It’s not often enough that you can have dinner at a place where the conversation is as crisp as the air on an early summer evening, however, Café Cortina owner Adrian Tonon’s outdoor patio is just such a place this early evening in June.

Dressed in a tailored navy suit complete with matching marigold and royal blue striped tie and pocket square, Tonon greets guests like old friends with firm handshakes and warm embraces and an offer of a glass of wine.

The patio is reminiscent of textbook pictures you see of the Italian countryside. Guests are surrounded by large pines and tall Arborvitae that allow a slight breeze. The gardens feature vivid purple pansies, yellow daisies and large variegated hosta. It boasts a large outdoor fireplace that is stocked with enough wood to last several evenings and strings of white lights under white canvas tents casting a soft glow that is just bright enough to see who you’re dining with and what delicacy is being placed in front of you. It’s the kind of setting that encourages conversation…exactly what he wants.

“Café Cortina more than just a restaurant: it’s a movement,” he explains. “We want everyone to come in, break bread and feel comfortable. We want everyone to feel like that. We want them to feel real hospitality. We bring leaders to lunch here and talk about community issues. We want community leaders to come here and talk about ways to make change.”

On this night, he’s invited to a slew of “facilitators” to enjoy classic, hearty Italian fare. The first course includes antipasto di salumi and picolo porzione di pasta, and plenty of discussion about the topic of the day as well as long-term issues and how things could be and should be. It’s clear that the patio is filled with people who “do,” not people who “say.”

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He noted that within the eight companies that make up Zingerman’s there is a foundation designed to not only help the community they serve, but also their own employees.
"We have a community chest that helps employees who are struggling with life's challenges and these days there are plenty of challenges. We want to take care of our own as much as we want to be good stewards of the community."

As the second course is served, the din of laughter and clinking glasses gives way to the murmur of discussion between bites of paccheri creamed bacon and peas, homemade ravioli with basil and tomato, as well as a fresh fish and seafood salad. While quieter, the discourse is no less important.

"If you can do something to help, you should," asserts Red Wing legend Ted Lindsay, recounting how his annual Ted Lindsay Foundation golf outing got started. John Czarnecki, now the foundation’s vice president, was helping Lindsay stretch for his regular workout and they got to talking about Czarnecki’s son, Dominic, who has autism.

"He said ‘What can we do about that?’ and I said ‘We can raise money!’," recalls Lindsay. "What do old athletes do to raise money? A golf outing!"

Since its founding 12 years ago, Lindsay’s foundation has raised more than $2 million from outings and memorabilia sales to fund research into the cause and cure of autism. The 12th annual outing will be held on Sept. 17 at Wabek Country Club in Bloomfield Hills.

Lindsay’s not only dedicated to the goals of the foundation, he’s equally gracious to share credit when it comes to making a difference in the community. While eagerly talking about the work of the organization, he was quick to pat Dale Hollandsworth, manager of consumer communications, Kroger of Michigan, on the back for his role in helping the foundation.

“They’ve been so generous with us,” Lindsay said.

Kroger stores across metro Detroit help the Lindsay Foundation with its “Easel Program,” Lindsay noted. The stores host a silent auction for one piece of autographed memorabilia—usually set up on an easel—in the store. After a certain amount of time, the winner collects their prize and a new piece comes into the store. Hollandsworth explained Kroger’s history of good corporate citizenship, but noted the program has done better than many of its charitable initiatives.

While Lindsay, like many former professional athletes, can weave a tale that keeps everyone at rapt attention, even he was upstaged by the Chef Jeffrey Hoffman’s offerings for the main course for the evening:
are grown on-site during the summer, he said. The garden has been planted with rapini, arugula, radicchio, swiss chard, basil, rosemary, sage, pumpkins, peppers, heirloom tomatoes, zucchini, eggplant and other fresh ingredients. Cafe Cortina’s menu reflects traditional hearty regional Italian cooking from 150 years ago, but with a modern presentation and a focus on ensuring that while the quality of the food is vital, a superior experience is the goal.

“The base is food and hospitality…that’s the root of it all,” Tonon said. “We are very serious about preserving Italian cooking. My family still lives in Italy. We’ve planted ourselves in kitchens where no one speaks English. We sent (Chef Jeffrey Hoffman) to Italy to let him see and experience what we mean.”

Tonon and Hoffman do not disappoint on this night as guests wind down the evening with limoncello pasticiera, cream brucciata – the restaurant’s version of crème brulee – and sogno nero, a chocolate cake with a name that literally translates appropriate at as “black dream” as well as coffee, cappuccino and espresso.

— Michael Strong
cafe cortina.com

braised beef with polenta or baked sea bass with lemon, parsley and olive oil, as well as rosemary potatoes, rapini with braid, and arugula salad and finnchicho.

If this evening is any indication, Tonon’s desire for Café Cortina to be a relaxed, comfortable place that encourages a free flow of ideas and creativity is clearly working.

“We work hard everyday, and take nothing for granted,” he said. “We’ve always been active in the community. We take serving others very seriously, but we enjoy life and all of its moments. Food brings people of all different areas and lifestyles together. Everybody gathers around the table and they talk. It’s also the best time for families. The dinner table is where you stop and everyone can bond. It is a common ground.”

The comfortable atmosphere is heightened by the feeling that the restaurant is nestled in an Italian countryside vineyard setting in Farmington Hills. A former apple orchard, Tonon’s parents, Adriano and Rina, opened the restaurant in 1976.

The grounds are still a working farm as most of the aromatic herbs and vegetables used in Cafe Cortina’s distinctive style of cooking are grown on-site during the summer, he said. The garden has been planted with rapini, arugula, radicchio, swiss chard, basil, rosemary, sage, pumpkins, peppers, heirloom tomatoes, zucchini, eggplant and other fresh ingredients. Cafe Cortina’s menu reflects traditional hearty regional Italian cooking from 150 years ago, but with a modern presentation and a focus on ensuring that while the quality of the food is vital, a superior experience is the goal.

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