



PLAYERS – PART 3

by **Dick Odom**

Skillet & Glass, April 20, 2020

“All rise! The Honorable Judge...” No contest is complete without the judges, by whatever names they are called—officials, referees, umpires—hell, in football you have referee, umpire, head linesman, line judge, field judge, side judge, back judge, center judge and replay official...Holy Crap...zebras! Guys...we’re going to limit to three judges for each contest, and we’ll have a pool of judges from which to select. These are guys, both professionals and amateurs, whom we’ll just say are “well-wined-and-dined”. They are demonstrated to have sensitive and discerning palates that will lend well to judging the variety of food and drink that they will render their decisions (and critiques) upon. In the next few features we’ll be introduced to the judges in the pool, who will also become players, or contestants as activities of the Guild progress.

For this feature I should have started with “All rise for the Italian national anthem”, for all of these gents are, I think, 2nd generation Italian. “Fratelli d’Italia” as the anthem is called, or “Brothers of Italy”. Quite appropriate, and these are not the only Italianos in the Guild.

Meet Jay Raffaldini. Like Johnny Smith, Jay didn’t find time to fill out a biography either, so he takes his chances and I have enough dirt—slips, interesting stories—to tell about Jay that I could write ad nauseum. And, I will necessarily have to delete, delete in order to be concise.

Jody and I first met Jay on Martin Luther King Day about seven years ago. Jody asked what I wanted to do for the holiday, and I said let’s sleep in late and then find a place in Charlotte for brunch while she gets on her tablet and finds an easy day trip. Likely the first thing that pops up that morning was Raffaldini Vineyards in Ronda, North Carolina, about an hour drive above Charlotte. Not expecting too much, based on some experiences with wineries from Georgia to Northern Virginia, the website picture of the venue was intriguing and inviting. And when we arrived it was truly a picture of Tuscany, complete with an architecturally perfect Italian villa overlooking the vineyards that are framed by the Blue Ridge mountains in the near

distance...truly reminiscent of many scenes we had in our minds' eyes of a peaceful Tuscan countryside.

After taking in the view, we moved on to the wines, strolling into the tasting room to experience their flight. Knowing decidedly little about wines then (and now, truthfully), I remember being surprisingly impressed with the medium bodied reds—Sangiovese and Montepulciano stood out. Over the years all of the Raffaldini wines are improving and I think Jay's proudest wine moment was learning that his **2017 Grande Riserva** (a wonderfully robust blend of Montepulciano, Petit Verdot, and Sagrantino grapes from his own vineyards), when entered in the **2019 San Francisco International Wine Competition**, together with more than 15,000 entries, placed somewhere near 350th. Moreover, **in its category** of non-Bordeaux reds > \$25, it **placed FIRST with an average rating by the judges of 97 and a Double Gold Medal, even more impressive**. Unfortunately for us, it is sold out at \$55/. **BRAVO Jerome!**

Okay, so the wines, the venue, the warm staff, yea, the entire experience were enough for us to join the wine club, and walking out the front door with six bottles of wine we met Jay who, though originally from NYC, is a genuinely nice guy (just a little southern jab at our northern bred brethren :-). And, though his eyes were saying "chin-chin", I was thinking his mind was saying Cha-ching-Cha-ching! That is until he later told me that if he didn't have his day-job—as an investment banker on Wall Street—he couldn't keep this winery dream alive.

Over the next few years we got to know Jay and many of his staff and were comfortable inviting him, and some other friends whom we had met at Raffaldini Vineyards, down to our home for an Italian dinner. Kelly Burleson and I cooked, and Jay brought the wines for the evening from his private collection (can you imagine this well-traveled-wined-and-dined collector's cellar?). He said, "the next time we get together I will cook", but Kelly B. and I thought better, Jay's wines have to be better than his cooking (fully tongue-in-cheek, Jay).

That **he is a sommelier**, and has dined all over the world, this man is perfectly robed for judgeship in our **Skillet & Glass**. When he takes off the robe, picks up his wine glass and starts talking about wine we will come away knowing more than we ever expected to know about the intricacies of this "nectar of the vine", because Jay is **passionate**—read, **excited**—**about wine**. That he is a spellbinding storyteller—fits so well in the Carolinas—and is a captivating teacher (frequent lecturer to the federal reserve on hedge funds) he has a way of giving other folks that same excitement about wine. You're gonna love what Jay has to share and how he does it in such a friendly and entertaining manner.

For more on Jay and Raffaldini Vineyards visit www.raffaldini.com and don't miss on the website his creative and inspiring story, "I'm a jellyfish".

Now we'll put the zebra stripes on **Jerry Simonetti**. I first met Jerry when, after a round of golf, Jody and I stopped into **Lily's Bistro** in Lake Wylie, South Carolina, where Jerry is owner and head chef. Well, his bar is well stocked with some very good bourbons, scotches (the pours are good too!) and wines. We could tell from the plates coming out of the kitchen to the tables that the entrees were very upscale and artfully presented. The aromas wafting over to the bar were enough for us to quickly decide on having dinner right at the bar (we had no reservations for dinner). We were not disappointed. And, Jerry stopped by the bar and chatted for a few moments after he was done in the kitchen.

