

Julita brought his passion for mushrooms to the plate

By JOHN STEWART
Special

Obituary

There aren't many restaurateurs who can save for supper in the parking lot.

Sandro Julita could — and did.

"Believe it or not, he once found Portabello mushrooms in our parking lot," says Karl Griffiths, the luncheon chef at Piatto, the restaurant on Dundas St. W. at the Credit River in Erindale Village, which Julita co-owned.

"He found oyster mushrooms there as well. He brought them into the restaurant. We said 'You can't eat those.' He went into the kitchen, sautéed them and guess what? They were really good."

Julita, co-owner of Piatto with Tom Skrela since 1989, died April 4 in Toronto after a two-year battle with prostate and bone cancers. He was 71.

He had a lifelong fascination with mushrooms which likely began with picking adventures with his father in his native Italy. But it wasn't just a marketing ploy for the restaurant co-owner, it was a true passion.

As well as mushrooms in many dishes on the menu, the walls featured artwork depicting the fungi and for many years there was a small library in the lobby of academic works and recipe books Julita had collected over the years.

"He would spend his days off out looking for mushrooms," recalls Skrela, who first met Julita in the early 1970s when he was the maître d' at — where else — Truffles Restaurant in the Hyatt Regency. The pair worked together at several well-known Toronto estab-

lishments before opening a business together in 1985 in the historic Cherry Hill house near Cawthra Rd. and Dundas St. E.

"He just loved mushrooms," says Skrela. "He would disappear into the woods for hours."

While he often took restaurant staff with him to pick for the menu, none of them had the same knack for success in rooting out morels or chanterelles as the restaurateur himself.

"I'd walk right by a patch and I'd turn around and there he would be, kneeling down and scooping them into his bag," recalls Skrela.

"He would go for hours and hours until you'd had enough," adds Griffiths. "But he'd always say, 'no, no, keep going, keep going.'"

Because of Julita's hunting prowess, Piatto would often have fresh mushroom dishes on its menu before even the food terminal or specialty markets would have them.

In a 2001 article in a Toronto newspaper Julita's partner, food critic and freelance writer Cynthia David, described how he was among 237 contestants in the 40th annual National Morel Hunting Championships in Boyne City, Michigan, which is renowned for the variety.

After the 90-minute hunt, Julita captured the Non-Resident Men's Trophy with his catch of 61 morels. He took home a "clumsy foot-high carved wooden morel he clutched as proudly as an Oscar."

They got together after Julita used what David called the most unusual pickup line she'd ever heard: "Would you like to come mushroom-hunting with me?"

Ron Lenyk, the CEO of the Living Arts Centre and a long-time Piatto regular, says Julita told him that he would often have to dodge other mushroom hunters, who would try to follow his car to Rattlesnake Point in Milton or to Caledon where he frequently picked. "They were trying to figure out what his secret spots were."

Lenyk says Julita was "a consummate professional as a restaurant owner. He would treat customers in a such a way that everybody felt he was their friend."

The owners have created a collegial, family atmosphere at Piatto where staff "don't leave, they only retire," says Griffiths.

Julita insisted that the staff sit down together after each shift to eat. "He was a firm believer in that."

Because of his expertise, people who found mushrooms in the wild would often turn up at the restaurant, asking Julita to identify their finds.

Every year, he would offer a free meal to the first person who came into the restaurant with morels, signally the start of the season.

The Mycological Society holds its annual spring gourmet mushroom feast annually at Piatto. This year it will be on Monday May 12. It's part of a Mushroom Week that the restaurant holds each year.

Julita retired three years ago and fell ill about a year later. "It's a real shame," says

Skrela. "Sometimes life is just not fair."

A reception to remember Julita and celebrate his life will be held tomorrow, 1-3 p.m., at Piatto, 1646 Dundas St. W.



Piatto co-owner Sandro Julita died April 4 in Toronto after a two-year battle with cancer.