A taste for community

**DOC GROUP** Applying the best from Italian and Australian cultures, DOC has ‘reset’ pizzeria expectations in Melbourne, Australia’s food capital.

DOC founder Tony Nicolini is unapologetic for his love of all things Italian. From DOC’s headquarters in Carlton, he goes as far as admitting that he would have trouble deciding whether to back the Azzurri or the Socceroos... should they ever meet in a World Cup Final.

“I may have been born and raised as an Australian, but I think and live in Italian,” he explains over a midday espresso. “I am free to express myself culturally and this is what I love about Australia.”

It is this obsession with preserving ‘the Italian way’ that underpins the DOC empire, cementing its reputation as one of the most heartfelt and authentic champions of Italian food culture in modern Melbourne.

**A passion passed down**

Spending time growing up between Italy and Australia, Tony developed his mutual admiration for both cultures early on. Watching every step his father took as one of the early pioneers of pizza in Australia, he took the best from both countries – an approach that would eventually shape the years to come.

Tony’s success story began in 1997 when he, alongside his father, Vito, opened his first restaurant – Pizza Espresso – in Templestowe Lower, in Melbourne’s east. Immigrating to Australia from central Italy’s Abruzzo, Vito was no stranger behind the pizza oven, opening his first pizzeria on Queensland’s Gold Coast in 1969. Tony has fond memories of that time, and was honoured when, almost three decades later, Vito agreed to join him in his venture. Working side by side, the father-and-son duo revolutionised the pizza experience, educating their clientele in the simple pleasures of authentic pizza – one slice at a time.

“...reset the gastronomic expectations of pizza eaters in Melbourne. When I opened Pizza Espresso, it was about helping people to understand that Italian pizza had nothing to do with those thick, doughy pizzas piled with matchstick ham.”

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**AT A GLANCE**

**Company:** DOC Group

**Directors:** Robert De Santis, Michael Costanzo

**Founder and general manager:** Tony Nicolini

**Industry:** hospitality

**Year established:** 1997

**Operating sites:** 5

**Employees:** 150

**Civic honours and community roles:**
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- Recognised Australian soccer base for the Juventus Football Club, Turin; patron, Italian Film Festival; advocate and donor, Starlight Children’s Foundation
Though challenging at first, before long Pizza Espresso had captured the attention of serious foodies, and in 2002 it was recognised as Melbourne's premier pizzeria by *The Age Epicure* and *The Age Cheap Eats Guide*. Countless enthusiastic reviews followed.

"We developed a following that we used to call the 'Pizzarazzi'. They were people that understood what authentic Italian pizza should be, and were willing to travel half an hour out of the city to eat it. It was hard at first, but good pizza news travelled fast. Today Melbourne's eaters are far more discerning: they have come to expect quality and are far more demanding of it."

Spurred by the success of Pizza Espresso, Tony sold the business and turned to coffee. He set up his espresso bar and pizza-by-the-slice operation in Lygon Street, Melbourne's

Committed to encapsulating
*Denominazione di Origine Controllata* –
Tony Nicolini (right) with salumiere, Giovanni Peluso.
Italian heartland, guided by a philosophy of ‘simplicity’. “I had a crazy notion that life would be quieter, simpler, if I ran a cafe,” Tony explains.

“Coffee is a way of life for Italians. Every piazza in Italy has a place where people come to congregate, and that’s what we created … a place for people to get together.”

In a city where drinking coffee is akin to breathing, Tony’s espresso bar and pizza-by-the-slice concept was a success. A second espresso bar was launched in the city, but before long the lure of his past and rich pizza history was too strong. This time, with the backing of restaurateur and friend Robert de Santis and salumiere Giovanni Peluso (in the background) at DOC Delicatessan in Carlton.

Preserving the Italian way

Renaming his businesses under the DOC label was a major decision, but one filled with promise and ambition. In Italy, DOC stands for Denominazione di Origine Controllata – a set of Italian laws enacted in 1955 to protect the names, origins, production methods and characteristics of Italy’s most loved and revered traditional foods and wine. Half a world away, Tony is equally committed to encapsulating those traditions he grew up with, and making them the hero of his business.

“Although we only do pizza and pasta, it is exercised with a lot of detail and an enormous amount of restraint. The key to our menu is simplicity, and when you pare things back, the ingredients you use become incredibly important.”

Provenance is key, and behind every product that is used at DOC is a unique story. Like an art curator, Tony goes to great lengths to find the perfect products to add to the collection, travelling regularly to Italy and abroad to meet with producers, and sourcing exclusive supplies for the menu.

“On my trips to Italy I actively seek out artisans who are upholding these old traditions, and I make it my duty to collate and tell these stories through DOC,” he says.
Tony describes the DOC vision as a marriage between preservation and innovation.

"I have a profound respect for the old-school way of doing things. There are some gastronomic unions that should never be tampered with – pizza margherita and spaghetti al pomodoro are two of my all-time favourite meals. They are simple, but in many ways they are also the hardest things to get right because there is absolutely nowhere to hide with those ingredients. For that reason we need to draw on the expertise of our chefs to showcase those amazing products that we find – whether it be a great tomato, an organic extra virgin olive oil or unique truffle oil. I want to push the boundaries and develop a new approach to Italian gastronomy."

Charming the clientele
A good meal is nothing without good service, and a large part of DOC’s charisma comes from its cohort of talented Italian chefs, baristas and waiting staff.

“We employ and sponsor a lot of Italians but it’s not about employing Italians for the sake of employing Italians; we employ young professionally trained Italians that understand the art of hospitality and they help train our local staff in the Italian way,” Tony says. “It has been very rewarding for me over the years to see young kids arrive, often with very limited English, and watch them grow and develop. Some have married, some have become Australian citizens, and many are still working for me.”

Every staff member, local or Italian, is trained in ‘the DOC way’ when they arrive, but that is not to mean that a little charm and personality does not go a long way.

“It is critical that our staff understands the philosophy behind DOC,” Tony says. “It’s quite simple: every time someone walks through the door, I want my staff to charm them. I want them to use their personality, their intellect and their generous nature to make every person who walks through the door feel like a part of the family.”

Sadly, Vito passed away in 2013; however, Tony believes he would be proud of what his son has achieved.

“Working with Dad was a great time in my life. In many ways my vision reflects his vision,” he says. “We used to get together for a coffee at 3 pm every day, and since his passing I continue to celebrate his legacy on a daily basis. My hope for the future is to be able to do the same thing with my own kids.”

“it was important to have the right backers, enabling me to execute my vision and grow to where DOC is today.”

– Tony Nicolini