

COOKING

Up a Storm

with Steve

What has your summer been like? What have you been doing?

I've pretty much been relaxing to tell you the truth. I wasn't able to get away so I've mainly been enjoying a bit of time at home and going into the restaurant a couple of nights a week.

What's the restaurant?

Mark's Place. It's a restaurant the Roccas and I have owned since February 2000.

How did you hatch the plan to run a restaurant?

Well, myself and the Rocca brothers knew Mark and Nicky, who owned a pizza place in Coburg for many years, and one day we were talking and said that if we ever had the opportunity to go into a restaurant ourselves then we should do it – and the Carlton place is the product of that.

Did anyone tell you that owning a restaurant is the fast way to have a nervous breakdown?

(Laughs) That's why we were keen to go in with Mark, who had more than ten years experience in running a restaurant. The day-to-day things are pretty much looked after by Mark and Nicky, while the Rocca brothers and I come in and do a bit of PR and talk to the customers and work behind the bar and do our stints here and there, when we can.

But what about the shocking hours involved with the hospitality industry?

Doesn't that play havoc with your training and playing footy?

It's pretty flexible. Obviously when you are part-owner, you can dictate what hours you work, so it's good from our point of view. Whenever our schedule allows it, we try to pop in.

If I strolled into Mark's Place, what should I order?

If you want pizza, you should go the Mark's Special, but if you are in for a nice hearty meal before you go to the footy, you can get stuck into a nice chicken parma, with vegies or salad or whatever you'd like.

Actually I like chips.

There's plenty of chips. Heaps of pastas too, with creamy sauces.

But you don't eat those, do you?

Ah, well, as the boss I have a responsibility to taste all the food that is on the menu. (Adds very quickly) Actually, the dietician at Essendon knows about this restaurant and has complete faith in my willpower to resist those things.

How did you and the Roccas team up?

We met through our association with football and through a lot of the promotional work you do. We bumped into each other at different occasions and we'd talk, and we found that we had a lot in common. We have similar backgrounds in regards to how we grew up. Usually you don't get a chance to talk to other players when they play for the opposition.

When one talks to older footballers, they often say that one of the things that is missing from the game now is that you don't get to hang out with players from opposing teams.

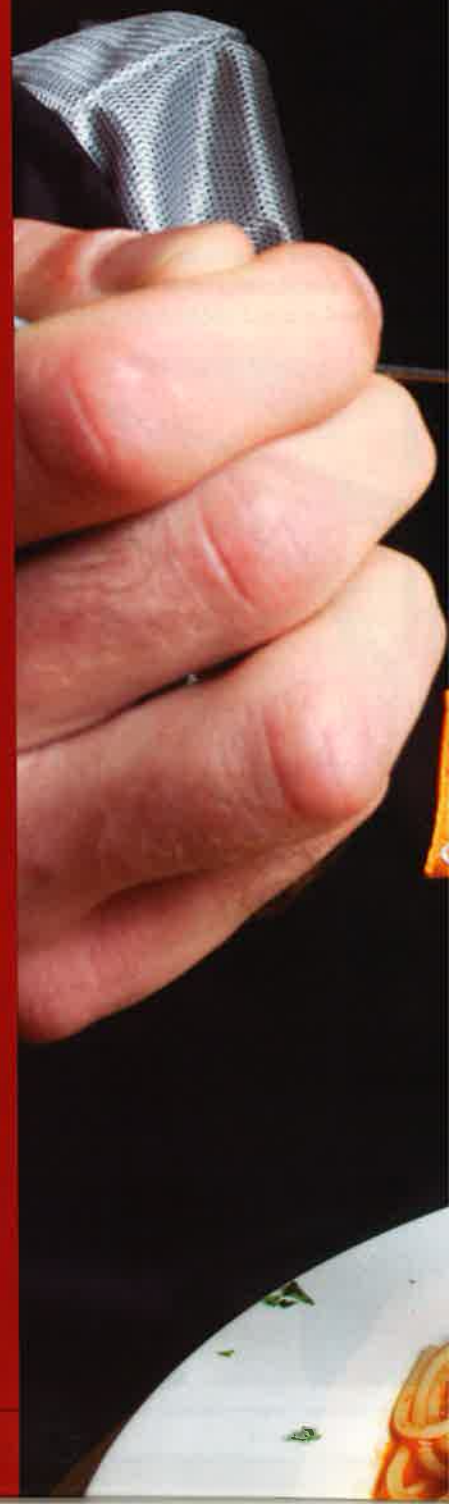
Well, Terry Daniher was a big one on that. He says that he always used to enjoy having a beer after the game with the guys from the opposition and also the umpires. He hates the fact that you don't get any kind of situation or forum to do that now.

Did you think of cutting any umpires in on the restaurant deal?

As part owners? No, they'd drive the customers away.

I guess you'd have Collingwood and North Melbourne fans as well as Essendon people coming to your restaurant. Can you make a broad, sweeping generalisation about the different temperaments of fans who come to Mark's Place?

The Collingwood fans are fantastic. When we first opened, both Roccas were at Collingwood so we always had a lot of the old die-hard Collingwood fans coming in, and they were good value. The Bomber supporters are fantastic too, and because our place is located between the MCG and Colonial, a lot of supporters are coming in before the game. And the North supporters? Because Sav has only been there one year, yeah, they are slowly building up their numbers.



**When you see the Roccas on the paddock, do you 'talk shop'?**

Yeah, I remind them to order tablecloths or ask them how the new dish on the menu is going.

Do they let you in the kitchen?

Initially... 'til I burnt a few meals. So now you'll find me safely behind the bar mixing drinks.

What about the cooking shows on TV, like Jamie Oliver or Nigella or the Gondola on the Murray? Who's your favourite?

I've watched quite a few of them, but I'd have to say that my mum is my favourite cook of them all. Her specialty is a top minestrone that can't be beaten. Whenever I go back home I know that there'll be something on the table. That's the beauty of having an Italian mum.

Given that your favourite singer is Dean Martin, and you now have an Italian restaurant, is it true that when the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore?

That's right, it is true. I've tried it out. Dean Martin is telling the truth – but only if the moon doesn't have anchovies on it.

This is a new year, with new challenges. What are you looking forward to on the field?

I'm really looking forward to a good, strong, solid year and having everyone back out on the park and playing with our full team and seeing some real excitement from the boys. The way summer has been going, it's been really bubbly and there's a real desire in there to show everyone what type of side we are.

Are you relieved or disappointed that somebody has come back who is a centimetre taller than you, and that you aren't the tallest in the side now?

No, Fish is good, Fish is fantastic. He taught me a lot when I first came here and it will be good now, toward the end of my career, to work with him again and see if we can create something special out there together. He's good, not just because he's such a fantastic player and ruckman but also because he's very good to have around the club. A lot of the young guys are enjoying having him around the place. Another bonus of Fish coming back is that before he was drafted I was the only veteran at the club, but now that he has been drafted he's not only the oldest bloke at the club but another veteran.

Not that the other players would say anything to you as the only veteran, would they...

Exactly. They know how to respect their elders down here. Most of the time anyway.

Special offer for EFC members in 2002 – on presentation of membership card receive 5% discount on bill at Mark's Place, 680 Swanston St, Carlton and 1/29 Fitzroy St, St Kilda.