



Steve Martorano at work in the kitchen

# MARTORANO ON THE MOVE

Chef and Philly native Steve Martorano expands his culinary empire. BY ADAM ERACE

JUST OFF A1A on Florida's Atlantic coast, you'll find a slice of home tucked into an unassuming shopping center. The writing on the front door at Café Martorano says it all: SOUTH PHILLY ITALIAN-AMERICAN COOKING.

Mention Café Martorano to those who've been there and you'll be met with sly smiles, wistful sighs and outlandish tales of three-hour waits, epic meatballs and an ill-advised attempt to beat down a flaming bread basket. Not that that ever happened to me...

Years ago, a chef I was working for tipped me off about Café Martorano. He pulled me aside and whispered the address, secretively, like he was telling me where to score drugs. What I didn't know yet was that Martorano's lemony lobster Francese and lush yolk-covered bucatini carbonara were just as addictive.

"There are about 18 places trying to do what I'm doing," says chef and owner Steve Martorano via cell phone, after a stint on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* that became a six-day stay, cooking for Kimmel in L.A. "But they still can't copy us."

He opened his Fort Lauderdale flagship restaurant 16 years ago. Here, as well as at Martorano's location at the Rio hotel in Las Vegas, the food is only half the experience. Flat-screen TVs surrounding the sleek space play movies while music blares. Before you know it, you'll be dancing tableside to the beats of Evelyn "Champagne" King and Barry White.

Martorano, 52, who grew up at Seventh and Fitzwater, developed a knack early on for fusing food, movies and music. "My dad had a bar in the eighties, and my cousin owned the first video-rental store in South Philly," he recalls. "I thought it was a great idea to host a *Godfather* night, but my dad said nobody would want to watch a movie in a bar. Eventually he gave in, and it was such a hit that he asked what movie we were going to show the following week."

Earlier this year, Martorano toyed with the idea of changing his format, offering small plates on the menu instead of the traditional family-style service. After only two weeks and a flood of customer complaints, he switched back. "People say if it's not broke, don't fix it," he shrugs.

Now, Martorano is further expanding the successful formula, with plans for an additional location in Florida at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino. He's also written an autobiography, set to come out in January, which chronicles his rise to fame from running a one-man sandwich shop from his mother's basement to becoming a nationally renowned restaurateur. 3343 E. Oakland Park Blvd., Fort Lauderdale, FL, 954-561-2554; [cafemartorano.com](http://cafemartorano.com) ■