



The Founders

Johnny Carrabba and his Uncle Damian Mandola share a passion for food and a family tradition of generous hospitality. Childhoods spent in lively kitchens gave these two men their knowledge and love of real home-made Italian food, and of course the original Carrabba family recipes, which are used to this day in their restaurants.

With ancestors who came to the gulf coast of Texas from Sicily in the late 1890s, Johnny and Damian grew up surrounded by two main influences – wonderful food and the importance of bringing extended family together. Old photographs of matriarchs Grace Mandola and her daughter Rose Carrabba hang on the restaurant walls, alongside pictures of Uncle Manuel making sausage (the recipe hasn't changed), and of the boys as children in the small backyard gardens where the family grew hard-to-find herbs from cuttings from the “old country”.

Meals were not just a part of life's routine for Johnny and Damian. Gathering at the table has always been an occasion to get together and talk through the events of the day, the week, the season. Food was central to birth, death and everything in between. Most family conversations began with “Whadya eat?” So for Johnny and Damian, good cooking also requires a knowledge and appreciation of people and their needs. Because the right food for the right occasion can never be taken for granted. No wonder that these two life-affirming men, who had the good sense and good fortune to embrace what they know best, have made decades long careers in the restaurant business. And it's no wonder their PBS cooking show

series “*Cucina*” and the companion “*Ciao*” cookbooks are so well loved.

Damian was the first of the two to venture out on his own. Using the knowledge he earned from working in restaurants owned by aunts and uncles in Houston, he opened a small trattoria, *Damian's*, while still at college. Then, after graduating, he opened what would become a Houston fine-dining favorite, *Damian's Cucina Italiana*.

Meanwhile, Johnny had made a name for himself managing his Uncle Tony's *Blue Oyster Café*. Soon it became obvious to Johnny and Damian that what Houston needed was a place to enjoy really great food in a warm, relaxed atmosphere. They talked about creating a new restaurant of their own which would stay true to their shared memories of the kitchens of their childhoods.

And so Carrabba's was born in 1986, making full and faithful use of the family's hundred-plus years of cooking traditions. One thing led to another and they soon had a second location that was as popular as the first. In 1993 a joint venture partnership was formed with Outback Steakhouse, Inc. Under the partnership ten locations were opened in Houston and Florida. Then in January 1995, OSI acquired the rights to develop Carrabba's nationally.

Today, Johnny and Damian are still busy developing new recipes, visiting restaurants and sharing their family philosophy of authenticity, passion and generosity with “Carrabbamicos” (staff) and customers across the country.

And the fine tastes and traditions of their Italian-American childhoods live on.