



It's opening night at Villa-O after months of preparations. Executive chef Rex Turner and his wife, pastry chef Giuliana Turner, listen at a staff pep talk.

And now, the show



Restaurateur Robert Colombo serves members of his staff drinks for a toast to Villa-O, at 4514 Travis St., on its opening.

Opening a restaurant is high theater — and Villa-O doesn't disappoint

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The polished and repolished honey-brown mahogany glows. Waiters obsessively straighten sky-blue napkins and fluff throw pillows with nautical flags. From the white-tiled kitchen comes the thud-thud-thud of cooks pounding veal chops.

Nearby, two bartenders quietly cut limes into quarter-inch slices and remove caps from liquor bottles, preparing to fill orders.

And then, the customer orders a limonini.

A server, in a solemn and solicitous voice, explains the problem: The orange and lemon slices have only been soaking in the vodka a few days. It will take a week for the spirits to be fully infused. Until then,

the cocktail will fall flat.

But the customer isn't buying the explanation. *You're either ready to open or you're not ready to open*, he snarls.

Immediately, as if teleported to the spot, the restaurant manager is tableside, apologizing, offering to make it right. *Is there another cocktail we could get you?*

On opening night, a cranky customer is the equivalent of tripping on the first step of the 100-yard dash.

Perched on a stool at the far end of the bar, owner and longtime restaurateur Robert Colombo watches, like a movie director, as this scene unfolds at his latest eatery, Villa-O. He observes how the staff, all new in their jobs and newly working together, handle the annoyed customer. Unlike them, he's hardly breaking a sweat.

"I thrive off the confusion of the day," he



WATCH VILLA-O TAKE SHAPE
and hear Robert Colombo talk about his vision for the restaurant.

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says.

For him, Villa-O is restaurant No. 34.

Still, he admits his biggest fear is the same as with the first: *What if nobody comes?*

Why would a rational person want to open a restaurant anywhere? It's an enterprise that often fails. And why open one in Dallas, one of the most competitive restaurant cities in the country?

There will be a year's worth of time and treasure spent before Mr. Colombo can declare his restaurant a success. Along the way, he'll contend with an abandoned freez-

er of stinking food, supplies held up by tornadoes, cranky neighbors and an opening date that gets pushed back again and again — finally arriving four months later than planned.

You'd have to be a little bit crazy or supremely self-confident. With Mr. Colombo, perhaps it's both. As he likes to say: "The only way to get exceptional results is to have unrealistic expectations."

Still, people have been coming — enthusiastically, and in droves — to his eateries for more than 20 years.

"I love the theater of what we do," he says.

Mr. Colombo has worked for Donald Trump — talk about theater — run New York's Plaza Hotel and opened what be-



MEI-CHUN JAU/Staff Photographer



TOM FOX/Staff Photographer

Discarded aluminum air-conditioning ducts pile up on the floor as the deconstruction of the Samba Room begins in July.

By January, much is completed at Villa-O, but more remains to be done. The opening date moves to February.

Drama flares in preparations

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came the national phenomenon Sizzzi with his brother, Patrick Colombo.

Now, with a cast that includes his childhood friend and business partner and an imported Italian chef, the New Yorker-turned-Dallasite is debuting Villa-O, Dallas' first organic Italian eatery.

The gamble is enormous: \$2.5 million for design and construction work and an annual operating budget of around \$3 million.

And opening night is just the beginning. In a production like this, a restaurateur is never completely in control. The audience rewrites the script every night.

All the while, jealous competitors watch for portents of failure.

"I eat up the pressure," says Mr. Colombo, a man who's made the number 13 his lucky charm. "It's energy."

Serendipity

Deep into running one Dallas restaurant (Trece) and constructing another (The Club) in June, Mr. Colombo isn't looking to start another project.

But a chance conversation with the landlord of the shuttered Samba Room gets him thinking. He envisions patrons, drinks in hand, lounging on sidewalk seating outside Villa-O, while other customers enjoy themselves across Travis Street at his Mexican eatery, Trece.

His investors, three local businessmen — some of whom he has known for decades — agree, and Mr. Colombo takes over the lease. Each investor kicks in about \$375,000, with Mr. Colombo adding a like amount in cash and sweat equity. Another \$1 million worth of

work will be done by Mr. Colombo and his childhood friend and right-hand man, Billy Solomon, before the opening.

Construction — or rather, deconstruction — starts in July. And it starts smelly.

