

# Forever young

A troika of under-40 talent keeps Tony Vallone hopping, and vice versa

By Dale Robertson | WINE WRITER

Tony Vallone is the consummate classicist when it comes to wine and food. You don't stay open for nearly half a century by heading off willy-nilly in all directions.

But the 68-year-old Vallone proudly says he reinvents himself a little bit every day. To do that, he stays in the game every day. If he's not tasting wines, trying to tweak his 1,000-plus selection list for the better, he's dipping his finger into a new sauce in chef Grant Gordon's kitchen.

It's a rare night when he can't be found working the room at his eponymous restaurant in Greenway Plaza, long an iconic restaurant for serious Houston foodies and oenophiles, in addition to the see-and-been crowd.

"I'm 28," says his general manager, Scott Sulma, "and I'm trying to keep up with him."

Vallone surrounds himself with "senior" staff members who bring a youthful perspective to the table. Besides Sulma, who was promoted to GM at 23, there's the just-turned-25 Gordon and "graybeard" wine director Scott Banks, all of 35.

They weren't close to being even a twinkle in their parents' eyes when the original Tony's came on line in 1965, where the Galleria now sits. In those days, fine dining in Houston meant an iceberg-lettuce salad, a fat steak, a baked potato and a bottle of Gallo's Hearty Burgundy or Mateus Rosé (two big-

selling staples on the original Tony's wine list).

But Vallone had a grander vision from the get-go, and he's still nudging the proverbial bar upward.

"It would be so easy for Mr. Vallone to say, 'Look what I've done; this is what we do; we're not changing anything,'" Banks said. "But he's just the opposite. He has dedicated himself to staying connected, to seeking other's opinions. The wine list is a good example. It's his concept, his creation totally, but he gives me pretty good latitude to fill in holes.

"If I stumble across something that I like and think we need, he's got an open mind. But he still buys as much of the wine as I do."

Adds Sulma, who meets with Vallone over lunch and dinner almost every day: "He keeps us motivated. He's always pushing us to do more, and to do it better. There's an element of the classics in everything we serve, but we pride ourselves on our innovations, too. We're always looking for a new twist."

Example: Wild-boar carpaccio, prepared like the Piemontese staple, vitello tonnato (rare veal in tuna sauce).

Wine-wise, what separates Vallone from many, if not most, famous restaurateurs in the U.S. is his approach to the food-and-wine dynamic. It all starts with the latter, he says. The wine dictates, not vice versa.

"You can change a dish," Vallone said, "but you



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**THE TEAM:** General manager Scott Sulma, standing from left, wine director Scott Banks and executive chef Grant Gordon with owner Tony Vallone at Tony's. The nightly tasting menu offers three- or five-plate courses with wines for those who want to sip their way through a culinary adventure.

can't change what's in the bottle." While that's an accepted way of thinking in the Old World, a true wine culture has only recently taken root in America. Vallone, who has traveled extensively in Italy

for inspiration, is delighted to have stayed in the business long enough to experience that sea change and others. But he talks like the kid in the candy store he remains.

"Mr. Vallone," Banks said, "still has an amazing passion for the business."