



Nancy Brussat Barocci and daughter Candace Warner prepare for the holidays at their Convito Café & Market.

A CONVITO CHRISTMAS

In Italian, *convito* means banquet. Here on the North Shore, *convito* means banquet and so much more. Meet the family and staff of Convito Café & Market, a multi-generational family team that helps to make everyday seem like a holiday with their marvelous European cuisine, wines and warm, inviting hospitality.

by PETER GIANOPULOS | PHOTOS by ROB WARNER

One fateful Christmas Eve in 1973, Nancy Brussat Barocci threw the ultimate holiday dinner party, sparking a love for Italian cuisine that would lead to the opening of her landmark restaurant and specialty store, Convito Italiano. Amazingly, almost four decades later, Brussat and her daughter, Candace Barocci Warner, are keeping those very same time-tested traditions and recipes alive at Convito Café & Market, what has become one of the area's brightest symbols of the holiday season.

NANCY BRUSSAT BAROCCI — SPIFFED UP IN HER BEST DRESS WHITES, an immaculately clean chef's smock with elegant black piping — is standing in the kitchen of her restaurant, Convito Café & Market, doing what she does best: planning a party.

Christmas is still months away. None of the children munching on whole-wheat pizzas and grilled cheese sandwiches in the nearby dining room have even begun the process of cobbling together a wish list for Santa. The weather outside is still brisk enough to require only the lightest of jackets. And pumpkins rest where big inflatable snowmen and plastic reindeer will stand in the near future.

And yet, there's Barocci carefully flattening out long sheets of handmade pasta dough, preparing a baked-pasta recipe called *primizia*, which she has been serving as a Christmas-time staple for almost 40 years.

Barocci's daughter, Candace Barocci Warner, now co-owner of the restaurant, is by her side as is Noe Sanchez, Convito's chef for the last five years.



Roloto primizia is a Christmas-time staple that Nancy Brussat Barocci has served to her family, friends and guests for more than 30 years.

In the coming months, the team will transform Convito into one of the North Shore's most beloved holiday institutions. They will sample panettone from every corner of Italy to ensure they have the best selection in the city. Decorations will be moved out of storage and hung from every rafter. And menu preparation will begin on the restaurant's cherished candlelight Christmas Eve dinner. But for now, the focus is squarely on ensuring they're ready to serve the best *primizia* this side of Bologna.

Over the years, Convito's *primizia* has become synonymous with the holidays on the North Shore. It's a dish that will find its way onto the restaurant's menu as a special, act as a centerpiece for many of its holiday catering orders, and play a starring role in the market's prepared-foods cases.

Barocci says she first encountered it in a magazine, decades ago. She tried it, adapted it to her own liking and quickly made it into a family favorite. Shortly after she opened the original Convito in 1980, it became a community favorite as well, a symbol of what Convito repre-



Alexandra Scagnelli began working at Convito 10 years ago as a server and in time, she explains, grew her love of wine. She moved into larger roles including manager and now she is Convito's wine director, combing the country and world for the best wines available from Europe. Her favorite is Ceretto Arneis, a white wine from Piedmont, Italy.

sented and what it continues to represent some three decades later: home-cooked food, expert service and a commitment to selling only the best of European delicacies and wines in a family friendly environment.

Thus they've got to get it right — make sure it's absolutely perfect — year after year. So the trio is doing a test run: carefully rolling up the spinach-lined dough in cheesecloth and dropping it in

boiling water until it floats to the top like a giant ravioli. Cut into slices, the primizia rolls are then topped with two sauces — a white béchamel and a red tomato sauce. The results are a perfect symbol of the season: a warm, bubbly Christmastime mix of reds, whites and greens squarely set in an elegant casserole.

Chef Sanchez sets up a table in the dining room. Everyone digs in. Forks go in. Smiles come out. It's the Convito way.

"I remember the first time I made this dish for Candace," says Barocci. "She must have been 5 years old. This was years ago, before we opened Convito ..."

From Italy with love

In the restaurant world, Convito is something of a miracle. These days, restaurants normally have the shelf life of a good French baguette. They come and go almost daily. Make it five years and you're a success. Make it 10 and you're an institution. Make it two decades and you're nothing short of a historic landmark.

