



Fresh seafood, inventive pasta dishes, and favorites such as New York strip make Tony's more than the typical steakhouse.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TONY'S

PUTTING DOWN STEAKS

Tony's of Lexington has fast become the place for big steaks and buzzy atmosphere

By Jacalyn Carfagno

Tony Ricci wasn't sure what to do. After two decades of managing for Jeff Ruby's steakhouses, Ricci and Ruby had parted ways. Ricci tried consulting and considered importing olive oil from his native Italy, but he'd come to a dead end.

"I found myself without a job and basically one month's worth of bills left in my account and with a family of five," he recalled. Finally a friend said, "Why don't you just do what you're good at and open a steakhouse?"

So he did.

Within a couple of months, he'd leased a space and raised \$750,000, and in May 2010 the first Tony's opened in suburban Cincinnati. The customers — make that guests

putting down steaks



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Tony Ricci's emphasis on high-quality food and attentive service has found an appreciative audience in Lexington.

— came. Within two years he was able to buy the building and soon began scouting markets for a second Tony's. A friend who worked for the Cincinnati-based company that was the leasing agent for The Square — the revitalized, rebranded Victorian Square in downtown Lexington — invited Ricci to come have a look. It was love at first sight. The dramatic two-story space defined by a wide staircase to the second floor caught his imagination. He signed a lease in July 2014; construction began in October.

When he opened in a snowstorm in

March 2015, customers walked into a place both warm and edgy, with wooden floors and soaring ceilings. On one side of the staircase spans an immense bar that seats 80, while linen-covered tables that can accommodate another 120 fill the other side. Guests looking for a respite from the hubbub try to land one of the slightly raised, upholstered booths along the walls. The second floor, which seats 140, can be broken into three rooms for private parties.

Despite the opening-night weather and the inevitable clamor of so many

people in one space, Lexington diners embraced Tony's from the start.

Two years later, on a late-winter Friday night, the dining room and bar are buzzing. Black-clad servers zip between their tables and the kitchen, sometimes running up the dramatic staircase that leads to the second floor. Ricci roams the scene, visiting tables, chatting with regulars, introducing himself to newcomers, answering questions, occasionally consulting with a manager or a server. The diners are an eclectic mix: some casual, others attired for an evening out. It's the

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Tony's anchors The Square, a renovated block of Victorian buildings in downtown Lexington.

weekend before Valentine's Day, and some tables for two are clearly there to honor that holiday. Other larger groups just seem intent on a good meal and a good time.

That's what Tony's is designed to give them. You cannot be around Ricci for long before he tells you that his mother has a sign in her kitchen that says, "Always room for one more."

For Ricci, that means the dinner table is a haven where everyone is welcome, where daily cares and differences are set aside. He thinks among the distractions of modern life, "we've forgotten how to really enjoy the dinner table."

At his restaurants he is on a crusade to restore that pleasure.

It's the food of course. A supplier in Cleveland who "knows my specs" provides all the beef. It's trimmed and cut to portions in the kitchen, where according to hundreds of online diners, it's also cooked to perfection. Over three-quarters of the entrees served are Tony's



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Derrick's greatest influence is metropolitan areas. The top styles and trends in cabinetry for the new year would be defined in the popular mantra "Less is More." Clean lines, a neutral palette and a mixture of different materials to create a transitional style. Granite and quartz are still high in demand for countertops but we are seeing it mixed with stainless steel, or reclaimed wood to create a more "natural" feel to the kitchen. A well designed kitchen or bath should have the basics; plenty of counterspace, excellent storage, proper lighting and a timeless look. The kitchen today has become the primary focal point in a residence to evolve and grow overtime with the family.

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Precision in the kitchen translates to well-presented dishes such as, above left, a salad of heirloom tomatoes and burrata. Top, starched table linens add elegance to the dining experience.

special beef, whether it's the filet mignons — bone in or not — the New York strips — aged or not — porterhouses, or ribeyes.

Ricci wants his restaurants to have “an edge” to reflect his Mediterranean roots. His kitchens use San Marzano tomatoes from Italy in their red sauces. His pastas, including a pappardelle fra diavolo with shrimp, spicy tomatoes, black olives, and red peppers, or the bucatini primavera with seasonal vegetables and roasted tomatoes in a white wine sauce, go beyond the steakhouse standards. Sautéed Brussels sprouts are a favorite side dish, and a recent appetizer special featured tender young beets paired with burrata, a ball of Italian mozzarella encasing a creamy, cheesy mixture. For years Ricci's mother oversaw production of cannoli for dessert.

MOM HAD A SAYING
THERE IS ALWAYS ROOM FOR
ONE MORE AT OUR TABLE

PRIVILEGED TO BE HERE HONORED TO SERVE YOU

— ✂ —
LET'S BECOME FRIENDS



Tony's mantra — “There is always room for one more at our table” — mirrors a sign found in his mother's kitchen.

