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FOOD & WINE ISSUE

LUXURY LAS VEGAS



# IT'S ALL ABOUT PLANTING TREES

Michael Severino lifts the spirits of many through his philanthropic giving

BY MARSALA RYPKA

Aristotle said, "Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow-ripening fruit."

That is something Southern Wine & Spirits' senior managing director, Larry Ruvo, and special events manager, Michael Severino, can attest to. The two have been friends for 35 years, and like a fine vintage wine, their friendship has grown richer and more satisfying with age.

When first introduced in 1980, neither of them had any idea how intertwined their lives would become, or the extraordinary road they would travel together.

"There was an instant bond the moment we met," said Ruvo. "It's difficult to describe Michael's importance to Southern Wine & Spirits and Keep Memory Alive. His loyalty, creativity, leadership and organizational skills are irreplaceable. I'm lucky to count him as one of my closest friends and colleagues."

Both men are cut from the same cloth: second-generation Italians who place great importance on family, friends and giving back to the community.

"Larry's face should be in the dictionary next to the word philanthropy," said Severino, acknowledging his friend who donates the wine and spirits for many philanthropic events in Las Vegas.

A modest, soft-spoken man, Severino is more comfortable talking about other peoples' accomplishments than his own. Like, for example, UNLVino that Ruvo co-founded in 1974 with the University of Nevada, Las Vegas' College of Hotel Administration. The annual wine-tasting event has raised millions of scholarship dollars for students embarking on a career in hospitality.

Hospitality is something Severino learned about at an early age.

"My Uncle Danny owned several Italian pastry shops in Brooklyn, where colorful characters with nicknames like Joe Pineapple hung out," he laughed. "And Uncle Charlie was in the supermarket business. Both prided themselves on providing the best quality food and excellent customer service."

Severino always had wanderlust and dreams of leaving Brooklyn, N.Y. At 18, he enlisted in the Army to avoid the draft and was shipped to the Panama Canal Zone.

"I'm lucky I didn't get sent to Vietnam," Severino said.

Two years later, he came home and got a job working for United Airlines in its flight kitchen.

"I was excited because United had European-trained chefs, and in first class, they served filet mignon, Australian lobster tails and had bottle service," he said.

In 1972, Severino had a chance to transfer to Las Vegas, but he only stayed 10 months.

"I was young, and I adopted some bad habits, namely gambling, and my father had to send me money to come home."

Back in New York, his friend Mike Bryne hired him as a waiter, then as night manager for TGI Friday's restaurant chain.

Four years later, Severino returned to Las Vegas older and wiser. He got a job downtown at Cohen & Kelly's

Pub and Restaurant, a watering hole for lawyers such as Oscar Goodman. On his days off, he went horseback riding with Tony Costanza, who is still his best friend.

"We'd ride up to Sunrise Mountain and tie our horses outside the Sunrise Cedars restaurant. Imagine a kid from Brooklyn doing that," he laughed.

After a couple of years at the Maxim Hotel, he went to the Frontier where he worked his way up from director of food and beverage to vice president. He interacted with headliners, like Wayne Newton, Glen Campbell and Joan Rivers, who performed there and ate in his restaurants.

It was at the Frontier that he met Tony Bennett for the first time.

"I grew up listening to his music, so when I saw him standing at the buffet, I got excited," said Severino. "I actually thought he was going to eat there, so I offered to escort him inside, but he was looking for the back way into the showroom through the kitchen."

From 1982–1988, Siegfried and Roy, who were "Masters of the Impossible," dazzled more than 3 million people at the Frontier with their magic extravaganza, *Beyond Belief*.

"It was the most successful spectacle in the history of Las Vegas, with white tigers and lions, a vanishing elephant and a python," said Severino. "Every celebrity came to see the show."



Michael Severino and Sigfried Fischbacher



Larry Ruvo, Tony Bennett and Michael Severino



Bernie Yuman, who has been Muhammad Ali's manager for 54 years, and was Siegfried and Roy's manager as well, recalls having wonderful celebration dinners at the Frontier with hotel executives, producers, agents and lawyers whenever they signed a movie or TV deal, extended their engagement, or expanded the Siegfried and Roy Theater, which they did three times.

"The table at Diamond Jim's was always exquisitely set with a European flair," said Yuman. "There was no place on the planet with a better presentation of food and impeccable service. That was due to Michael Severino's talent and professionalism. He has been my friend for over 40 years. I can't say enough about him."

