

## Through Artisan Food and European Hospitality, a Family Legacy is Born!



In 1973, 10 Mile Road near Orchard Lake Road was a rural landscape dotted with apple orchards. For Chiarina "Rina" and Adriano Tonon, the 5-acre parcel they found in Detroit's northern outskirts, newly named Farmington Hills, was perfect for a garden and restaurant. Three years later, Café Cortina opened its doors.

Today, Café Cortina celebrates not only its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary but also being inducted into the Distinguished Restaurants of North America (DiRōNA) Hall of Fame, an honor reserved only for restaurateurs with extraordinary contributions to both the dining industry and their communities.

"This is such a sense of accomplishment and reward for the years of service in hospitality and love of food," Tonon says. "It was really influenced by my immigrant parents and my husband, Adriano."



WRITER | JULIE FORD      PHOTOS | HILARY NICHOLS

From the age of nine, Tonon watched her Italian immigrant parents work seamlessly together at Rina's Pizzeria family dining establishment on Schaefer just north of Lyndon in Detroit. Watching and learning, Tonon recognized her parents had something special — their love for each other, their love of cooking traditional Italian cuisine and service to their customers who over the decades became like family.

"I learned charity through the nuns in strict Catholic schools, and I was exposed to European influence until I was 14-15 years old," Tonon says. "My dad would close the restaurant for a month every August and put us on a cruise liner and say, 'we're going to Italy' and we'd spend a month on the Island of Ponza and the Amalfi Coast. It was not a normal childhood."

At 17, Tonon knew she wanted the beautiful life her parents had, and at a dance, found her life partner — Adriano Tonon, a baker who only spoke Italian and was from Cortina d'Ampezzo located in the Region of Veneto in northeastern Italy.

They married the next year and lived from May to September in the Veneto with his parents. There, Tonon learned about farm life from his mother, and the couple traveled by train across the



region to explore eateries in the picturesque Italian cities and countryside.

Full of ideas and energy, the couple decided to call their restaurant Café Cortina and, in 1976, brought to Farmington Hills what they loved in their ancestral country — fresh, local ingredients, high-quality dishes and romantic, intimate dining spaces.

"My husband cooked everything, I had my flowers, and at 80 seats, we decided that was enough," Tonon says. "We wanted a garden, a small restaurant and we wanted it to be romantic. Adriano was genuine — when you walked through the door, you knew you were welcome; people just really loved Adriano."

## Sour Amaro e Rosmarino

**Ingredients (1 serving)**

- 2 oz Amaro Averna
- 0.75 oz Fresh lemon juice
- 0.5 oz Fresh orange juice
- 0.5 oz Honey syrup (1:1 honey + water)
- 2 dashes orange bitters

**Garnish**

- Fresh rosemary sprig
- Caramelized orange slice

**Method**

Dry shake all ingredients (without ice).  
 Add ice and shake hard until well chilled.  
 Strain into a chilled rocks glass over a large cube or fresh ice.  
 Express rosemary smoke: Light the tip of a rosemary sprig until it smolders.  
 Place it upright in the drink as garnish, allowing aromatic smoke to rise.

Generations of customers knew and loved him; then mourned his death when he was 51. During their 30 years of marriage, the couple had two sons, Adrian and Giancarlo, and Café Cortina became a mainstay of the freshest, finest, most authentic northern and southern Italian cuisine in the Detroit area.

Today, Café Cortina continues its family-owned tradition with sons Adrian and Giancarlo at the helm, along with their mother, and with grandson Andrew as the restaurant's next sommelier, who will oversee wines from small production boutique vineyards not easily found. Director of Weddings and Private Events Kelley VanDesande and Director



Rina Tonon received the DiRoNA Award Sept 10, 2025, shown here with her family.

of Operations Kujtim Sabaj, along with experienced kitchen and dining staff, embody the dining excellence Café Cortina has achieved for 50 years.

For Chef de Cuisine Ernesto Antopia, earning the top spot in the kitchen meant he had to create Swordfish Livornese at the highest possible level — matching how Tonon's mother made it, and he passed. His dishes represent the Mediterranean freshness and flavors of southern Italy, the province of Latina and the Region of Veneto in northeast Italy.

Whether seated for an intimate wedding, celebrating a special gathering with friends or on date, Café Cortina offers inside and outside patios, courtyard, dining room or private fireplace room dining areas to match the occasion. Fresh, quality, farm-to-table vegetables, herbs and flowers right from the onsite gardens add to the romance of the entire dining experience of a more intimate, slower pace immersed in authentic Italian hospitality.

"When you like people, life is easy," Tonon says. "I have been fortunate to have a wonderful family life, partner, and sons, grandsons and granddaughter to carry on. Apples don't fall far from their tree — the restaurant their father and mother created is a legacy." □

Café Cortina is located at 30715 W. 10 Mile Road in Farmington Hills. Learn more at [CafeCortina.com](http://CafeCortina.com)