

Those who don't know Jenna Arcidiacono wouldn't guess the gregarious woman with the pink mohawk and matching eye shadow speaks fluent Italian— including the two Italian men she overheard talking rudely about the people around them on a bus in San Francisco.

"I turned around and cussed them out," She laughed, silencing the insults and leaving the two men stunned as she got off the bus.



Arcidiacono (pronounced *Are-chee di ah coh-noh*) is the owner and head chef of Amore Trattoria Italiana, a treasure of a restaurant located at 5080 Alpine Ave. in Comstock Park. She and her husband, Maurizio, received the keys to the vacant building in 2009 after preparing a delicious multi-course meal for the property owners. Within the next year, the neglected space was transformed into a cozy European retreat packed with both visual and edible art that has been enhancing our dining experience since July 2010.

Amore's menu, which changes with the seasons and includes meal titles that are a party to pronounce, is full of creations one could imagine accumulated from generations of shared and perfected family recipes; but when asked if she is Italian, Arcidiacono laughed.

"I am so Dutch!" the former Jenna DeVries exclaimed between moments of perfect Italian conversation with a coworker and precise descriptions of places in Italy. Before meeting her husband and donning

her current last name, Arcidiacono went to Michigan State University where she earned a bachelor's degree in fine arts. After graduating in 1996, she moved to San Francisco to experience the thrill of living in a big city by herself.

"I knew no one," Arcidiacono said about her new adventure. She moved into an apartment located in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco, populated by a large Italian culture. Although Arcidiacono didn't speak any Italian and now lived in an unfamiliar city, she absorbed the surroundings of this new experience and appreciated the dynamic city's population. "It's a fascinating city," she said. "There's a lot to do and so much to see. I had many great neighbors who were awesome."

Arcidiacono got a job working at a small, 10-table Italian restaurant owned by two women who were not shy about patronizing one of their most valuable employees. Although Arcidiacono admits the food was amazing, her boss' attitude towards their workers was often condescending and discouraging.

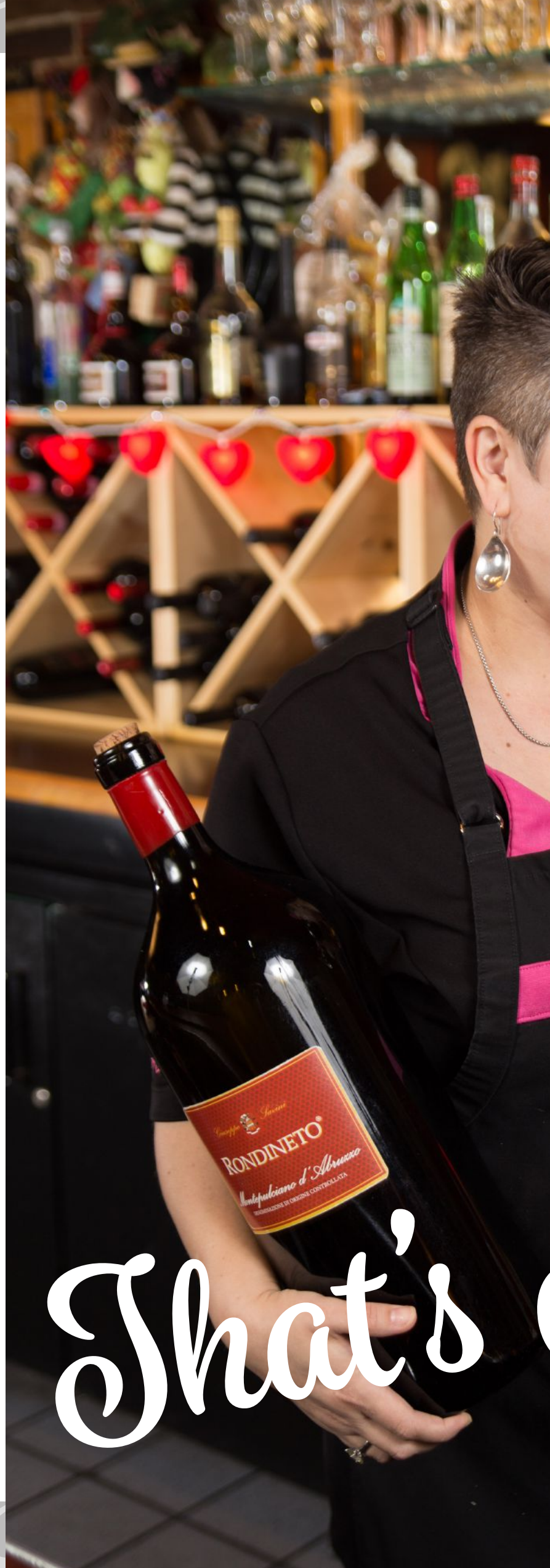
"I'm generally a person who is non-confrontational, so working for them was tough," Arcidiacono said, adding the experience as an ingredient to her dauntless personality. "I did learn how to stick up for myself and how not to treat staff."