Opening the walk-in commercial refrigerator on a hot day, the crew discovers boxes of rancid cheese and produce — moldy, green and reeking. The power at the Samba Room had been turned off months earlier.

With busted-up plaster crunching beneath their feet, construction workers remove kitchen equipment. Others use circular saws screeching through steel to break down countertops and other items that can be sold.

Wooden chairs and tabletops are stacked along the walls. Piles of discarded eight-inch aluminum air-conditioning ducts lie on the floor. Black wires dangle from the ceiling.

A large plastic tarp covers the bar — the only piece of the old restaurant that stays.

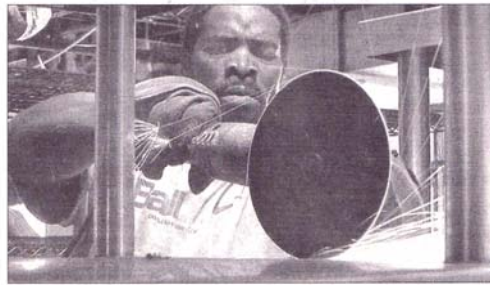
By early fall, the dining area is largely gutted down to the studs.

Along the way, the A-C system springs a leak, forcing workers to scatter white plastic buckets to catch the flow.

"We could've started from scratch, in a new building, easily," Mr. Colombo says. "But this is more fun."

A frenzy of activity, interrupted by delays caused by contractors, neighbors and a worn-out staff who had just completed The Club, marks the next few months.

"The way we build them, it's always hectic," Mr. Colombo says. "We take a take-no-prisoners attitude. ... We push everybody proba-



KYE R. LEE/Staff Photographer

The interiors of the old Samba Room are torn down in August as details for the design of Villa-O takes shape.

bly harder than they thought they could be."

In the heat of August, Mr. Colombo calls designers, electricians, HVAC specialists, his construction foreman, publicists, his head chef and Mr. Solomon to an all-day meeting at his firm, La Reve Consultants, on McKinney Avenue.

Sitting one minute, standing to jot notes on a whiteboard the next, Mr. Colombo smoothly shifts gears from discussing the restaurant's brand to its menu to the best way to install a 2,000-pound wood-burning pizza oven.

He passes around glossy pages ripped from magazines and catalogs to show the look he wants for the restaurant: gleaming Chris-Craft boat exteriors, peaceful seascapes in Positano, Italy. He hands out copies of Villa-O's positioning statement: O stands for organic, original, oceanic.

Villa-O must be exclusive yet accessible, he explains. Sophisticated but not snooty. And since Mr. Colombo thinks the eatery has expansion potential, the logo and menu

slip from early October to early November. Then to right before Thanksgiving. Then early December. A mid-January opening drifts to early February.

By this time, weeks of work are being crammed into a few days. Half a dozen workers are staining wood, putting down marble floors and installing banquette seating into the early morning hours.

Steady complaints from neighboring businesses about the noise add to the tension. (Well, how else can you construct a restaurant?) The smell of the stain forces workers to limit that to a half-day at most, costing time.

Meanwhile, Mr. Solomon's mantra has become *Unacceptable, unacceptable, unacceptable*.

"It's crazy," he says. "The workers say I haven't smiled. ... Robert expects so much, it makes me twice as crazy. He's such a perfectionist."

"If there was a gun here ... well, there would be some shooting," he quips.

Customer service

On Feb. 2, a Saturday, 15 members of the wait staff gather at The Club for training. Seated on a barstool in front, Mr. Colombo spends nearly an hour talking about his conversion to organic eating, the unhealthiness of modern farming, the negative energy that builds up in our food.

Then he gets down to business. One summer long ago, driving one of his father's cabs in New York, Mr. Colombo performed his own experiment in customer service. For two weeks, he carried packages inside buildings and offered passengers bottled water and an array of newspapers to read. The next two weeks, he was a typical apa-

thetic New York cabbie.

The result? His apathy cut his tips 40 percent. "If you've got to spend the time there," he tells the future Villa-O staffers, "wouldn't you rather make more money?"

Customer service is more than just cleaning tables or delivering food, he adds. Customers want to be entertained.

"Bruce Springsteen ... he could just sit there and sing," he says. "But he goes out there and puts on a show."

Then Mr. Colombo notices the blank looks on the faces of his Generation Y staff. Bruce Springsteen? Make that Alicia Keys, he corrects himself.

He ends by reciting a boss's perspective: "Don't waste your time when you're with us; make money."