And then there's Convito, which in September celebrated its 32nd anniversary, an achievement no one would have predicted back in 1980 when Barocci took a leap of faith and opened the original Convito Italiano at 1625 Sheridan Road in Wilmette, an Italian market and bakery that specialized in imported meats, wines and pastas, plus a head-turning selection of prepared foods.

Should you ask Nancy Barocci for the initial spark that led to the creation of Convito, she'd say it was her love for Italian food, which dates back to a fateful Christmas party she threw almost four decades ago.

The year was 1973. And ostensibly her aim had been to impress her whole family with a lavish two-day feast worthy of the Vatican itself. So she mapped out a menu. Tinkered with it. Got all the necessary decorations and ingredients and plunged into it — full steam ahead.

The results are the stuff of family lore. An endless parade of food — night blending into day. It began, of course, with the primizia and pasta selections. Cappelletti as far as the eye can see. Pasta. Pasta. And more pasta. Then came cookies, and hot chocolate after a trip to the windows at Marshall Field's with the kiddies.

After midnight mass appeared an antipasti spread for the ages: every Italian cold cut and cheese imaginable. Then in the morning came slices of panettone followed by a brunch of eggs and sausages of every stripe. And finally an American finish: a Christmas turkey with all the trimmings.

“It was ridiculous,” says Barocci. “I remember my father, who was a big eater and loved food, actually turning green after that Christmas. I never did anything like it quite again, but I fell in love with Italian cooking. The ingredients. The simplicity of flavors. I just loved it. It’s why I wound up opening what was essentially a high-end Italian grocery story. I needed to share that love with other people.”

Convito was, without a doubt, a store ahead of its time. Back then, Italian cuisine, even in downtown Chicago, was dominated by the kind of stereotypical Italian-American fare that any self-respecting Italian from the Old Country would scoff at. Red sauces. Meatballs. Spaghetti. Breadsticks. The occasional chicken parmigiana. And if you were lucky, a ricotta-filled cannoli for dessert.

“At that time, about the only prepared foods you could buy at a grocery store up here was coleslaw and potato salad,” says Barocci. “No one knew what pesto was or what a sun-dried tomato tasted like. There was no such thing as fresh pastas. And the only Italian wines they knew were bottles of Chianti in wicker baskets.”

Having traveled extensively with her partner Paolo Volpara, who was a fellow co-worker of her ex-husband, a Leo Burnett executive, she had explored the various regions of Italy throughout the 1970s, sampling delicacies from Naples to Milan.

Being of English, Alsatian and Irish descent, she had decided to sit down with Volpara’s mother, Wanda, and learn how to make Italian food the Italian way: simple, unpretentious ingredients matched with careful, time-consuming culinary techniques and shrewdly chosen bottles of wine.

An avid party planner her entire life — Barocci was so skilled she once threw a Wimbledon party in England that impressed even the English — she approached her new venture with a keen eye toward teaching her North Shore neighbors the niceties of Italian dining rituals, including how to properly order and store wine.

She didn’t just open a market, she printed what she called “capitulos” — chapters — in Italian — newsletters that outlined the unique flavor profiles of Italy’s various regions, each broadsheet offering wine-pairing tips and recipes that would help her neighbors re-create Italian feasts right in their own homes.

The formula worked. “People loved the pre-made meals and the sauces and the salads,” says Barocci. “And I said to myself, ‘Oh, *that’s* what people want. I can cook that for them, too.’”



Candace Wagner joins Chef Noe Sanchez who is slicing a panettone that he made earlier in the day. They top the traditional sweet bread loaf that originated in Milan with a wild black cherry sauce.