Arcidiacono also learned a lot about small business while working in the eatery. She left the restaurant with better memories of the food than of the owners and got a job at a spaghetteria owned by one of her neighbors. Finally in an environment free of poor leadership, Arcidiacono flourished and continued educating herself through experience; cooking, tasting, managing and working multiple positions in the restaurant.

"Every single job I worked, I learned something new or different," Arcidiacono said. "I learned I was capable of doing a lot of things and was able to learn all aspects of the restaurant business and function."

Arcidiacono lived and worked in San Francisco for five years, where she collected lessons she uses today from the multiple jobs she worked and memories with the unforgettable community she snickers at when recalling past events. She worked at a restaurant called the Mona Lisa, which was managed by a Calabrese man who had a hobby of standing outside the entrance and bad-mouthing everyone who walked by in his native language.

One day, while her manager was partaking in his daily routine of insulting passersby, Arcidiacono's future husband, Maurizio, walked by with a friend and received his portion of the manager's badgering. Visiting San Francisco from Italy, Maurizio not only understood everything the manager was saying, but returned the attitude with an Italian cuss-out of his own. Slightly stunned that his shield of a language barrier didn't work in this situation, the manager



That's



Amore

BY BRI KILROY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY TWO EAGLES MARCUS

laughed and invited the men in for coffee. Soon, Maurizio was hired to join the staff at the Mona Lisa, working side-by-side with Arcidiacono. The two began dating a couple of months later.

“He took me on a beautiful whirlwind tour of Italy,” Arcidiacono said of the trip she and Maurizio went on shortly after that. “He asked me if I wanted to go and I said, ‘Um, yeah’ and, our first night, we stayed at Hotel Bel Sit, which overlooks Lago Maggiore and there is a castle right across.” Arcidiacono pulled out her phone to show the indescribable wonder of the hotel’s location. “Every time we’re in Italy, we go there,” she added

Arcidiacono estimated she and her family, Maurizio and two daughters, go to Italy at least twice a year. She even spent three years living there, teaching English as a second language. She and the students shared a mutual eagerness to learn each other’s language and, by the time she moved back to the United States, Arcidiacono could add bilingualism to her list of ever-growing skills.

“If you ever need to learn another language,” Arcidiacono advised, “just move there for three years.”

Now residing in Rockford, Arcidiacono manages to give Amore’s guests a taste of Italy through a full menu of authentic Italian dishes, conversation and the atmosphere of her restaurant. She and the Amore staff organize dinners daily that help people learn more about Italian dining and Amore in the best possible way: eating. The phrase “A tavola non si invecchia” scurries across the top of her business card meaning, “When you’re sitting at the table, you never get older.”

“Just bigger,” someone added, overhearing Arcidiacono’s translation during the interview. That earned a laugh from both of us and it’s easily apparent Arcidiacono uses the medium of food to create community at Amore. “It means that we are happy and enjoying each other’s company while fueling our minds and bodies with food,” she said.

It’s not rare to see Arcidiacono while visiting Amore. The chef oftentimes weaves among tables, communicating with diners and connecting in a way customers don’t always get to experience with the head chef at a restaurant. These special engagements inspired Arcidiacono and her friend who was starting a travel agency to organize an opportunity many of her customers dreamed of seizing. In 2014, Arcidiacono began taking a group of 14 people every year on a culinary adventure in Italy through a travel company called Onward Travel.

“Many of the people I talked to said it was on their bucket list,” Arcidiacono explained, thrilled to be in her third year of sharing the beauty of Italy with others. Last month, Arcidiacono took a group to Sicily where they learned about the culture and absorbed the flavors of the Mediterranean island.

Exposing travelers to Italy’s different food is something Arcidiacono is pleased to do, serving as a teacher to others. Coming from a city harboring places like Fazoli’s and the Olive Garden, many are surprised to find that authentic Italian cuisine differs from what they’ve experienced at the chains. Arcidiacono remembers the irritation customers felt when Amore first opened and the menu didn’t include spaghetti and meatballs. Of course, with creations made from fresh ingredients and dishes that allow people to discover the delights of Italy, standard spaghetti and meatballs weren’t sorely missed for long.

Arcidiacono is thankful that Amore’s location puts her in a prime place to source ingredients from its surrounding farms, giving her the ability to prepare food the way chefs do in Italy. “[Italians] were farm-to-table before anyone else,” she said. “That’s why places in Italy have different food ... because they use the farms they have around them.”



The local ingredients, the incredible dishes and the personality Arcidiacono and her staff bring to the local restaurant scene makes Amore a truly remarkable place. When you do visit and sit down for a plate of Pappardelle, you’ll go on an adventure unlike anything your palate has experienced before. You may even be reading this article while you do so, as Amore usually has a stack of our magazines in the building’s entrance decorated with a La Bocca della Verità mural, hand-painted by Arcidiacono in a successful effort to utilize and disguise some holes that were left in the wall from a previous payphone.

Launch into this month with the permission to eat and drink among Grand Rapids’ wealth of local restaurants, and be merry among the owners and diners you share the experience with. Learn more by visiting AmoreTrattoriaItaliana.com where you can indulge in the menu, wine and beer dinner dates, recipes, free cooking classes and more.

And remember, Grand Rapids; a tavola non si invecchia!