



Reviving The Villa
first person
with **Mike Sperandeo** *by Angie Kay Dilmore*

If you were a resident of Southwest Louisiana prior to 2004, chances are you remember the Italian Villa. This restaurant was located in an old re-purposed house on Ryan St., and is the current location of Rikenjaks Brewing Company. Many have fond memories of the Italian Villa, affectionately known as “the Villa”. The restaurant had a reputation for great authentic Italian cuisine, and was the place to go for a special date or a quiet, relaxing dinner. The Italian Villa was owned by Mike Sperandeo’s father, Marco, who opened the business in 1986. Mike joined his father in the early 1990s and managed the establishment after Marco retired and then passed away after battling lung cancer.

Now, twelve years after he closed the Italian Villa, Mike is reviving his family’s restaurant in a new downtown Lake Charles location. He has named it, simply, The Villa. *Thrive* visited with Mike recently got the scoop on this exciting endeavor.

You grew up during the 1950s and 1960s. Tell me about your childhood.

It was a typical childhood of that era, with a hard-working dad and a stay-at-home mom. We played outdoors, rode our bikes, hunted and fished with Dad. I was born in New Orleans and moved to Lake Charles in the 1st grade. Then back to New Orleans, Baton Rouge for awhile, and finally back to Lake Charles my senior year of high school at LaGrange. But Lake Charles is home.

Was your family always in the restaurant business?

My grandfather owned a restaurant in New Orleans, but he passed away when my dad was only four years old. And my family had a restaurant in Baton Rouge for awhile. But both my dad and I were primarily in the optical business. After we moved back to Lake Charles, Dad always dreamed of opening a restaurant where he could share the recipes of his father’s homeland, Sicily. He gathered all the old, authentic family recipes, became a chef, and opened The Italian Villa.

What led you to join your father at the Italian Villa?

My optical business had me traveling frequently, leaving my wife and kids at home. Dad told me he wanted to retire in a couple of years and asked me if I’d join him and take over the Villa. The timing was right. He hit me at the right moment when I was ready to get off the road and I was excited to join him. He was like a good friend, not just a dad.

What kept you busy after you closed the restaurant in 2004?

I worked at the Harlequin with Nic Hunter for 11 years, mostly as a front house general manager.

What prompted you to resurrect The Villa?

Four or five years ago, Nic Hunter came to me one day and asked me to re-do the Italian Villa with him. Over the next couple of years, we pursued several locations that, for one reason or another, just didn’t work out. Then Nic became engaged, got involved with politics, and had to back out of the venture. I didn’t think about it much after that, but I kept my ears open. One day, Rick and Donna Richard, who had bought the Noble Building, came to me and asked if I’d be interested in putting my restaurant there. I jumped at the opportunity.

The Villa is currently under construction and you hope to have it open soon.

Describe your new business.

It’s a gem of a building and a great location. The space is still under construction, but it’s starting to look like a restaurant. The Noble Building is a historic landmark so all the architecture has to remain the same. Even though the space was gutted, it had to be replaced to its original form. There is a mezzanine level, which gives us added seating capacity. We’ll have 90 seats, including the bar.

What can patrons expect to find on the menu at The Villa?

The old Italian Villa served traditional southern Italian and Sicilian specialties, and over the years I incorporated some northern Italian dishes. This new Villa is an evolution of the original. Indeed, the average diner has evolved. People bring more sophisticated palates and are willing to try new things. So it will be a bit of what I call New Orleans Italian, with some Creole influence, using what is available and local. There will be some unusual Italian dishes, as well. I like to create! But there will also be a number of the old favorites from the original

Italian Villa, due to demand. I can’t go anywhere without someone naming their favorite Italian Villa dish and requesting I keep that on the menu. So, a little old, a little new. We will also offer a bar and a nice wine list.

Please tell *Thrive* readers two things few people know about you.

I can be shy. And I like to skydive – have been three times so far.

The Villa is located at 322 Pujo St., Lake Charles. Watch for a Grand Opening soon!

