

NORTH SHORE

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Risky Business

How Celebrity Chef Fabio Viviani is redefining restaurant success in an industry known for high stakes



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Fabio Viviani is the type of chef and restaurateur who will walk you into his restaurant with an umbrella when it's raining. He trains his staff to warmly welcome guests at the door and always say, "Thank you for coming," on the way out. He once even gave a dog a bone—literally—wrapping up the leftovers from a perfectly cooked prime ribeye for a guest's bulldog to chew on later.

"A lot of restaurants have great food, especially here in the Chicago area," Viviani says. "I think we have very good food, too, of course, but the food is only a component of how we're trying to make people feel. True hospitality is what we provide and what drives our business."

Some say you can't put a price on hospitality. Or can you?

As dining costs rise, people seek more than a meal—they want memorable experiences. The team at Fabio Viviani Hospitality knows this. Walk into any of their restaurants, and you'll see managers wearing earpieces, communicating about guest arrivals, table needs, and kitchen updates. Even the design is intentional—at the one-year-old LAGO in Lake Zurich, not far from Viviani's home in Barrington, lush living walls, sleek black bars, pristine leather booths, and an open kitchen set the stage. Viviani's hospitality-first approach has paid off. Since 2005, he has opened more than 40 restaurants, bars, and hospitality venues nationwide, including his first U.S.

restaurant, Café Firenze outside Los Angeles, as well as Siena Tavern, Bar Siena (Chicago and Skokie), BomboBar, Prime & Provisions and Builders Building, an event space, through a partnership with DineAmic Hospitality. He has also opened restaurants around the country, including Taverna Coastale in St. Petersburg, Florida, Portico by Fabio Viviani in Seneca County, N.Y., Adelina in



Detroit, and various Mercato by Fabio Viviani concepts. Most recently he opened Giostra in South Barrington and plans to open a second location Giostra location in Glenview this year.



From Florence to the U.S.

Viviani's story, though, starts in Italy. A native of Florence, he became a successful restaurateur at an early age. At just 11 years old, he took a job at a bakery to help support his family while his mother was ill.

"School for me is like pineapple on pizza—I made it work, but I wasn't supposed to be there," he jokes.

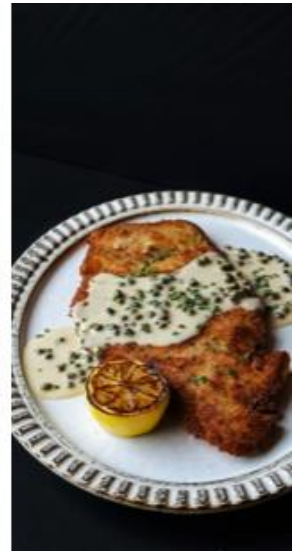
By his late teens, he had opened multiple restaurants, nightclubs, and small hotels. At 27, after selling his businesses, he planned a year-long vacation to California, but it turned into a permanent stay. Landing in Ventura County, he quickly connected with industry peers and got back to work, opening Café Firenze in Moorpark in 2005 at age 29, followed by Firenze Osteria, Bar Firenze, and Mercato by Fabio Viviani in Los Angeles. A partnership with DineAmic Hospitality brought him to Chicago, where he opened Siena Tavern in 2013.

A Team Effort

Viviani has become quite the celebrity chef, first earning the title of "fan favorite" on *Top Chef* Season 5 in 2008, followed by numerous TV appearances. He has also built a massive social media following with his popular cooking videos. Still, he credits his leadership team for much of his success.

"Almost my entire team—about 80%—are people who have been with me for almost 20 years," he says. "Many restaurant owners can't say the same. I'm still working with the same three people I met in California when I first came to the U.S."

His leadership team includes Mike Langner (CFO), John Paolone (partner/chief culinary officer), Kevin Blayne (partner/chief development officer), Shane Farzad (head of operations), and others, supported by a workforce of 3,000 employees.



Investing in People and Tech

Viviani and his restaurant group prioritize people—investors, guests, and employees alike.

“We invest heavily in our people,” he says, noting that he always places his A-team on new restaurant openings. “Most places hire the GM 30 days before opening, and then it’s all crazy because nobody knows what’s going on, where things are, who’s in charge.”

When it comes to investors, Viviani and his team are selective.

“When people invest in our company, they always get their money out first, with great interest, so there’s equity,” he says. “Restaurants are a very risky business, but we’ve become a somewhat safer one.”

Technology plays a major role in this success. Viviani pulls out his phone to showcase the app he uses to monitor all his restaurants.

“Everything we do is at our fingertips,” he says. “I can be anywhere in the world, press a button, and know the exact financial health of my company.”

His proprietary software tracks revenue, average check costs, predicted sales, labor costs, scheduling, table spending, and even guest preferences—all in real time.

“Right now, I can look at my phone and see that I have 35 guests in the restaurant, the average check is \$27, and the top seller during brunch is the classic breakfast,” he says.

“When we’re able to know and cater to our guests at that level of detail, they’re a guest for life.”

A Diversified Portfolio

Just as savvy investors diversify their portfolios, Viviani’s team has expanded across various restaurant concepts. From fine-dining steakhouses to upscale bars, quick-serve dessert outlets, and food and beverage operations at major casinos, Fabio Viviani Hospitality Group runs it all.

During the pandemic, he launched JARS By Fabio Viviani, a takeout dessert-in-a-jar concept designed to weather the industry’s challenges. The first location opened in Chicago’s West Loop in 2023, with plans for 10 more in Atlanta.

Viviani's team also operates at major resorts, including The Marketplace at Morongo Casino Resort in Cabazon, California, and Portico by Fabio Viviani at del Lago Resort & Casino in Seneca County, New York. Recently, they partnered with Wind Creek Resort in South Chicago to run food and beverage operations there.

Most recently, Viviani joined forces with Bill Stavrou, founder of FoodHaul, a chef-driven meal delivery service based at Valley Lodge Tavern in Wilmette. The concept offers freshly prepared, restaurant-

quality meals for pickup or delivery. Viviani developed signature dishes like chicken parm, Wagyu beef meatballs, and gnocchi tartufo for the platform.

“You can go in, grab a few meals, or order them for delivery at a flat fee, and these are restaurant dishes made within a 24-hour period,” he says, adding that FoodHaul plans to expand across Chicago.

With every restaurant he opens and every investment he makes, Viviani continues to prove that while great food brings people in, it’s hospitality that keeps them coming back.

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