

■ up close ■

anibal romero, of crabtree's kittle house



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WHEN HE WAS JUST A KID in Guatemala he was a whiz in the kitchen. If his mom wasn't home and he was hungry, he would break out the food and cook it up just the way he liked it. "I always knew I belonged in the kitchen," says Anibal Romero, executive chef at Crabtree's Kittle House in Chappaqua.



“ I need to *feel* the food.”



Romero, 39, is open and personable with his assistants, sous chefs and dishwashers alike. He works in and around his 18 person staff, darting from station to station with a subtle, edgy persistence—an energetic dance that is part of his staff’s choreography. With a restaurant that has the capacity of serving more than 350 people at any given moment, the kitchen hums with activity while Romero shifts between roles from chef to manager.

“I like to be occupied—I can’t just delegate. I need to ‘feel’ the food,” he says, explaining his need to be both in the prep lines and at the stove. “But I stop and see to make sure that everything is up to point.” With a furrowed brow Romero reviews orders and dotes over selected plates before they reach the table.

Romero came to this country from Guatemala when he was 15 to visit his uncle, who enticed the teen to stay and get his high school diploma. A year later, he knocked on the door of the Kittle House and got hired as a dishwasher.

“That lasted only for one day,” says owner John Crabtree, who says he knew he had a fresh talent in his kitchen. “When you spot somebody with a passion it’s like he’s marked. Anibal stood out—he had that look in his eye. We had more confidence in him than he did.”

Crabtree immediately moved Romero to the cold prep station making salads, dressings, carpaccio, preparing

desserts. Romero didn't think he could do the job, he remembers of his first days at Kittle House 23 years ago. "I had to crank 60 to 70 lunches and dinners every day and keep everything speeded up," he says. He thought he would never be able to do it so his chef lined up Polaroid pictures at his station showing him the contents of each dish. "I clearly remember this—I could look at the pictures and know immediately what went on each plate," says Romero. "By the second week I was on my own."

Working part time and going to high school kept Romero busy, but he always was attentive to what else was going on in the kitchen. He wanted to know more about how dishes sought out and praised by returning patrons were prepared at Kittle House. In 1989, he went to the International Pastry Arts Center in Elmsford, run by Albert Kumin (now closed); after a year at the school, Romero returned to Kittle House as a pastry chef and sous chef.

But, Romero stresses, there was always something more to learn, a new way to cook, a different way to prepare a dish, another kitchen to run. In 2002, and for several years after, he tried his hand as a chef at other area restaurants. By 2006, he had the "big picture" of how to run top-shelf restaurant kitchens. He returned to the Kittle House, this time as executive chef.

"I missed this place because it's a challenge. There's never a dull moment here; it's always busy. If there's a quiet moment, I'm thinking, 'What do I do?'"

Part of the challenge for Romero is experimenting with the cuisine, coming up with new dishes. He not only uses ingredients from around the world but actively purchases fresh produce from local farms. "Cabbage Hill Farm and a few local farmers provide us with fresh microgreens," he explains. "Rainbow Ridge Farm sells us their goat cheese and maple syrup."

Crabtree says he is open to new dishes, adding that a restaurant has to avoid being static and must constantly evolve. His palate is the final test for Romero's culinary experiments. "John [Crabtree] is very open and we can play around with different foods," Romero says. "He has a great palate and can tell if something is off, even if it's by one peppercorn." (Not long ago, Romero experimented with a crepe using pulled pork and orange ginger sauce. It needed something, so Crabtree selected a few herbs that made the dish work.)



"I always try to encourage these guys to try new things," says Crabtree. "We have to push the envelope; if it doesn't work then we learn from our mistakes." The Kittle House menu changes constantly depending on the season and what's at the market. "This year peaches were not in season—the year was way off and it was tough," says Romero. "You have to be flexible with what food is available."

Romero and his staff work anywhere from 40 to 100 hours a week, with weekends being the busiest and most demanding. "The day doesn't have enough hours—many of us are here early," he says. Everyone gets two days off each week; when it's slow, Romero can take off and be with his wife Martha and his four children, ages 6 to 13. "We all have families," Crabtree says. "And while we are a family here at the restaurant, we understand that everyone has outside lives. That's why Anibal has Kevin, so he can spend time with his family." Stepping in for Romero when he takes a day off and relieving him when things get too busy in the kitchen is assistant chef Kevin Bertrand. "Kevin also helps me with the menu," says Romero.

At the end of each night, the entire staff meets to review the evening. "We need to get that positive or negative feedback," Crabtree says. "If we know what went wrong, we can correct it." Crabtree and Romero are thankful for a dedicated staff. "These guys aren't just here to cook and get a paycheck. It's the excitement and the chance to grow," says Crabtree.

Romero sees his younger self in one of the kitchen staff. "Stuardo Diaz reminds me of when I just started working here. He can multi-task and I have taken him under my wing. But you have to know when to guide him and when not to." Another eager young man is Amos Bigler, Crabtree adds. "He has the mark, the passion. We are keeping our eyes on these two young men—they are self-motivated."

Romero's world expands outside the kitchen into the dining room to his audience. When he can, he ventures out to schmooze with the patrons. "I know that John is very involved—he's all over the place, but I will occasionally pop out of the kitchen." Crabtree says Romero also stands in the front door occasionally to say goodbye to the customers. "They do appreciate it," he smiles.

Some time ago, Romero came to the Kittle House for dinner with his wife. "We sat at table 18," he recalls. "It was like being a spy—hearing people at the nearby tables talking about the food. They didn't know I work here and it was great hearing them rave about the food, the desserts, the service. It was nice. I should come here as a customer more often." ❖



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