Another delay

That next Thursday, Feb. 7, two large banquettes in the bar are turned on their sides, a drop cloth in between loaded with nail guns, oversize rulers and other construction material. A fine coat of white dust covers every surface.

Construction has come largely to a halt. Workers idle outside in the warm sunshine as a city health inspector makes her rounds, checking restroom splashwalls and peering into drains.

The inspector notes a few small violations but — nothing that will keep them from cooking.

The bigger problem, executive chef Rex Turner can't help but notice, is a lack of supplies. A shipment of kitchen equipment has been held up in South Carolina because of recent tornadoes, and a dairy order didn't arrive.

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REX C. CURRY/Special Contributor

The bar is all that is left from the old Samba Room by the time Villa-O opens. Robert Colombo envisions Villa-O as exclusive yet accessible, sophisticated but not snooty.

Minutes tick away to opening

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"The bellini machine is here," Mr. Solomon jokes, referring to the mixer that will keep the cocktails frozen. "We'll be OK."

Clearly, Villa-O will not be serving food the next day.

With Monday as the new target, the crew spends the weekend taking care of details. The wait staff is quizzed on the menu. *What's on the antipasto and cheese plate? What does a fusilli pasta look like?*

The kitchen begins prep work. Tension flares between executive chef Mr. Turner and Marcello Franzoi, a pizza maker originally from Naples, Italy. Two alpha males in a small space, they spar over control of the kitchen and its crew.

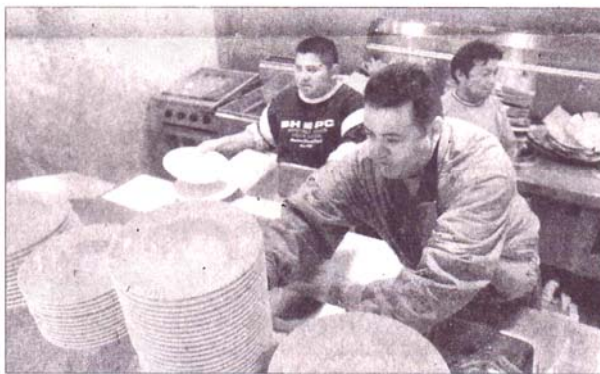
"Look," Mr. Solomon advises the chef, "it's like this: You gotta let Randy Moss be Randy Moss," referring to the New England Patriots' wide receiver. "He's not going to play quarterback." In other words, you run the kitchen. Let the pizza maker make pizza.

Meanwhile, Mr. Colombo tests the comfort of the navy-blue leather barstools when he's not roaming the restaurant with a Windex bottle, polishing surfaces. Even as most of the staff calls it a night, he adjusts spotlights and hangs photos of sailboats until nearly midnight.

On Saturday night, friends and family are invited to sample the first tastes from the kitchen.

The flung-open French doors also lure in passers-by. Once they agree to be guinea pigs for the new kitchen, they're welcomed warmly.

Mr. Colombo plays the effusive host. He carries out plates of pasta, pizza and desserts and fills glasses of wine while also noting imperfec-



CHERYL DIAZ MEYER/Staff Photographer

From left: Sergio Ton, Jose Gutierrez and Jose Cohuo unpack dishes in Villa-O's kitchen.

STOCKING VILLA-O

Here are some of the items Villa-O needed on opening night:

- 450 pounds of flour: 150 pounds each of high-gluten, Italian caputo and organic semolina
- 75 pounds of tomatoes
- 45 stainless steel sauté pans
- 10 gallons of extra virgin olive oil
- 6 pounds of black peppercorns
- 6 pounds of red pepper flakes
- 21 gallon-size measuring pitchers
- 41 quart-size measuring cups
- 14 pairs of tongs
- 6 metal spatulas
- 14 rubber spatulas
- 40 pounds of artichokes

SOURCE: Villa-O

tions in the food and service.

The atmosphere is boisterous, and he bounces between the clusters of diners. *How is everything? What else can I get you?*

The official opening is two nights later.

It's a Monday, and Mr. Colombo puts Villa-O in his staff's hands. The

waiters are sometimes unsteady, and the kitchen almost runs out of the handmade pasta, but Mr. Colombo considers his opening night a success.

"It takes awhile before they're battle-ready," Mr. Colombo says of the staff. The night's 30 customers seem satisfied — even Mr. Limontini, who settled for a different cocktail.

By 10 p.m., cooks start to close down the kitchen, putting food away and cleaning equipment. Sales total about \$1,600. Pretty good for a Monday night.

