

Generosity Is the Most Important Ingredient

Chef Chris Ponte

Café Ponte • Tampa Bay, FL • (727) 538-5768

By Bonnie Boots

Generosity can make a day, even change a life. Chris Ponte knows this better than most. He's generous by nature, expecting nothing in return other than the good feeling of knowing he's made someone's day. What he didn't realize is that his generosity would change his life.

Ponte was working at a restaurant in a middle class Florida neighborhood. A steady base of local diners demanded little but basic American fare. One regular, an elderly man with ever-changing dietary needs, was the exception. He ate at the restaurant frequently, and inevitably requested special service.

In some kitchens, special requests are looked on as a disruption. Ponte views special requests as a chef's duty. "We're in the hospitality business," he says. "Our diners are our guests. I give a guest in my dining room the same consideration I'd give a guest in my own home."

Ponte made every effort to provide tasty dinners for the gentleman, even when all the fellow could eat was broth. The chef's generosity was rewarded in an extraordinary way. The grateful diner sponsored Ponte's education at the renowned French cooking school Cordon Bleu. This classical education was followed by an apprenticeship at famed Paris restaurant, Taillevent, and stints with chefs Daniel Boulud and Francois Payard in New York.

Ponte eventually returned to the Tampa Bay area intent on many a chef's dream — that of opening his own restaurant. The eponymous Café Ponte is now a fact, rather than a fantasy, but to the chef/restaurateur, it still seems like a dream. "To think of one day having your own restaurant seems so awesome," he says. "But once you have it, there's no time to appreciate it.

Running the restaurant is so demanding, he admits, that it consumes all his time and attention. "I never have time to step back and say, "This is it — I'm actually living my dream!" Ponte says. "Instead, I'm always looking ahead. At lunch, I'm anticipating dinner. Today, I'm planning tomorrow. Of all the challenges involved in running a restaurant, the hardest challenge is making me stop and appreciate what I have already achieved."

What Ponte has achieved strikes some in this Tampa Bay community as nearly impossible — selling challenging cuisine in a market dominated by chains. Critics warned Ponte before he opened that people in the area didn't support creative cuisine. Ponte has found otherwise. "I've found my customers are very food-conscious. They're well-traveled, savvy diners.

We don't have to explain every ingredient to them. They know food and have high expectations. My diners constantly tell me how glad they are that someone is finally catering to them."

The chef thinks he's tapped into a market that was being ignored. "I think the chains are so big in this area, so intimidating, that independents were simply too frightened to challenge them. I've been here a short time, and I'll admit the first three months were scary. But since then, our business has increased steadily. And it's because we offer high-quality, creative

cuisine at a reasonable price. When people discover they can have really delicious food for roughly the same or often less than they spend at a chain for bland, we capture them as our customer."

Ponte is pleased by his success in winning local diners, but what he finds truly rewarding is the number of chefs who leave their

own kitchen to eat at Café Ponte. Renowned Tampa Bay chefs like Ralph Sitero and Tom Pritchard are quick to sing Ponte's praises. And Wolfgang Puck, who's often in Tampa Bay on business, is a frequent diner. "Who would ever think," says Ponte, "that one day I'd be serving Wolfgang Puck? It's the highest honor I can imagine!"

Ponte admits being quite pleased with his career. "To make a living doing what you love is the best thing you can hope for. And this is a great time to be a chef. We're finally getting recognition. Because of Food TV, people want to meet us, know about us.

"Of course," he continues, "you have to be willing to make a lot of sacrifices to be a chef. And it says a lot about chefs as people, that they are willing to give up their weekends, give up being with their own family on the holidays in order to make the day special for others. It says that chefs are generous and giving people." And generosity, as Ponte has found, can make a day, even change a life. ■

"To make a living doing what you love is the best thing you can hope for ..."