At Tony's though, the food is just part of the experience. “You're just not coming here to feed yourself. I want you to get away from life for a couple of hours,” he said.

Online reviewers extol their dining experiences: “Steaks are great and service was impeccable.” Often, they mention and recommend waiters by name: “We always get great service from our favorite waiter, Chris.” That's Chris Sullivan, the first waiter Ricci hired in Lexington. They met when Ricci walked into a Lexington restaurant where Sullivan was working. When Ricci returned a couple of weeks later, Sullivan called him by name and remembered what he'd ordered. “Why don't you come work for me?” Ricci said he asked.

Ricci is always on the lookout for people with the spark he wants. Mentoe Bonwin worked at a local gas station, and the two struck up a conversation each time Ricci pulled in. Now, seven months into working as a server's assistant at Tony's, he's glad he made the move. “People love to come here,” Bonwin said, and he loves talking to them. “For me this is a classroom” where, as he refills glasses and clears tables, he can meet millionaires and ordinary people or ask attorneys whether he should go to law

school before returning to his native Liberia.

Bonwin was among the wait staff sitting alert, pads and pens at hand, at a recent staff meeting. They took notes on the night's food specials. The bar manager talked about new wines and beers on tap. He gave a detailed rundown of the new boutique bourbons coming to the already extensive lineup. With distilleries surrounding Lexington, bourbon is, of course, a favorite drink and the wait staff must be able to guide diners through the offerings.

Next, Ricci got up to talk. Valentine's Day fell in the middle of the week so diners would be celebrating on the weekends that bracketed it as well. Later in the month there was a special dinner for the people who had collectively invested \$2 million to open the Lexington location. For the investors, Ricci said, “I want shoes polished and nails clean.” The challenge with first-time Valentine's guests is to “make them your regulars.” This is a theme with Ricci. Treat people right; remember it's the guest's experience not the waiters'; and they will return.

The last year had been great, and 2017 has started even better, Ricci told his staff, while cautioning them not to get complacent



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TONY'S

or ease up. "Routine is good, but routine without passion is fatal. Passion means not missing the simplest of details."

Ricci lives that passion. When he walks into his restaurant, he wants "a vibrant place. I'm looking for smiles on people's faces. I'm looking for interaction between the servers and the guests, interaction with my managers and the guests."

Beyond that good vibe, "I get into the nitty-gritty of it — are the music and lights at the right level, is the valet area clean, or are there cigarette butts on the sidewalk?"

Any guest at Tony's will meet him

if it's one of the several days a week he's there. When he's not, at least one manager will drop in on every table.

Ricci believes this passion for detail is what it takes to translate the demands of hundreds of people ordering hundreds of drinks and dishes into the welcoming experience he wants for his guests.

"My favorite line — control the chaos," he said with a laugh. "It's like going to see a Broadway show. You never see the back of the house; it's chaotic; it's crazy. Imagine, you just sat 20 tables in 45 minutes and all these checks are coming."



Server's assistant Mentoe Bonwin enjoys the educational aspect of working at Tony's.



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putting down steaks



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Though steaks have pride of place, Tony's wide-ranging menu also features seafood such as sea bass, above right, and vegetables such as Brussels sprouts, right, in addition to freshly baked bread.

In that world, mistakes are inevitable. "You're dealing with two animals: the one that's being cooked and the one that's doing the cooking, and if either one of them is having a bad day I'm in trouble."

And so his staff is drilled on how to handle it when a steak is overcooked, the pasta is cold, something takes too long. "Assure the guest that everything is going to be OK. I've got you covered; I've got it." People understand, he said, that things can go wrong; it's how you respond that matters.

Ricci said he always "had the itch" to go out on his own, but, like the food he serves, his long apprenticeship working for others is grounded in his family story.

Both his grandfather and his father left Italy to find work, enduring long separations from their families. His grandfather came to the U.S. before the Great Depression but returned to Italy while his father worked in Germany during reconstruction after World War II. Ricci was 8 when the family emigrated to Toronto. They learned they'd inherited U.S. citizenship from the grandfather's

time here and moved the next year to join an uncle in Cincinnati.

Ricci remembers "watching my dad being the last one hired, the first one fired, coming from Italy when he was in his 30s." Working for Ruby, the son didn't have those worries. "Jeff gave me an opportunity to raise a family, for my wife to stay at home while we were raising our kids."

But, like those who came before him, Ricci reached a point where he had to go somewhere new. Seven years and two restaurants later, he has no regrets.

And no regrets about Lexington as the venue for his second venture. He loved the huge space in The Square the first time he saw it. And he loved the location, across the street from Rupp Arena, a stone's throw from the business center and an easy drive from Keeneland.

But Ricci said what he really loves is the clientele. "I truly believe that kitchens in Lexingtonians' homes are there for resale value only. I have never seen a town go out for dinner as often as they do here." **KM**