As a few patrons linger over drinks and dessert, Mr. Colombo thanks his staff and slips out. It'll be the first time he's home — a condo on the 13th floor of the Plaza on Turtle Creek — before midnight in weeks.

Opening night starts Villa-O's next phase, he knows.

"This will be a much, much better restaurant a year from now than the first day we open," Mr. Colombo promises.



TOM FOX/Staff Photographer

Restaurateur Robert Colombo tastes a variety of dishes during chef tryouts for his Villa-O.

Restaurateur's path led to Trump, Plaza, Sfuzzi

Robert Colombo ended up in hospitality by accident.

It was baseball that ran through his blood — Dad played for the Philadelphia Phillies — and his ballplaying earned him a scholarship to Cornell University.

There, he thought about law school but ended up taking a few courses in the school's famed hotel program at an adviser's suggestion. Law school was forgotten.

After his freshman year at Cornell, in the summer of 1973, the then-19-year-old Mr. Colombo wrangled a job at California's Bohemian Grove, an exclusive all-male campground for the rich, powerful and famous, serving the likes of Henry Kissinger and John Wayne.

He graduated in 1976 and took a series of hotel jobs, cycling through Westin, Hilton and Hyatt hotels in Atlanta; Manhattan; Rye, N.Y.; and Chicago.

In 1981, Hyatt sent him to its Grand Hyatt in Manhattan as food and beverage director — working for none other than Donald Trump.

The Big Apple real estate mogul had little patience for fools, Mr. Colombo recalls. Talking about a hotel industry colleague ensnared in financial troubles, Mr. Trump dismissed Mr. Colombo's empathy: Either he was stealing or stupid, and I don't want either of those characteristics in my hotel, Mr. Trump said.

"And, you know," Mr. Colombo says now, "he was right."

Heading to Dallas

In the mid-80s, brother Patrick Colombo, then food and beverage director at Dallas' storied

ROBERT COLOMBO

Age: 54

Hometown: Garden City, N.Y.

Education: Graduated from Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration in Ithaca, N.Y., 1976

Previous jobs: Food and beverage director, Grand Hyatt Hotel, New York; general manager, Plaza Hotel, New York; co-founded restaurant chain Sfuzzi, 1987

Family: Wife Rozalyn Colombo, director of the Harry Winston boutique in Highland Park; 12-year-old daughter Grace

SOURCE: Dallas Morning News research

Mansion on Turtle Creek hotel, and a couple of friends in Dallas persuaded him to head south.

In Dallas, he found the perfect stage for his first entrepreneurial venture.

He opened Sfuzzi, an upscale casual Italian eatery, in 1987 on McKinney Avenue, Dallas' hippest strip back then. An immediate hit, it attracted a trendy crowd that squeezed up to the bar for the frozen Sfuzzis, a pastel-hued cocktail perfect for the preppy heyday.

By 1994, Sfuzzi had exploded to 21 restaurants across the country. *Crain's New York Business* named Mr. Colombo one of its "40 under 40" business stars in 1993.

But a failed effort to take the company public began the end of Sfuzzi's long run. Without the capital to feed its growth, and with a glut of similar chains invading its niche, Sfuzzi's business faltered.

In 1995, Mr. Colombo and his

co-owners sold Sfuzzi for about \$27 million to Toscorp Inc., another owner of chain restaurants. Within a year, the new owners had filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

By then, Mr. Colombo and his first wife — from whom he would soon separate — had adopted a daughter, Grace. Mr. Colombo returned to New York and climbed onto his next stage, as general manager of the venerable Plaza Hotel.

More changes

But an itch to be his own boss again brought him back to Dallas in 2001.

He made changes in his personal life as well. After a divorce in 2001, Mr. Colombo met Rozalyn St. Pe on the only blind date he's ever had.

Two years later, he married the vivacious director of the exclusive Harry Winston jewelry store in Highland Park Village.

In 2006, Mr. Colombo's development company, La Reve Consultants, opened Trece, an upscale Mexican restaurant on Travis Street. A supper club throwback, The Club, followed in the Centrum Building in Oak Lawn a year later.

Villa-O, an Italian restaurant featuring organic offerings, is Mr. Colombo's newest addition.

Mr. Colombo and his wife converted to an organic-as-much-as-possible diet a few years ago.

He sees Villa-O as his next cross-country sensation, launched from Knox-Henderson, the city's neighborhood du jour this time.

Angela Shah