

Michael's Back Door Restaurant
Interview with: Michael Morra Jr.

Conducted by: Vanessa Sebastiao

Michael Morra founded the business in 1981 and is now operated by his son Michael Morra Jr. Michael was born in Puglia and immigrated to Canada when he was seventeen years old. Opening a restaurant was not Michael's initial plan. He became a hairdresser and opened a salon in Clarkson. Throughout the years he invested his money in the property surrounding his salon. In 1977 he developed the property into a small shopping centre. Within the centre, there was a tea and sandwich shop. Upon leaving the establishment the owners asked if Michael wanted to take over the business. Agreeing, Michael took over with the help of his wife and son in 1981. The restaurant's name is Michael's Back Door Restaurant because the entrance is in the back of the building and the restaurant cannot be accessed or seen from the front. Thus, the name represents coming through the back to enter the restaurant.

The original mission of Michael's Back Door Restaurant was to offer a fine dining Italian restaurant for the community to grow and enjoy as the owner believed Clarkson lacked this experience. In 1981, until 1985, Chef Giuseppe Morganti was the head cook for Michael's Back Door Restaurant. In 1985 Chef Stephan Waespi became the head chef and had extensive culinary training done in downtown Toronto. He worked at Michael's Back Door Restaurant until 2015 when he retired. The chefs that have worked at the establishment have put twists on classic Italian dishes, yet also provide classic dishes. For a while classic dishes were not selling well so they had to innovate and make creative dishes. They accomplished this by taking less well-known regional dishes from Italy and selling them in Canada, or by modifying it slightly to make something different. The most famous dish is one created by a Swiss chef, Stephan Waespi, and it is an angel hair pasta with lobster meat in a rosé sauce.

Due to globalization, Michael states there are currently more brands being imported directly from Italy or more ingredients, such as pasta, being manufactured here in Canada. This has made it easier to create authentic Italian food. At the time of the establishment's opening, a lot more was done completely from scratch, which is quite time consuming. Yet, the restaurant owners did not find it difficult to find ingredients that they needed to accomplish creating their dishes. The menu has changed in a few ways over the years. In the 80s lasagna, chicken parmigiana, fettuccini, and other dishes were most popular. Into the 90s things changed, there was more fish items and more variety in pastas. In the present-day Michael Jr. has noticed an increase of clientele ordering more traditional dishes. The establishment still offers some creative dishes like meatballs made from wild boar.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the restaurant business globally in a drastic way. At Michael's Back Door Restaurant, they had to adapt to lockdown orders by shifting from a fine dining sit down experience to take-out or delivery. It has changed their outlook going forward in terms of staying healthy to take precautions for everyone to stay healthy.

The restaurant is celebrating their 40th anniversary in 2021. Michael's father owns the building so unless he is kicked out by his father, he has no intention on closing. Michael's son says personally it is a tough business, and it takes its toll mentally and physically, he hopes to retire in 10 years.