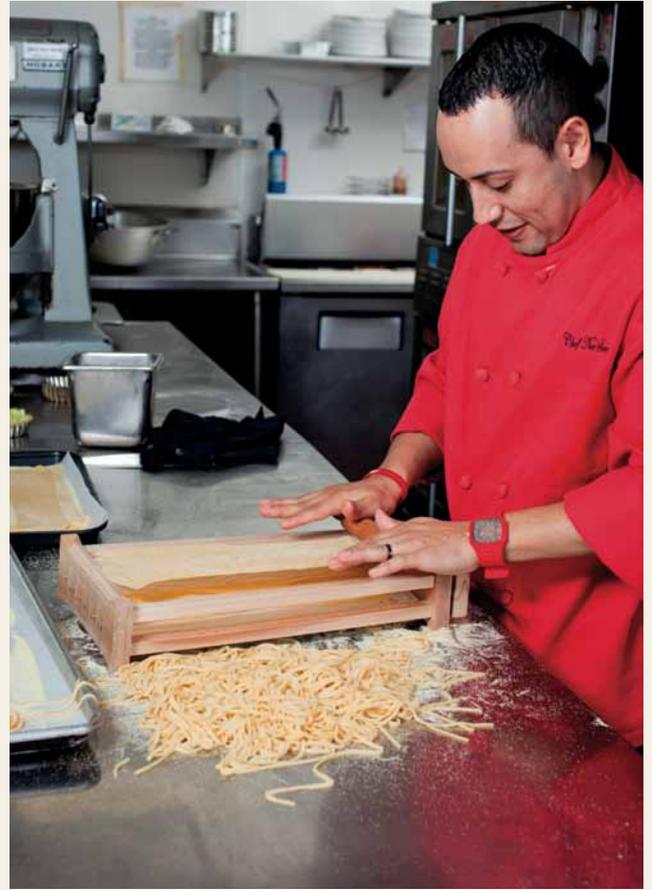
Having modeled her market on the famed Peck specialty food store in Milan, Barocci then moved to a new larger location at Plaza del Lago in Wilmette in 1982, with the idea to annex her market with a 28-seat café that would mimic the cozy trattorias she’d encountered up and down Italy.

It was equally successful. In time, came more opportunities: Barocci opened a second, lavish Convito location in downtown Chicago in 1984 followed by a third albeit short-lived spot in the Merchandise Mart. Then came the creation of Betise, a Provence-inspired spot she’d opened in 1992.

On paper, things looked good. But Barocci was stressed, finding it difficult to oversee four locations on her own. “Things changed,” she says. “And they changed quickly.”



Chef Noe Sanchez makes plenty of homemade pasta for Convito's signature restaurant dishes as well as for completing a wide selection of prepared foods in the market's cold case. He says the kitchen staff at Convito makes nearly all of its pastas by hand.



Chef Sanchez places a wide ribbon of homemade pasta on the Italian chitarra, a pasta cutting tool that echoes a musical instrument in its construction with strings. Once the fresh pasta ribbon is coated with semolina to avoid sticking to any surface, it is ready to be cut into strips that resemble linguine but a bit thicker in size.



Once Chez Sanchez places the pasta on the chitarra, he uses a small rolling pin to press the flat sheet into thin ribbons that resemble a thick linguine. Sanchez says he loves how pliable the pasta is and explains that it can be boiled and made ready to serve once it is cut.



Chef Sanchez' reward of fresh, homemade pasta slides off the base of the chitarra. A kitchen staff of 20 (including three of Sanchez' brothers) will help create the day's menu items with other fresh ingredients to delight guests or visitors who need to take lunch or dinner home.

SECOND GENERATION SUCCESS

If you ask Barocci to tell you how Convito started she'll point you back to Italian journeys and Christmas meals passed, but if you ask her why Convito has survived — and thrived — over the last two decades, she'll point you toward her daughter, Candace Barocci Warner.

BY 1995, BAROCCI'S LUCK HAD TURNED. A fire had forced her to close her downtown location. The Merchandise Mart location had opened and closed in the blink of an eye. And Barocci was feeling tired and overworked. What she needed, she says, was some help. Someone she could trust.

Although it was Barocci's son, Rob, who was a natural behind the burners, it was Candace who had always showed an innate sense for management. She had worked at Convito since she was 10, doing everything from cooking pasta and rolling cookie dough to bagging the bruschetta and manning the cash register.

After high school, she'd happily drifted off to college, with a junior year abroad in Provence, where she studied French before working in a cross-cultural training firm for international businesspeople, the restaurant world seemingly a distant memory.

"To be honest, before my mom called, I didn't see myself going back," says Warner, "but when I was interviewed, it just felt right. I'd worked there in the past for many years and had done so many different tasks that it felt natural."

