

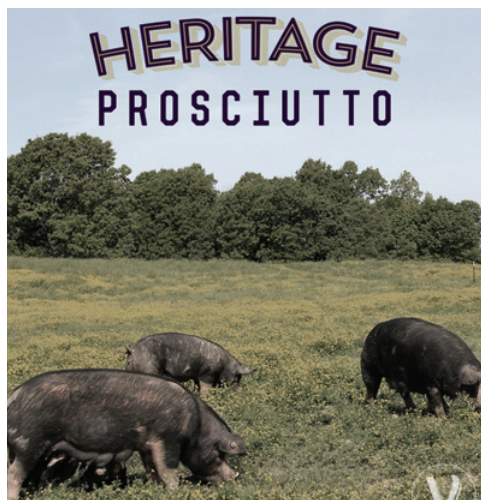
## HOUSE OF CAKES *cheese sticks achieve* PASTRY PERFECTION

You wouldn't know by its name, but House of Cakes in Park Ridge has deep Italian roots. Owned and operated by Gerardo and Marie Nigro since 1987, the tiny storefront is a cornucopia of cannoli, pizza, focaccia, sfogliatelle, cuccidati and more, as well as wedding cakes and a host of American pastries and baked goods.

Tortes, coffee cakes, donuts, cookies, strudels and breads fill their shelves to capacity, and all of their butter cookies are made with real butter. Seasonal favorites include pumpkin, apple and cherry pie as well as pumpkin and apple slices.

By far their most popular items are their cheese sticks. Often imitated and never duplicated, they feature an airy cream cheese filling nestled in flaky pastry and topped with powdered sugar. "People have tried to copy them, but our customers tell us that they never come close," Marie proudly notes. Available in regular and mini sizes, they fly off the shelves by the tray during the holidays and make a wonderful addition to sweet tables at weddings and other special events. (They're only 99 cents each on Tuesday if you want to stop in and give them a try.)

With son, Vincent, and daughter, Christina, joining their parents in the family business, customers will be happy to know that their cheese sticks and other baked delights will be available for a generation to come. (houseofcakeschicago.com)



## PRIMO PROSCIUTTO

Never one to rest on its laurels, Volpi Foods has added Heritage Prosciutto to its already extensive list of artisan salumi and cured meats. The company is partnering with family farms throughout Missouri and Illinois to humanely raise and harvest high-quality heritage-breed pork. The product is aged for more than 18 months under the watchful eye of Volpi's master salumiere, yielding a rustic flavor with a nutty finish that's sure to stand out on any holiday charcuterie. Heritage Prosciutto is available for both wholesale and retail customers. (volpi-foods.com)



## CHOICE CHEESE

Always on the lookout for unique Italian offerings, La Mozzarella has unearthed a cheese with a proud Pugliese pedigree. Hailing from the far southern region and dating back to the 14th century, the company's caciocavallo is aged in caves for at least six months, emerging with a thin, light-brown rind and an interior the color of straw. Hard, compact and perfect for grating, it has an earthy flavor and a buttery, stony and slightly picante aftertaste. Natural, smoked and di grotta versions are available wholesale. (lamozzarella.com)

## NEW CASA CHEF *returns to his* CULINARY ROOTS

After spending the last 15 years in corporate dining, Mark Triggiano is returning to his roots as the new chef at Casa Italia.

"I learned so much from working in the corporate world, but garlic and red sauce are in my DNA, so this is like coming home for me," says Triggiano, who served as both unit and chef manager for Motorola and Compass North America.

It should come as no surprise that his grandmother was a formative influence. While his fellow students at St. Cyprian elementary school in River Grove were muddling through sloppy Joes in the school lunchroom, he was feasting on pastina in brodo and veal scallopini in nonna's kitchen. "She taught me the value of good food and of making people happy through their taste buds," he recalls.

After earning an associate's degree from the Culinary Institute of America in New York and serving as executive chef for Sentry Insurance in Wisconsin for three years, he took over as owner and chef of Pastafina restaurant in Chicago, earning plaudits during a nine-year tenure.

He brings that experience and training to bear on his new position. "You have to know your market," he says of the family and club events he'll be servicing. "My mission is to give them the food they love at an affordable price." (708-345-5933)

