

OUTSIDE THE KITCHEN

**Chef/Owners:** Sandra and Roger Cappucci

**Residence:** Mamaroneck

**Food Business:** Porta Napoli, Harrison

**G**rowing up in Harrison, Roger Cappucci had several passions: pasta, meatballs, ragù, bread. And Sandra Manzella. The food, he adored from his grandmother's kitchen. Sandra he adored from afar. Acquainted through their large Italian American community, he was a frequent guest at Sandra's family's elaborate Sunday feasts. "I worshipped her," he says. "I thought she was gorgeous." But she was also older, by 16 years. He kept his ardor to himself, through her first marriage and two children, until she was single again and relied on him for friendship and healing. "He was there for me," she says. "He was my confidant." A year later, he was her boyfriend and, in May 2015, her husband. Hollywood ending, Westchester location.

Today their partnership has extended to business. They debuted Porta Napoli last September, four months after marrying, three months after signing the lease. Their honeymoon was spent plastering, tiling, sawing. Sandra, petite and blond, had opened the West Village's celebrated pizzeria/wine bar Kesté years before and wanted to bring that same Neapolitan authenticity north. Her ex-husband was from central Naples, and she knew her pizza. "Fashion comes from Milan, food from Naples," she asserts. "Kesté means 'This is it'—'it' being a wood-fired oven, Neapolitan flour, tomatoes, and cheese. And 'it' is now at Porta Napoli—pizza in all its puffed charred crust, lusty tomato, buttery mozzarella, basil-leaved margarita glory (one of 30 pizzas available).

Sandra knew more than pizza, however. She knew real estate and construction, thanks to immersion in her father's home-building firm, and restaurant administration thanks to years with Citigroup's corporate credit-card-sales division. "I worked with restaurant owners; that was my entrée into the business," she explains.

"My entrée was her," Roger, now 27, quips in that easy way happy couples banter. He's now Porta Napoli's pizzaiolo, having expanded upon his grandmother's teachings with a stint at Kesté.



**Chef Speak**

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—Roger Cappucci

But he brings much more than his pizzaiolo's wooden peel: there's a Fordham University business degree, five summers as a paralegal with his father's Park Avenue law firm, and six months at a hedge fund. "I always figured I'd work in law or finance, but a desk job just wasn't for me," he says. "I need to be with people, to please them. I was fortunate to be raised wealthy, to have traveled the world and be accustomed to good food, good service, fine atmosphere. Running a restaurant felt natural to me."



Roger Cappucci working the pizza peel, or paddle.

Okay, but constructing one didn't. "My family just hired people to do work," he admits, shrugging, I didn't have to do anything." And again, that easy banter: **Sandra:** "He didn't even know how to hang a picture." **Roger:** "But once I was with her, I learned I had an affinity for building."

**Sandra:** "He also learned how to clean and vacuum."

**Roger:** "And paint, tile, and sheetrock."

**Sandra:** "I taught him well."

Pause, then exchange of adoring smiles. Such a romantic past and present. There's just one contention: the future. Sandra dreams of Fiji, draped on a chaise in her open-air lagoon bungalow. But Roger is sipping Sangiovese in his Tuscan villa, surveying his vineyards, making pizza. Sandra considers, then makes a concession: She'll switch out the South Pacific for the Amalfi Coast. "We'll meet in the middle," she says. Roger beams at her, and once again, there are those smiles. —Diane Weintraub Pohl

WHAT THE HECK IS A...  
**Cucamelon**



**Description:** Also known as Mexican sour gherkins, mouse melons (it's grape-sized) or *sanditas* ("little watermelons" in Spanish), the cute-as-a-button cucamelon is an heirloom native to Mexico and Central America around since pre-Columbian times. They are distantly related to the cucumber, grow on lush, scrambling high-yielding vines and have an alternating dark- and light-green exterior, and a soft, light-green juicy interior.

**Flavor Profile:** Despite its resemblance to a watermelon (albeit a tiny one), the flavor is heavy on the cucumber with a tinge of lime or lemon and a snappy crunch.

**Gardner Alert:** Cucamelons are pest-resistant, drought-resistant, have beautiful vines, and don't require any fancy pruning techniques. Planted in April or May, fruit is produced between July and September. A trellis should be used for support as the vines can grow as long as 10 feet. Rareseeds.com is a respectable source to purchase the seeds.

**Culinary Uses:** Similar to how traditional cucumbers are utilized, slice cucamelons into salads, chop into salsas for extra texture, or pickle whole with dill, peppercorns, and mint. They can also be speared with toothpicks and popped into martinis. Flavor a basic ham sandwich or add some color to a fancy cheeseboard. —JBT

CHEFS PHOTO BY KRISTEN GUASTELLA

SIZZLING...

**Harissa**

(Tunisian hot chili pepper paste)



HEATING...

**Gochujang**

(fermented Korean hot pepper paste)



FIZZLING...

**Sriracha**

(Southeast Asian hot sauce)

