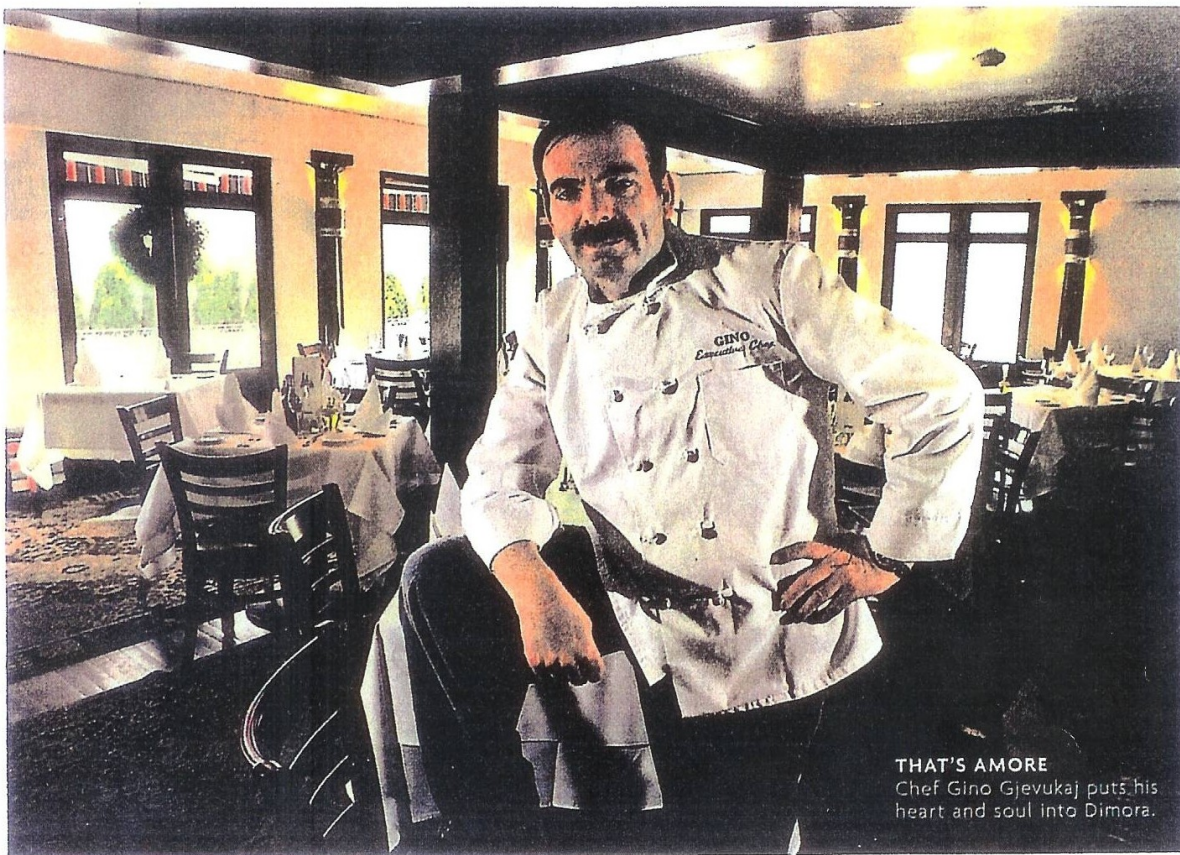


# Dining at Dimora

Benevolent Monarch rules his peaceable kingdom



**THAT'S AMORE**  
Chef Gino Gjevukaj puts his heart and soul into Dimora.

**BY SUSAN LEIGH SHERRILL**  
Photos by Lou Rocco

**D**imora in Norwood derives its name from the Italian word for love, and, although it may be the setting for many a romantic meal, here the greatest love comes from the kitchen.

Chef and owner Gino Gjevukaj is the heart – and soul – of Dimora. Since he acquired the restaurant in 2003, Gjevukaj – known to all as Chef Gino – has never missed a day and he “never says no;” his desire to

please his clientele keeps them coming back, in droves.

The atmosphere on a recent Saturday night at Dimora is charged with energy. While the restaurant’s look is an attractive mix of traditional and contemporary – big windows, sleek lighting, lots of dark wood, – it is clear diners are here for the food, which is served with amiable style by an all-male wait staff. Tables are just close enough for people to see and admire what their neighbors are having, and recommendations are exchanged back and forth as new

arrivals are faced with choosing from Dimora’s large menu.

Originally from Italy’s Calabria region, Chef Gino began his career cooking in seafood restaurants on the Adriatic coast. He arrived in New York City in 1985 and soon found work as the chef at Dolphin, where he received a “very good” from Bryan Miller of *The New York Times*. In 1989, eager to be on his own, he opened Il Brunello in New Rochelle, New York, which he describes as a “casual, family restaurant” that was lauded by *The Times* as “the hottest

it in New Rochelle." The success of this venture led to Gino's launch of a second Westchester County restaurant, Brunello II, shortly thereafter. But both of these were rented space, and the chef wanted a restaurant with property that he could own.