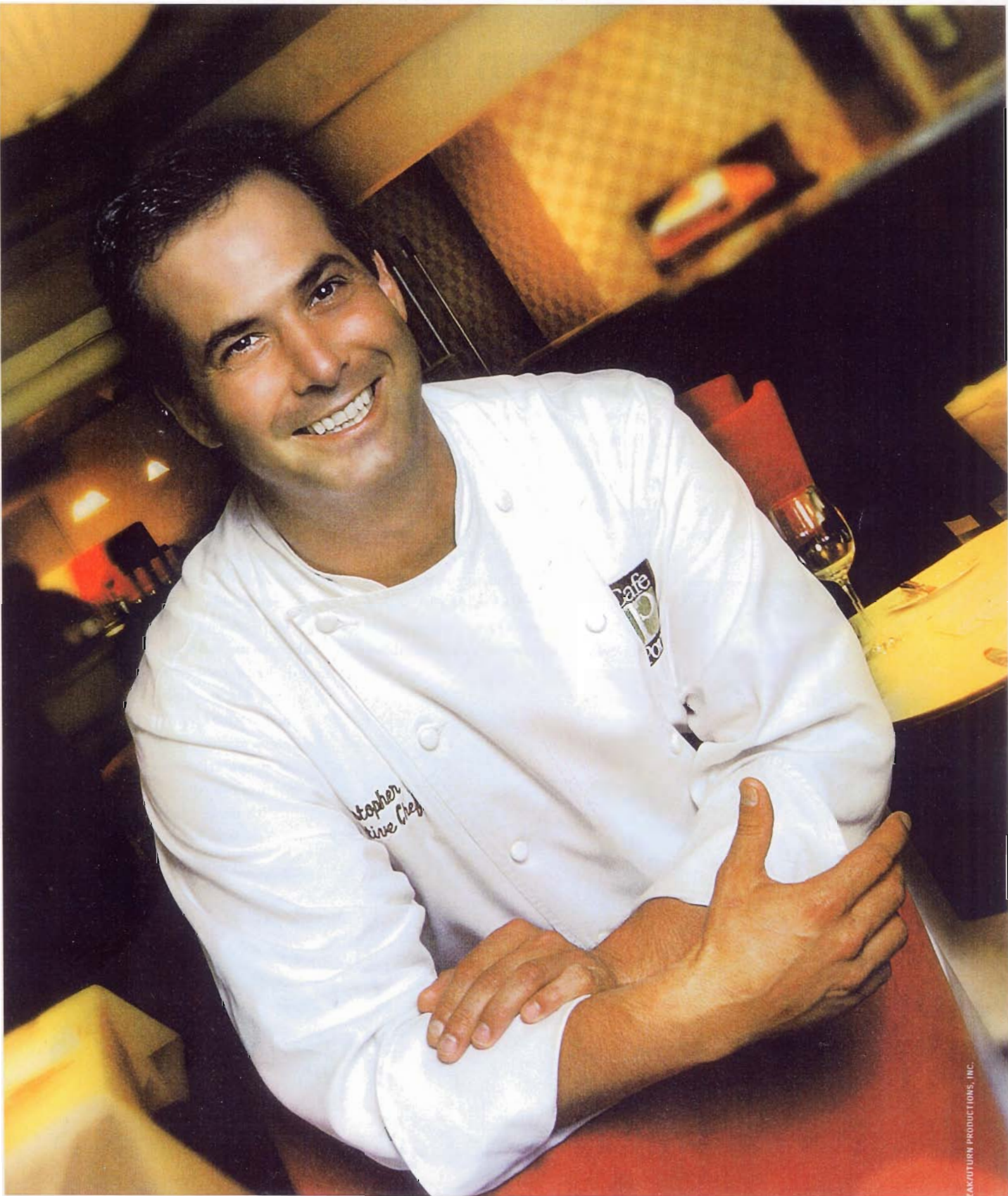
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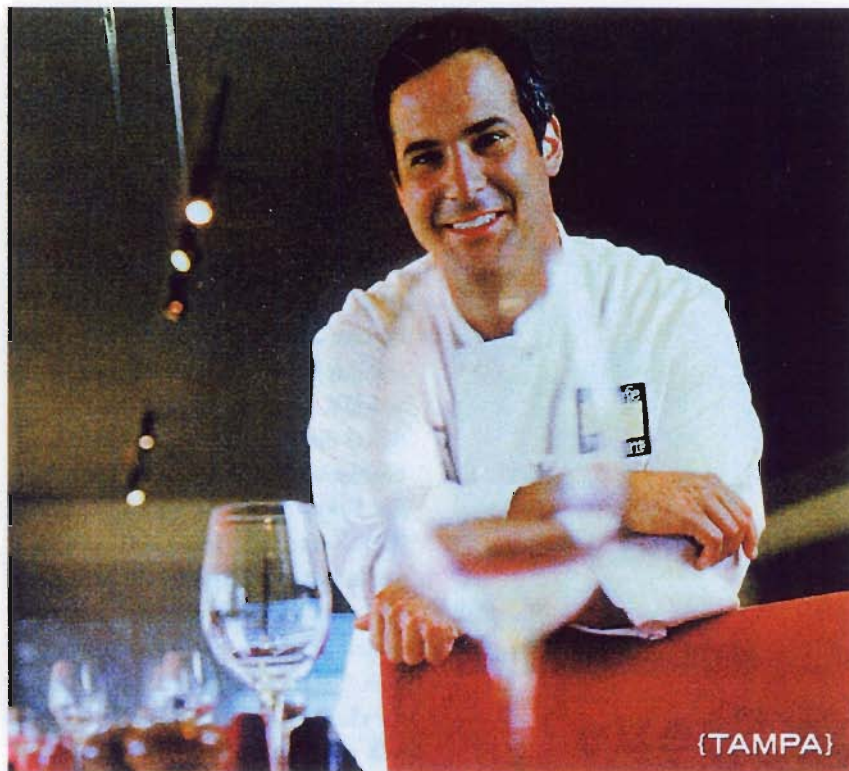
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Recipe for Success

