

The San Diego Union-Tribune

Late owner's friends relaunch Carmel Valley restaurant as Amici's

There's a story behind the name of the new [Amici's Ristobar](#), a mid-priced neighborhood Italian restaurant that opened last weekend in [Carmel Valley](#). It's a story of friendship.

Amici's replaces the former Dolce at the Highlands, a more upscale Italian restaurant that opened two years ago in the Village at Pacific Highlands Ranch shopping center.

Dolce was founded by [Dr. Tony F. Smith](#), an internationally known management consultant and author who died from complications of hemophilia on Oct. 2. He was 57.



Tony F. Smith, who died in October 2017. (Courtesy photo)

The San Diego native, who lived in Del Mar with his wife of 32 years, loved fine Italian food and wines and enjoyed sharing that passion at his restaurants, which included [Dolce Pano e Vino](#), which he opened in 2010 in [Rancho Santa Fe](#), and Dolce at the Highlands, which opened in 2016.

Following Smith's unexpected death, his close friends and investors in the Highlands location — Eric Nielsen of Cardiff and Chris and Louise Lischewski of Rancho Santa Fe — offered to buy out Smith's share in the location to help alleviate some of the financial pressures on his widow, Erin Murphy Smith. She retained sole ownership of the Dolce location in Rancho Santa Fe.

Nielsen is a general contractor who built both of the Dolce restaurants for Smith. He said the decision was made to rename the Carmel Valley location Amici's, which means "friends" in Italian, as a tribute to Smith who had been a close friend for more than 15 years.

"That was one of the things about Tony," Nielsen said. "When he opened his first restaurant, he did it because he wanted all of his friends to come together and be part of his family."

Once the sale was complete, Nielsen said he and the Lischewskis decided to make some other changes to the Highlands location to make it more accessible to the community.

"People told us they felt it was too formal," Nielsen said. "We decided to rebrand it and give it a little more family-friendly atmosphere where locals could come and have a more relaxing experience where they could bring in their family and friends."

The restaurant was closed from June 18-22 for the installation of new signs, brickwork and lighting and the addition of more artwork on the walls.

"Essentially, what we did was make it a more comfortable and inviting place to come," Nielsen said.

One thing that hasn't changed is the staff, including longtime general manager Courtney MacDonald and head chef Rhoelle Gabriel.

This past weekend, Gabriel launched a new menu inspired by the cuisine of Southern Italy. The prices are more affordable, with more shared plates and dishes for children. A few of the most popular Dolce dishes remain on the menu, Nielsen said.

Among the new dishes at Amici's are eggplant parmigiana in a jar, roasted octopus with cannellini beans, spaghetti with clams and linguine fruttati de mare baked in parchment paper.

"We believe we have an amazing chef and an amazing manager and we believe we can do really well by just taking the formality out and making it a place where people can come in with their kids and family," Nielsen said.

Diners can get a taste of Amici's Ristobar, along with two other newer restaurants in the shopping center, from 6:30-9 p.m. July 25 at the annual "A Moveable Feast" progressive dinner program at the Village at Pacific Highlands Ranch.

The dinner will begin at Wokou Ramen & Yakitori where an appetizer and cocktail course will be served from 6:30-7:15 p.m. Diners will then move to Amici's for entree and wine course from 7:30-8:15 p.m. Then the meal concludes at Casa Rústica, with dessert and coffee served from 8:30-9 p.m. Tickets are \$50 and can be ordered at: phrprogressivedinner2018.eventbrite.com

The Ristobar (an Italian twist on the words restaurant/bar) opens at 11 a.m. daily for lunch and dinner service, as well as weekend brunch. Happy hour is 3 to 6 p.m. daily. It is located at 5980 Village Way in Carmel Valley. Visit amicisristobar.com.



Head chef Rhoelle Gabriel at Amici's Ristobar in Carmel Valley. (Jim Sullivan)