In Memoriam: Chef Walter Pelliccia

February 5, 2015

It is with immense sadness that The West Coast Fishing Club acknowledges the recent passing of a dear friend and colleague, North Island Lodge Executive Chef Walter Pelliccia.

Walter plied his considerable skill and talent for 24 seasons for guests of North Island Lodge, many of whom returned year after year for the fishing, the fellowship that Walter was very much a part of, and by the Italian-inspired cuisine that he took great pride in serving. More often than not, guests would also be regaled over the course of their stay with an amusing and masterfully told post-dinner story or two about life in the old country.

Born in the Molise region of south-eastern Italy, Walter was a chef for as long as he could remember. “I grew up in a pasta factory that belonged to a friend of my parents,” he said recently. “My mother was a caterer and my uncles owned restaurants.”

From his family’s home near the Adriatic coast, he aspired to become a seafood specialist, but widened his culinary repertoire after immigrating with his family to Canada at the age of 15. He undertook formal chef training at Vancouver’s Culinary Arts Institute, but insisted: “It was just to get a piece of paper; I’ve been cooking my whole life.”
WCFC co-founder Brian Legge recalls that Walter was already working as a chef on the North Island Camp when he and business partner Rick Grange purchased it in 1989. After a year of refurbishing, it was renamed North Island Lodge and went into service at Langara Island the following summer. Brian also recalls that Walter’s extraordinary sense of loyalty and pride had an immediate impact on the business, and specifically on the quality of the guest experience.

“At the time we opened North Island Lodge, we also had plans to build The Clubhouse, and we challenged Walter to set very high culinary standards for both lodges,” said Brian. “There is no question he accomplished that. He took great pride in what he did and he was very particular about where he sourced food supplies and ingredients. He really put his stamp on The West Coast Fishing Club, and especially on North Island Lodge. He gave it a personality and an identity that has been one of the keys to its popularity over the years.”

From 1979 to 1986, Walter owned and operated Pietros on Vancouver’s East Hastings Street near the Pacific Coliseum, which was then home to the Vancouver Canucks. The restaurant was a popular haunt for the Canucks management staff and for legions of loyal customers from the east-side Italian community, who appreciated Walter’s commitment to refined old-world fare.

It was a style that he replicated with perfection to the delight of guests at Langara Island, insisting on using only the freshest seafood products from local Haida Gwaii suppliers and the finest cuts of meat that he personally sourced from artisan butchers. He was also keenly aware of his guests’ preferences, especially repeat visitors and fellow Italians, and he was more than happy to surprise them on occasion with game meats such as rabbit or wild boar, and always served in the Italian tradition with enormous family style side-platters at each table.

“He had a great rapport with the guests,” said North Island Lodge General Manager Todd McIntyre. “He was a very good story teller and had a gift for the one-liners. But you could also tell he cared a lot about the staff. He treated them all like family members. That Italian culture was embedded in his personality, a bit of a hard outer shell but the size of his heart overshadowed that ten-fold.”

“Above all, Walter was one of the most proud and loyal people I have ever met. His family meant everything to him. He had grandchildren that he talked about often, and even though he spent the entire summer away from them, he kept in touch constantly.”

Brian Legge also recalls Walter’s enthusiasm for the annual Fishing For Kids Tournament, and his insistence on serving lunch for all participants at North Island Lodge rather than The Clubhouse so that they could maximize their time on the water. “We assigned shifts for lunch,” said Brian. “Half the boats would go in for lunch at 11:45 and the next one at 12:45 and Walter would be ready for them. He really enjoyed the contact with the participants.”

Although he is gone, Chef Walter Pelliccia has left an indelible mark on The West Coast Fishing Club and upon those of us who were fortunate to have known him. His generosity of spirit and the culinary standards he established almost 25 years ago remain a trademark of excellence for which each of the lodges is famous today, and a source of inspiration for the talented chefs who carry forth his legacy amid the marine wilderness of Haida Gwaii.

We extend sincere condolences to Walter’s family, and to the very many who loved and admired him.
Addio amico, ci mancherai.

Farewell friend, we will miss you.

Be sure to try Chef Walter’s Salmon and Halibut recipes that were guest favorites for years at North Island Lodge. Enjoy!