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BON APPETIT

# How Tony Vallone became the classiest restaurateur in Houston



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Running a fine-dining restaurant takes the same precision as some of the masterpieces performed by Houston's major arts organizations.

"You have to have consistency. You have to have technique. And then you have to have delivery where you choreograph the service, the food and the ambiance," said Tony Vallone, whose namesake high-end restaurant, Tony's, celebrates half a century this year.

"Running a fine restaurant is detail work – fine linens from Italy, fresh flowers, real crystal and silver," he said.

Tony's has moved three times since it was first started by the Houston native, whose Italian roots lie in Naples. But it was the second move, by the urging of Galleria developer Gerald Hines, that made Tony's the fine-dining institution it is today.

"He wanted me to refine, to get better, classier, and he would help me with the new location, but it had to be really nice."

Hines' vision came to fruition. Tony's regularly tops lists of the best restaurants in Houston and the U.S., and has hosted world leaders, top entertainers, business icons and almost every sitting president since fellow Texan Lyndon B. Johnson.

Through the years, Vallone has expanded and divested in other endeavors, survived a bout of the West Nile virus, and dealt with the various economic booms and busts. But, Tony's never stopped evolving.

"Right now, I think, is the best we've ever been. The day you stop evolving is the day it's time to quit."

**What's been the biggest change in the industry in your 50 years of running Tony's?** Back in the early '60s and even late '50s, we couldn't get product. We didn't have refrigerated trucking at that time. There wasn't risotto coming in, you had to use American rice. The espresso Italian coffees coming in weren't very good. So we had to improvise. I used to have to go to a bait camp (in the Galveston area) to buy calamari.

Now everything's here, it's such a cosmopolitan city, it's a city of arts and opportunity. We're very lucky. But in those days, it was coming into its own.

**What did you cook in the early days?** I



"My favorite thing is meeting new people in this dining room," said Tony Vallone, whose wife, Donna, works with him in the evenings.

COURTESY

started doing pasta and seafood, which no one down here had done. I was doing stuffed calamari with crab and shrimp, which had been going on in Italy for centuries but not down here. I gained a lot of fanfare and popularity by bringing in pasta and seafood in the pomodoro sauces. So it was fun, it was creative, but it was a challenge because people weren't used to that.

**Tell me about your relationship with Gerald Hines.** (He) was a big influence on me. The first restaurant I ever had was a little mom-and-pop Italian restaurant, and he started eating with me, he loved my food. I cooked for him and served him, I did everything – a jack of all trades. And the time came to tear the building down – they were going to build the Galleria – and he told me he would move me to Post Oak but he wanted me to refine. He took me to Chicago to talk to his designers. We opened the first nice Tony's in 1972 on Post Oak. And that did very well.

**How has fine dining changed?** People will pay the money, but they want their money's worth, so with us that's never a problem; we give it in abundance. I think the younger generations grew up eating better food than we did, and they know

food better, they're more knowledgeable.

**How has social media changed your industry?** I'm learning social media, it's wonderful because it's different. Everything is available, people are talking quickly, it's changing ideas. It's not just about harmony of the palate, but it's about harmony of the spirit. When

you're in a restaurant, time should stand still. You come here to escape pressures from life and to relax and to enjoy.

**What advice would you give an aspiring restaurateur?** It's a hard business. To have fine dining at any level, you can't do it from a social arena or from a golf course or from an office in Cleveland. You have to be in the arena yourself, eyes on. You have to watch your business. When you go to a restaurant and the owner's there working, you're generally in a good restaurant.

**How has Houston contributed to your success?** I think hard work will pay off anywhere, but I think it's more recognized here. We are an entrepreneurial city. Anyone can make it here. I certainly didn't come from the best side of the tracks. You have to work hard, and you have to deliver.

**300**  
Employees of the Vallone Restaurant Group, which includes Tony's, Vallone's, Ciao Bello and Tony's Catering

**2 kg**  
Amount of seasonal truffles Tony's imports per week. "We always follow the season, not only here, but in Europe."

CLOSER LOOK

TONY VALLONE

Age: 71

Hometown: Houston

Family: Wife of 32 years, Donna; five kids and seven grandkids

**Where do you go out to eat?** "I don't go out that much because I'm generally in our restaurants. If I do go out, I go to Chinatown or sushi. I love Fu Fu (Cafe) in Chinatown."

**Hobbies:** "Travel – I go to Italy twice a year, New York five times a year. I love working, if I didn't work, I don't know what I'd do. I hope they carry me out one day with a fish in one hand and pasta in the other."

**First job:** "Every job I've ever had from the time I was very young was working in or around kitchens. I had a grandmother who was really like my mother, she was a fabulous cook. I used to help her a lot."

**Toughest lesson:** "You can't let your feelings get hurt. You have to learn not to be too sensitive with people, you have to be caring but you have to also protect your sensitivity."

**What's the biggest challenge facing your industry?** The scarcity of labor – there's so many restaurants in this city.

**What about rising prices?** We're definitely in an inflation. Prices are just skyrocketing. What's going on with organic eggs right now – prices are almost four times what we used to pay for them. Fish is up, meat is up, and I only buy the best. I have purveyors I have been using for years. I've been doing farm-to-table for over 40 years.

**What's the biggest mistake you've made?** I've made lots of those, I don't know what the biggest is. The whole thing is, when you make a mistake, you learn from it. It's not so much what you did, but what you do about it. I know this: Excuses don't pay bills.

**What's next for you?** I'm very goal-oriented, I love having goals. I love being creative. I have a lot I want to do.

**What do you want your legacy to be?** Pioneer – we had to break a lot of barriers in the beginning.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

TONY VALLONE'S RESTAURANT EMPIRE THROUGH THE YEARS

<p>1965</p> <p>Tony Vallone opens his first restaurant, Tony's, on Sage where the Macy's now stands in the Galleria.</p>	<p>1972</p> <p>Due to the construction of the Galleria, Tony's moves to Post Oak with the help of developer Gerald Hines.</p>	<p>2003</p> <p>Vallone sells three restaurants – La Griglia and two Grottos – to Landry's Inc.</p>	<p>2005</p> <p>Tony's moves to its current location on Richmond in Greenway Plaza.</p>	<p>2009</p> <p>Ciao Bello, a more casual Italian concept, opens in the Galleria area.</p>	<p>2013</p> <p>Vallone's Steakhouse opens in the Memorial City area.</p>	<p>2015</p> <p>Tony's will celebrate its 50th birthday on Nov. 19 with a big charity dinner that will benefit Life Flight.</p>
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NOTE: TIMELINE IS NOT CONCLUSIVE.

SOURCE: HBJ RESEARCH