On the next occasion we were there for dinner, Kelly B. was with us, and as he lives in Lake Wylie, he had known Jerry for a while. And after Jerry finished in the kitchen, he joined us for "a wee dram". We talked mostly about bourbons and scotches that evening and I told him that the next time we made a reservation, I would bring a bottle of a scotch he had not yet tried, Glenmorangie *Signet* (introduced to me by **Steve Couick**, another member of the Guild). That we did, and on that occasion shared a generous pour of the *Signet* while Jody had a nice red wine. On that night I introduced Jerry to the idea of **Skillet & Glass**, and it piqued his interest. "Does this mean that I now don't have to organize a club for bourbon and scotch tasting?"

I'm only just getting to know Jerry and intended to spend more time with him before social distancing and his having to close the restaurant to on-location dining. But, in our last phone call, he volunteered to be a judge...tells me he thinks he'll be a good one. I already knew that.

Obviously, with his being Italian, Lily's menu is heavily weighted in Italian cuisine but with flashes of French and American (especially some Southern American with Italian roots). I like to skip lunch when we have a reservation for dinner because I'm very likely going to order **Linguini Frutti di Mare** with lobster tail, mussels, clams, shrimp, diver scallops and marinara sauce. This is served on a platter that could easily feed two, and Jody typically brings home most of the linguini that she pairs with her lunches for the next three days. I hate to use a hackneyed expression, but "this is to die for".

As an aside, one of Jerry's hobbies, sidelines if you will, is **roasting coffee**. As I recall the story, his father-in-law is in the coffee roasting business and sells to several American brands that you would all recognize. Jerry got interested and set himself

up with a roaster, presumably professional grade, and is making serious strides in perfecting the art of coffee roasting. Oh my, I see espresso and cappuccino in our futures, maybe, nay probably. I also see a **Smash Down** between **Jerry Simonetti** and **Chris Morabito** whose father and he roast coffee as a hobby. More about Chris in another feature, and he's actually going to be a significant performer in our first get-together.

I think Jerry is going to **wow us** with his critiques as a judge and he seems to embody the foundational concepts upon which the **Skillet & Glass** are being built.

To learn more about Lily's Bistro visit www.lilysbistrolakewylie.com.

Nano. Loosely translated from Italian to English means "little man". When you meet **Nano DiEduardo** you won't be saying "little man". He played wide receiver in college for UConn and still has an athletic build though not quite like the typical wide receivers we see in college today.

Nano grew up in a community in New Jersey with a diverse population of nationalities. He learned to cook **Italian** from his--guess who--grandmother, and from his other grandmother learned to cook **Russian**. Oh boy, **Chris Morabito**, I see an amateur team in our future. Chris also learned from family to cook Italian and Russian when he was coming along.

Nano has related stories of growing up and doing things with family (meaning his immediate family plus aunts, uncles, and cousins) such as buying bushels of tomatoes in season and cooking/canning tomatoes all weekend. He and his wife, Wendy, at the first of each year will make fresh ravioli with various stuffings and freeze enough to last for the rest of the year. And, Nano has a handful of sauce recipes to put on those raviolis so that there are multiple combinations to dine on throughout the year.

The first real evidence I observed of Nano's cooking skills was neither Italian nor Russian, it was **Irish**. You see, Wendy's Irish and for several years Jody and I experienced St. Patrick's Day feasts at the DiEduardo's. Nano always cooked the corned beef...real slow for hours until it melted in your mouth. Most of the other wonderful accompaniments were made by Wendy who is an excellent cook in her own right, even having owned a bakery, and man she makes a mean cheesecake, of about any flavor that you can think. Well, sorry, I know this is a guild for "guys", but I can't just mention Wendy and leave that part out.

We talked about it for a couple of years before it finally came together. Nano and Dick cooking an Italian, five-course dinner for a group of our friends (ended up being sixteen of us). I love to do ossobuco and it just happened to be a dish that Nano had not cooked himself but had had it many times in restaurants. Naturally, Nano brought cheese ravioli and prepared the sauces for the ravioli, a brown mushroom cream sauce and prosciutto sauce (love the way those who grew up in Italian communities say “prozhoot”... calamari is “kallamöd” and manicotti is “maniköt”). The ravioli was a part of the antipasti together with my version of bruschetta. His other pasta dish was the pasta course with his Bolognese sauce over homemade ziti. Another specialty of Nano’s is his stuffed Italian bread and this time he brought one with pepperoni and mushrooms. Wendy took care of the dolce with tiramisu and Italian cheesecake. I made a stab at sgroppino, an after-dinner drink with frozen lemon cream, prosecco, and vodka that I learned from a restaurant owner in Venice. It was a disaster, not because of the drink but making the cream led to a flood in the front room...a story for another time. The other disaster belonged to Nano who was straining the ziti only to have the pot slip, scalding his oven-gloved hand that was not a heavy silicone type glove but of a porous fabric for the oven. He endured the scalding water in the glove without dropping everything and finally got the glove off, but not before suffering second degree burns and some nerve damage over most of his hand. Who says cooking is for wussies?

Nano played sports in high school and college and knows the job of refs, umps, and judges. He also called a career of management decisions before retiring from IBM. He is well-wined-and-dined and particularly enjoys his wines and scotches. He has a very discerning palate and we’re going to learn a lot from **Nano D.**

MORE TO COME! Again, I hope to eventually introduce you to all of our members in the same manner as above. In the meantime **FELLOWS**, keep on cookin’.

“Creativity is inventing, experimenting, growing, taking risks, breaking rules, making mistakes, and having fun.” Mary Lou Cook