THERE WAS NO WAY THE OLD BAKER IN PORTOFINO, ITALY, WAS GOING TO GIVE a young American chef her focaccia recipe. “So every time I was in Portofino,” says **CHRISTOPHER PONTE**, “I’d go get her bread and try to break it down. I made that bread probably 400 times, and I eventually got it right.”

That was in 1998, when Ponte, now 36 and the chef and owner of **Café Ponte** in Clearwater, Fla., was touring the world on a yacht as its chef. He used every port of call to add to an education that includes a degree from Johnson and Wales University in Providence, R. I., study at the Cordon Bleu, and an apprenticeship at the renowned Paris restaurant Taillevent. In the Azores, he learned how to keep octopus tender (smack it on cement, then freeze it); in France, he found the secret for richer mashed potatoes (boil them with the skin on to keep the water out, then peel them); in the Caribbean, he talked a chef into revealing his vanilla-rum sauce recipe.

Ponte opened his café in late 2002, combining a sense of adventure with the classic techniques of his training. Within months of the opening, he had earned a spot as one of Tampa’s brightest young chefs.

Ponte had pictured himself in a small, intimate restaurant. Instead, he ended up with a 250-seater in a shopping plaza. “I borrowed money from my parents and friends, gutted the place, put it together, and prayed,” he says. Prayer might have helped, but Ponte’s passion and determination clinched it. Anyone who makes 400 batches of focaccia before declaring it perfect means business.

Ponte won’t cut corners in his kitchen. The veal is locally raised, the scallops shipped overnight from Massachusetts, the herbs grown at a nearby farm. The results have been described by critics as

eclectic, subtle, creative, and infused with worldly influences. Ponte has a different take: “What kind of food do I cook? The food of love. In every dish we do, we put our heart and soul into it.” — *Paula M. Bodah*

5 To Try

» 1. Bascom’s Chop House.

A carnivore’s dream, this restaurant is known for good-size slabs of high-quality aged Midwestern beef. Clearwater; 727.573.3363.

» 2. **Island Way Grill.** Pacific Rim, island, and Pan-Asian cuisine share space with a sushi bar and a *Wine Spectator* award-winning wine list. Clearwater Beach; 727.461.6617.

» 3. **Marchand’s Bar and Grill at the Vinoy.** This romantic place for Continental dining is in a setting that feels straight out of Italy, thanks to its location at the Mediterranean-inspired Renaissance Vinoy Resort. St. Petersburg; 727.894.1000.

» 4. **Mise En Place Bistro.** In its sleek, sophisticated dining room, or on the breeze patio, you’ll enjoy flavors from both sides of the Atlantic as you dine on classic French and American dishes. Tampa; 813.839.3939.

» 5. **Oystercatchers.** This restaurant, overlooking Tampa Bay, focuses on seafood dishes and is known for its Sunday brunch. Tampa; 813.207.6815.



Choice of Chocolate

One of Café Ponte’s signature desserts, the Trio of Chocolate includes a chocolate-caramel tart, Paris tea pot a crème, and a dark chocolate sorbet.