

all in the Family

The Lambertis know what we're hungry for

By Adam Erace



On both sides of the Ben Franklin Bridge, restaurateur Aldo Lamberti offers escapes from everyday life and certainly from everyday dining. Positano Coast by Aldo Lamberti and Caffè Aldo Lamberti, just two locations of Lamberti's empire of restaurants, offer guests memorable experiences through their cuisine, service, and atmosphere.

Only about 20 feet above the Old City street level, the alfresco lounge at Positano Coast literally and figuratively exists on another plane. Gauzy white curtains billow cinematically. Inviting blue sofas imported from the restaurant's namesake Italian beach town beckon. Glowing lanterns give guests the kind of Mediterranean tan one earns yachting along the Amalfi coast. On these lemon-scented sky patios, the Positano lifestyle lives.

"I love talking to people, and I really couldn't do that making pizza."

—Aldo Lamberti

"When dad decided to renovate three of our restaurants, he hired an architect/interior designer from his hometown who did a 'Tour of Italy' theme, modeling the respective restaurants after Tuscany, Milan, and Positano," says one of the managers, Rosita Lamberti, daughter of Aldo, the family patriarch and owner of 10 restaurants in Philadelphia, New Jersey, and Delaware. "The concept was to make each very different."

Mission accomplished. Both inside and outside at Positano Coast—the line between the two is, righteously, undefined—evokes the stunning city by the sea. The hand-painted tiles are imported. The dark-haired staff looks like they are too. And the menu, focused on crudo and seafood-centric small plates, is inspired by the waters near the city the Lamberti family once called home.

Monte Di Procida is located on a little spit of land across the Bay of Naples from Capri and Sorrento. "I grew up in the water, on the coast," Aldo says. "I learned about fish when I was six years old." The love of seafood translates to his son, Pippo, the executive chef at Positano Coast and Caffè Aldo Lamberti in Cherry Hill.





Positano Coast incorporates several sustainable fish throughout their menu with items like the roasted Alaskan black cod and the grilled octopus with artichokes and rosemary pesto. Also, Pippo was the first to introduce Philly to crudo, the Italian version

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of sashimi, and now one of Positano Coast’s signature dishes. “Crudo was a tough thing. At first, people didn’t get it. Now, we have a lot of people coming in just for that.” Tuna, oysters, scallops with heirloom tomatoes, mahi-mahi with smoked mozzarella, Japanese madai snapper glossed in grassy extra-virgin olive oil and showered with lemon zest. Light and bright is the point of these oceanic harmonies. And Pippo always has his sister and father to bounce new ideas off of.

“It’s great to work with family,” Rosita says, “but sometimes it can be tough. The family dynamic can sometimes overshadow the business dynamic, but we’re always honest with each other. If my brother makes a new dish, for example, I’m not going to—”

“Sugarcoat it,” Pippo finishes for her.



For sure, this is a family affair, beginning when Aldo moved from Monte Di Procida to Brooklyn in 1963. His father, Joe, had come to the States two years earlier and opened Joe’s Pizza, and for Aldo, joining the family business was assumed. “There was no question of whether you liked it or didn’t like it,” he laughs. “It was a natural thing.” In 1967, he went to work at his brother-in-law’s restaurant in Long Island, staying there for seven months until his family opened a restaurant/pizzeria in Plainview, Long Island “That’s where I really learned the ins and outs.”

Aldo first came to the Philly area in 1976 and opened a pizzeria in Berlin, N.J., and later another

in Kennett Square, until returning to Italy the following year. He stayed in his hometown for nine years (having Rosita, 30, and Pippo, 28, in the meantime) and returned to the States in 1985, opening a pizzeria and ristorante in Cherry Hill. Aldo went back to Italy again, this time only for six months, and had a choice to make when he got back to Jersey.

“I had to decide between pizza and restaurant cooking. Not that people didn’t like my pizza, but they just really liked my food. I love talking to people, and I really couldn’t do that making pizza.” Ultimately, the restaurant side of the business won out, and has since expanded into a veritable empire.

Caffe Aldo Lamberti was the first fine dining restaurant in the empire, growing from 2,000 square feet to 15,000 square feet over the course of three renovations and 20-plus years. Situated on Route 70, Caffe Aldo Lamberti is a modern mille-feuille of glass and wood that wouldn’t look out of place on an Aspen ski resort. Butter-yellow umbrellas bloom on an expanded patio that leads into the first-floor enoteca (Italian for wine bar), both part of the most recent round of renovations last year.

At the enoteca’s epic square bar, Jersey businessmen hold court over cult bottles stored in a climate-controlled glass wine room; including the stock in the three cellars, the Caffe stocks over 1,000 different labels, accounting for the generous accolades from *Wine Spectator* and *Wine Enthusiast*.

Whether it’s a big, brawny Barolo or offbeat Falanghina you fancy, the kitchen, under Pippo’s direction, will find a suitable mate. Though pastas (like the sweet potato gnocchi made from a family recipe handed down through generations) and meats (filetto Gorgonzola and veal carciofi) are plentiful, Aldo is most outspoken about the seafood: “We serve whatever’s freshest. Pompano, madai, snapper, sole, grouper. The best way to eat the fish is grilled, with a little olive oil and fresh lemon,” which is the way they serve the whole branzino, expertly filleted tableside. “You don’t need much more than that.”

If Caffe Aldo Lamberti is the reliable flagship, then Positano Coast is the dazzling crown jewel. So no matter which side of the bridge you are on, you can always depend on the Lamberti touch. D

