannoli, and the pizza was 6 dollars. This occurred on Thursdays from January until the summer months.

The pandemic has affected how Café Diplomatico operates as government issued lockdowns have kept many places closed for many months. Yet Café Diplomatico has remained open and often has conversations with regulars through their window. The establishment has offered pick up and delivery services in order to survive, along with government subsidies. The menu has remained fully available. Café Diplomatico looks forward to opening up their restaurant fully in the future and to host their Euro Cup 2021 soccer viewings.