

[Back in the 'Burg]



## Viva L'Italia

*Alumna returns for master's to help run local business*

BY KATIE HUDSON ('10)

**K**atharine Corgan ('06) has only been to Italy once, but she knows good Italian food when she tastes it. So does the JMU and Harrisonburg community, and that's why they keep coming back to Corgan's restaurant, L'Italia Pizza & Pasta.

While completing her English degree, Corgan started bussing tables at Gervasio and Veronica Amato's restaurant, L'Italia, in 2003. Corgan, originally from West Hartford, Conn., eventually worked her way up to managing the restaurant several nights a week in 2007. During that time, Amato's Sicilian cousin, Vito Pellerito, was quickly working his way up to managing at L'Italia Pizza & Pasta.

Upon graduating, Corgan and Pellerito were dating and were about to take on the challenge of running L'Italia Pizza & Pasta. The Amatos were expecting a child and needed to lighten some of their workload. They put their faith in Corgan and Pellerito knowing they could uphold the L'Italia reputation.

"L'Italia was my only management experience," says Corgan. "Managing our own restaurant definitely turned out to be a trial and error kind of process." One of those errors came only a few days after taking over L'Italia Pizza & Pasta. Since business had been a little slow after New Year's, Pellerito told his kitchen staff to take the day off. Not knowing this, Corgan told her waitress to take the day off too. To both of their bewilderment, Corgan and Pellerito found themselves running the entire restaurant during a rush of customers. "We've never done anything like that again," Corgan says, "But, that's the best way to learn."

After a year of working with the restaurant, the two decided to change the college atmosphere. They closed for 10 days to ensure a smooth transition. Using a limited budget, they painted and wallpapered the entire restaurant themselves. "We also began to focus more on the food and aimed more toward a family atmosphere."

That's not to say that families are the only ones coming through the restaurant's doors. JMU athletes and coaches are often seen dining. "I loved going to the JMU football games, so it's always exciting when football coaches come in," Corgan says. "It makes you feel like part of the athletics community."

Some of the recipes, including the homemade marinara sauce, come from Pellerito's mother, who owns a flower shop in Sicily. Pellerito's younger brother, Ugo, brings his Italian culinary education to the restaurant as well. With the family help, Corgan and Pellerito have begun to find the perfect mix of customers. "It's very important that we're in a college town, and we know the students are good business," Pellerito says. "That's why it's important our quality of food is good and our prices are reasonable."

The mix of customers has been the best part of the job for Corgan. "Our regular customers begin to feel like family," Corgan says.

### Back at JMU to earn a master's

While she is completing an M.B.A. at JMU, Corgan says she considers herself to have an advantage when it comes to the Duke Dog community. "I remember how separated from Harrisonburg I felt as an undergrad," Corgan says, referring to the JMU bubble. "Since graduation, I've discovered the wonderful people who make up this community and how JMU has such an integral role."

The reward of completing her master's degree, Corgan says, will be

**Katharine Corgan ('06) may be young, but this entrepreneur knows every side of running Harrisonburg restaurant staple L'Italia.**

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being able to apply her classes to the restaurant. Prior to starting M.B.A. classes, her lessons on management came through the restaurant. But now, Corgan says she is learning the technical side of the job and how she can use those lessons to her advantage.

Alex Lefebvre ('10) knows firsthand the trials and tribulations the restaurant has undergone. Lefebvre, much like Corgan, started as a waitress and has since moved her way up to managing L'Italia Pizza & Pasta a couple nights a week. "Katharine's dedication and genuine personality have shown me such a unique example of being a great boss," Lefebvre says. "She's extremely professional but approachable."

Corgan believes the approachability factor mostly stems from one thing — a smile.

She not only greets her customers with smiles, she also likes to hire employees who have a natural smile. "While most people can master the menu and the whole process of serving, it's really impossible to teach someone to be gen-

uine and hospitable," she says.

Every year Corgan has to start a new search for those natural smiles because every year waitresses graduate and leave. "It's like Neverland," says Corgan. "Everyone stays the same age."

Beyond the change in staff over the years, the L'Italia menu has changed as well. Every Friday, Corgan comes up with specials for the weekend, which always includes an appetizer, entree, dessert and wine. Corgan has also let her creative side shine through by starting brunch on Sundays. All originally cooked and taste-tested by her, the menu features dishes from "Italian" French toast to a casserole named after her grandmother.

"She just loves what she does. She is always thinking of ways to improve our business," Pellerito says. The latest step has been adding the restaurant to the social networking world. By starting Twitter and Facebook pages for the restaurant, customers can know the specials before walking in the door.

"We have to keep working hard for our customers," Corgan says. "We want our customers to be taken care of and to be treated special." To Corgan and Pellerito, that's what hospitality is all about. *ml*

**'Our regular customers begin to feel like family.'**

— KATHARINE CORGAN ('06)

## Madison Events

APRIL 9-11

**Black Alumni Chapter Reunion Weekend**

APRIL 9 AND 12

**CHOICES Legacy Receptions**

APRIL 16

**Charlotte Dukes Golf Outing**

APRIL 17

**Richmond Friends and Pins Bowling**

APRIL 24

**Boston Alumni Chapter: Red Sox vs. Orioles Outing**

APRIL 29 - MAY 1

**Bluestone Reunion Weekend**

MAY 21

**Cheerleading Chapter New Alumni Happy Hour**

JUNE 4-6

**Madison Alumni Conference**  
[www.jmu.edu/alumni/events](http://www.jmu.edu/alumni/events)

AUGUST 14

**Richmond Crabfest**

SEPTEMBER 18

**Metro Dukes D.C. Crabfest**

OCTOBER 15-17

**Homecoming 2010**

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