

Q&A with Chef Paul Bartolotta

Written by Samantha Stull



Chef Paul Bartolotta is a two-time James Beard Award-winning chef from Wauwatosa, Wis. He trained in both Italy and France, and later returned to the United States, where he opened a restaurant with his brother. The two of them now operate a restaurant group, The Bartolotta Restaurants, with 11 different eateries. Bartolotta will be leading the all-star chefs panel at azcentral Food & Wine Experience on Sunday, Nov. 8 outside of Scottsdale Fashion Square.

AFM: How did you get involved with azcentral Food & Wine Experience?

PB: A good friend of mine in Chicago had friends in the organizing committee, so he asked me if I would like to be involved. I generally limit the amount of events I do per year because family and restaurants come first for me; I am a family guy. But I have family in Arizona and it is the perfect chance and perfect excuse to come out.

AFM: What should attendees expect at your all-star chefs panel?

PB: This panel will allow a bird's-eye view into our world. People don't have the most realistic view of our world and how challenging and demanding it is; there's a lot that goes into it. There are a lot of things we can talk about to give consumers a better insight into the realities of our world. There's so much on the Food Network with food demos and recipes, and I find people more wanting to know how we got started, what we love and hate, how we balance life and work, where we got our training, etc.

AFM: What are you most excited for about the event?

PB: I'm excited to interact and cook with a group of chefs I don't know, and I will also get the chance to cook with and see some old friends as well. It will also be nice to get to meet new people curious about our business, whether professional or consumer. It's a good chance to get my name and brand out there. Plus, I know it's an inaugural year for this event, and it's already extremely well supported. Based on the support behind it, and research I've done, it sounds like it will be a great year.

AFM: Have you spent any time in Arizona?

PB: I've done some chef collaborative retreats there. I am friends with some chefs there, and I'm curious to meet a lot of the young up and coming chefs in the area.

AFM: How did you get your start in the kitchen?

PB: When I needed money to take girls on dates, I started working in a restaurant and I just loved the restaurant business. I loved camaraderie and teamwork. Then I started meeting people, and opening doors. Then I did about seven and a half years of training in Italy and a little more than a year in France.

AFM: How did the restaurant group that you own with your brother get its start?

PB: We started the company 22 years ago after I had moved back to the Midwest and gotten my first food award. Our first restaurant was in our hometown and with a single loan we were up and running, and every year we did a new restaurant. I would bring my young chefs and protégés and move them to Milwaukee to train. I looked at it as a place to utilize my skills as a chef owner rather than a chef cook, and prompt them so it's not all about me. I always started in the background because it was about the craft, so I created a life to allow myself selfishly to continue traveling and continue learning, because for me it's about the team.

AFM: What is your career highlight?

PB: Probably some of the greatest pleasures I've had, I would have to say, are the professionalism and level of intimacy, sincerity and authenticity that I have in relationships with people that I work with. It's a team sport and you're only as good as the people that work with you.