It had been Warner who had come up with the name for Bêtise — a French phrase, roughly translated, that means "out of the ordinary" — and it was Warner who had always shown a talent for crunching numbers, sitting down and calculating food costs and tweaks to the budget, a skill that has proven invaluable in the café's longstanding success.

The results were magic, the sort of perfectly balanced yin-yang working relationship that is rare to find in any business, let alone a family-run one.

Warner, who prefers eating fish and vegetables and focuses on the health benefits of Italian cooking, brought a new dimension to Convito's food offerings. She began diversifying Convito's stock of prepared foods, flying out to gourmet-food trade shows across the United States and bringing back new products, especially boutique health food all-natural options and all-natural treats. She quickly instituted a new kid's menu designed to lure younger families into the restaurant and implemented health-conscious options like whole-wheat pasta and healthy sides like kale and a diverse selection of vegetables.

Meanwhile, Barocci, who is an unabashed carnivore, continued to cook the traditional dishes that had made Convito such a hit, teaching Sanchez how to make the restaurant's most iconic meals. She also, in the face of growing competition from boutique grocery chains, set out



Candace Warner, Nancy Brussat Barocci and Chef Noe Sanchez gather before they open their doors to an average of 450 guests per day who will enjoy their hospitality in the many sections of Convito including the deli and market, restaurant (outside seating in season) and extensive European wine shop.

to update the items in Convito's prepared case, changing menu items twice a year, luring customers in with a steady stream of new products.

"We have regulars," says Warner, "customers who have been dining here forever, who come to order the things they love: steak frites, the four-cheese pasta and that sort of thing. That's mom's specialty. But she also makes a concerted effort to change things — not too much, but just enough to create a sense of excitement."

By the middle 2006, while Warner was eight months pregnant, the mother-daughter duo began combining Convito and Bêtise into one sprawling Mediterranean restaurant and specialty store called Convito Café & Market and by 2009, Warner was made co-owner of the restaurant, a perfect 50-50 split and a symbolic passing of the torch from one savvy businesswoman to another.

"Candace has done every job in the front of the restaurant — every single one," says Barocci. "I prefer designing and creating, so we're the perfect team."

COMING HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

It's during Christmastime, however, that their talents seem to blend into one fluid whole, a perfect coalescence of the old and new, the storied and progressive. Ask them to describe how the market and restaurant change during the season and they'll practically finish each other's sentences.

THEY'LL DESCRIBE HOW MUCH THEY ENJOY festooning Convito's many rounded arches with holiday decorations and their annual baking of Convito's Christmas cookies, which run the gamut from Italian panforte to old-fashioned iced sugar cookies. They will collaborate on creating a take-out menu of Thanksgiving and holiday staples, like roasted turkeys and fresh made cranberry sauce, as well as a constantly evolving catering menu of antipasti trays, pastas and small holiday nibbles.

And of course, come Christmas Eve, the restaurant will go dark, the lights dimmed and replaced by the symbolic flicker of candles, marking the 20th year the restaurant has offered its popular candlelight Christmas Eve dinner, one of the most storied holiday traditions on the North Shore.

"I think we're entertainers at heart," says Warner as she exchanges a quick knowing smile with her mother. "It's kind of a lost art, but my mom has been doing it for as long as I can remember. She knows how to throw a party. There's a skill to it. And I think that's why so many people come to Convito around the holidays. We're always here; we've always been here, ready to help."

This year will be no different. In early fall, Warner began receiving emails and text messages from former employees who worked at Convito during their younger years. It's become a kind of tradition for many of them to return to the restaurant on the morning of Christmas Eve to put in one annual day of work and catch up with old friends and customers, a reminder not only of their past but the enduring spirit of the restaurant during the holidays.

"They come back because it's fun; it's a tradition," says Candace, "Where else do you hear about people calling up and saying, 'Can I work the 6 a.m. shift?'"

But they do. On Christmas Eve, mother and daughter will dine at Convito's candlelight dinner. And on Christmas Day, they will continue many of the family's cherished traditions at home, albeit with an expanded family and a third generation of cooks and kitchen helpers to mentor.

They will eat, drink and celebrate a season that sparked the creation of their landmark restaurant. And somewhere, it can be assured, a pan full of primizia, bubbling with meaty tomatoes and silky béchamel, will not be far away, bringing smiles to all who sample it.