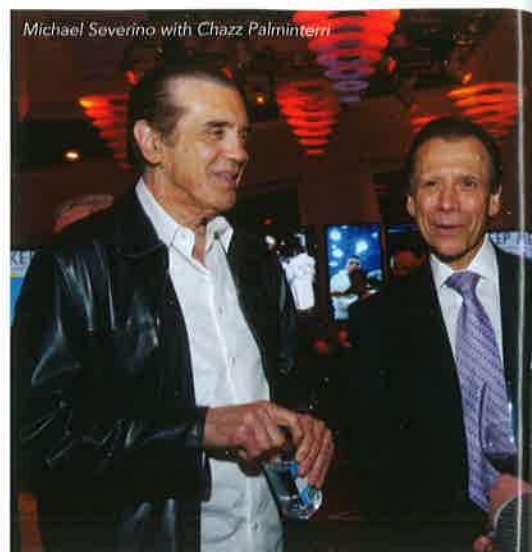
Severino worked at the Frontier for 10 years, until it was sold. Then he went to the Riviera, where he met the hotel's entertainment director, Steve Schirripa, who later was cast as Bobby Bacalieri on "The Sopranos."

"Steve introduced us to James Gandolfini," said Severino. "They both became great friends and supporters of the foundation Larry started years later."

In 1989, Severino's friendship with Ruvo deepened when Larry's father, Lou, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

"Lou couldn't work anymore at their family-owned restaurant, The Venetian on West Sahara, so I quit my job at the Riviera to manage it," Severino said. "It was a famous gathering place for locals and celebrities."

"You never knew who'd come in for dinner. It might be Vic Damone, Robert De Niro, Steve Wynn, Harry Reid, Brian Greenspun, the Fertittas, Bernie Yuman or the Goodmans. They came because Larry's mom, Angie, was the best Italian chef in town—even Sinatra had food delivered to Caesars Palace—but also because it felt like family there."



Severino managed The Venetian until it was sold in 1993. Then he went to work with Ruvo at Southern Wine & Spirits. In 1995, a year after his father's death, Ruvo started the Keep Memory Alive Foundation to raise money for research for Alzheimer's disease.

Fast-forward to the present, and Severino will tell you about the enormous amount of time, energy and resources Ruvo has spent raising more than \$200 million to build and maintain the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health, which is named after his father.

"Lou would be proud that visitors from around the world come to this first-class medical facility," said Severino. "More clinical trials for Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, Huntington's and other neurological disorders are conducted there than anywhere else."

Severino has been on the board of Keep Memory Alive since its inception. For the past 20 years, he has helped make KMA's star-studded "Power of Love" fundraising gala a huge success. This year, Tony Bennett, who is about to turn 90, was the guest of honor.


"I reminded him of the story about the buffet at the Frontier, and we both laughed," Severino said.

Rubbing shoulders with Tony Bennett and past "Power of Love" honorees, such as Quincy Jones; Michael Caine; Emilio and Gloria Estefan; Andrea and Victoria Bocelli; and Muhammad Ali, who suffers

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Michael Severino with Chef Daniel Boulud



Michael Severino with wife Denise



from Parkinson's, is beyond anything Severino dreamed of as a boy in Brooklyn.

Working in the flight kitchen at United Airlines or TGI Fridays, he never imagined he would become an executive officer of the *Chaine des Rotisseurs USA*, the largest and oldest gastronomical society, which was founded in 1248 and revived in Paris in 1950.

He also never thought he would become friends with top chefs, like Thomas Keller, Mario Batali and Daniel Boulud.

Or get to know celebrities, such as Chazz Palminteri, who has his own signature Sicilian vodka, BiVi; and Diane Keaton, who launched a red wine called *The Keaton* and hosted an event at Southern Wine & Spirits called "Women Gone Wine."

While in Las Vegas, Keaton took a tour of the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health with the director, Dr. Jeffrey Cummings, who treated her mother before she died of Alzheimer's in 2008.

Severino said education, whether it's in the medical field, or the realm of wine and spirits, is important to Ruvo. That's why he started SWS's Academy of Beverages and Fine Service.

The 1,700-square-foot room, designed by

SWS's executive director of mixology, Francesco Lafranconi, resembles a nightclub with a 41-foot bar, stainless-steel work stations, LED tasting surfaces, stadium-style seating for 50, and audio and visual technology that enables remote learning and streaming of a variety of classes and events.

During the 12-week program, students learn about alcoholic beverages from Cicerone beer expert Sam Merritt; Master Sommelier Joseph Phillips; and Sake Sommelier Luis de Santos.

For Ruvo and Severino, business and philanthropy often overlap. For the past 10 years, SWS has sponsored *Bon Appétit's* "Vegas Uncork'd." At this year's event, Nobu hosted a \$1,000-per-person dinner, with the proceeds going to Keep Memory Alive.

Severino is loved by many people, including his wife, Denise, and son, Spencer. In fact, the day *Luxury Las Vegas* spoke with him, it was his 14<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

Before leaving, he gave us a card with a Greek proverb that said, "A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they will never sit in."

Severino has planted many trees that benefit others. As Italian's say when toasting, "Salute." Here's to a great man with a big heart. ☐