

ABOUT CHEF ROCCO WHALEN



Rocco Whalen, if nothing else, is wrapped up in the love of cooking: the idea and vitality of it, the doing of it, the invention and sustainability of it, the day-to-day enrichment of it, and, ultimately and significantly, the memory of learning all about it from his Mother. All combine as convictions he affectionately shares with regulars and first-timers who dine at his remarkable restaurant, Fahrenheit in historic Tremont, a scone's throw from downtown Cleveland. Rocco opened Fahrenheit in 2002. It is contemporary American cuisine, always in a state of flux and perfection. It was a hit from the get-go. After 16 years, it still is: it never fails to impress.

You may, if you wish, engage Rocco in idle chitchat about stuff totally unrelated to cooking, but not for long. Eventually the chitchat reverts to what he loves to talk about best: his ideas and perceptions about cooking, the world of foodservice, and the business of running a restaurant. What else to expect from a chef who says, "I was put on this earth to cook and I plan on doing that with lots of love for many years to come."

He does not stand still. Which is why, today, with Fahrenheit home to a packed house every day of the week, Rocco has emerged as one of the best chefs in Cleveland which makes him one of the best in the Midwest. That's not just me talking. Accolades and recognitions flow seemingly nonstop from local and national media. He is rarely overlooked. He does cooking demos once a week on a local television station; he has traveled to other cities to do the same. He explains articulately, intelligently, and seriously what he does and why and how he does it.

Gourmet magazine listed Fahrenheit in its "Guide to America's Best Restaurants"; in 2002 trade pub *Restaurant Hospitality* named Rocco a "rising star"; in 2004 he was a James Beard rising star nominee. *Esquire* magazine's food and travel writer, John Mariani, in his 2002 annual report of the best new restaurants in America, informed the foodservice world that "[Rocco] is a chef to keep your eye on." When Mariani was asked what he meant by that, he said, "it's all about effort and technique." Indeed.

Other recognitions? Lots, but two more deserve mentioning. *Crain's Cleveland Business* included Rocco in its 2013 annual report, "Forty under 40": its selection of 40 of the city's top business whizkids, all younger than 40 years old. There among the 40—among vice presidents, presidents, CEOs, CFOs, law partners, et al—Rocco Whalen, the publication's tacit acknowledgment that he is not only a great chef, not just a cook, but a savvy businessperson who knows what it takes to run a business from hiring to accounting to tracking inventory to daily expenses to the continuing fine-tuning of the product. Fahrenheit first and foremost is a restaurant; it is also a business and Rocco knows how to run it. Also, last year, *Cleveland* magazine named Rocco one of the city's most interesting people, a compilation the magazine publishes annually that informs its readers who, among athletes, artists, media guys and dolls, restaurateurs, musicians, doctors, teachers, whimsy-spinners, and other sorts, are worthy of our attention.

The people of Cleveland, enamored of Rocco and his skills, “keep an eye on him” fixing him with a steady gaze that focuses on everything he does. They can’t wait for the next Fahrenheit menu iteration (“the fine-tuning of the product” seem to appear as do the phases of the moon) to find out what inventions Rocco has come up with. Rarely are they disappointed. The latest? “Fahren-Lite”: new course additions light in calories and fat, a deliberate spin-off some say of Rocco’s starring in Food Network show, “The Fat Chef,” that highlighted what he did to overcome his struggle with fatness. He lost a lot of weight and will tell you he feels better than ever. He looks it. About the Fahren-Lite items? Rocco says, “I felt compelled to add them; after what I went through, it was the right thing to do.”

Whalen has evolved: from five years cooking with Wolfgang Puck at damn near every one of his restaurants on the west coast, to a stint as exec chef at Blue Point Grille when he returned to hometown Cleveland in 2001, to, 18-months later at the age of 24, leaping at the chance to open Fahrenheit, September 2002.

You may explain Rocco’s success by talking of his hard work and dedication and indefatigable hours working the kitchen and talking to guests in the dining room to find out what they liked about his food and what they didn’t. However, in the business of running a restaurant, each of these tasks is a given. It is the intensity and manifestation of each that has positioned Rocco where he is today. He has never lost sight of that; never faltered, never become complacent. Laurels he has received are backburnered awaiting the next batch of them, each dependent on execution, guest appreciation and reviews in the media. Day to day, he overachieves himself, relentlessly raising the restaurant’s bar of excellence as he brainstorms ways to exceed his guests’s expectations and, lest we forget, distance and distinguish himself from the competition.

Without that kind of unstinting commitment to excellence, his unrelenting perseverance in the pursuit of excellence, Rocco would not be where he is today. He is pleased as punch at how Fahrenheit has grown, overjoyed at the recognition he has received locally and nationally, all of which has led to an expansion of his brand at Rosie & Rocco’s restaurant—his homage in name and deed to the memory of his Mother—at the just-opened Horseshoe Casino in downtown Cleveland; at a kiosk at Quicken Loans arena where the Cleveland Cavaliers play; and at a couple of quick-serve restaurants serving pizza and meatballs at FirstEnergy Stadium, home of the Cleveland Browns. Absent Rocco’s extraordinary work at Fahrenheit there would be no expansion, no invitations to expand.

He’s not quite finished. Nor, it seems, will he ever be.

If you have absorbed all of the above, you begin to understand, as Rocco progressed from the cusp of distinction to the crest of exhilarating achievements, why the developers of a spectacular 21-story mixed-use high-rise, dubbed Skye (www.SKYEcondos.com) in downtown Charlotte, North Carolina, invited Rocco to create a rooftop Fahrenheit in the building. Charlotte’s first and only open-air restaurant and bar, Fahrenheit is located on the 21st floor. The 8,600-square-foot rooftop restaurant and bar opened in 2013. It gives residents and guests an opportunity to enjoy indoor and outdoor dining and a spectacular bar and lounge opens up to the stunning roof area where linear fireplaces offer ambiance to the wrap-around patio.

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