An extended search in Westchester yielded up nothing, but word of mouth led Gino to Dimora, just over the state line in New Jersey. The building had held five or six different restaurants over a period of seven years; its most recent owners had rented Dimora for just five months before they were struggling. Chef Gino talked his Westchester staff and convinced his wife and three sons – all of whom help with the business – to purchase the property. But first, he took a long hard look at Dimora's menu.

"Everywhere I go, I figure out what the place needs first," he says. "I look at the other restaurants and I prepare a menu for the area."

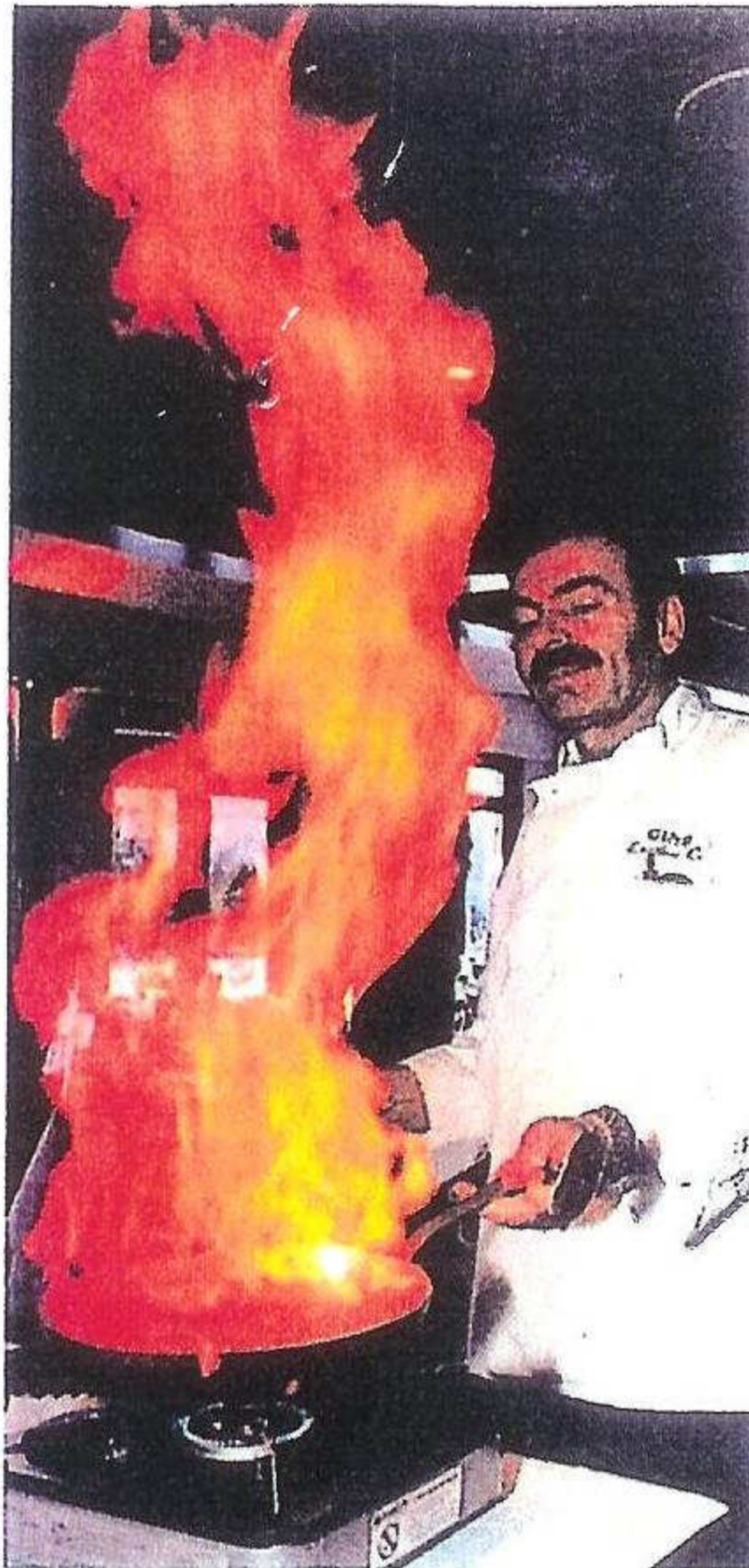
While his Westchester restaurants focused on fish and pasta, at Dimora, Gino knew he had to offer a more sophisticated range of dishes. He draws his clientele from the immediate region, but also from New York City and Rockland, as his reputation has quickly grown.

Dimora offers a classic Italian selection of appetizers, salads, soups, pastas, meat, and fish, with an impressive array of specials recited in mouthwatering detail by the staff. These include an additional five to six appetizers, three pastas – one with seafood – three meats and six to seven fishes.

Fish is still a clear favorite for the chef and his customers. While on any given evening he may have swordfish, blue sea bass, tuna and snapper, among others, the standout is branzino, a Mediterranean fish with a taste and texture similar to striped bass and only available here in the United States for the past few years. "People love it so much," Gino says. "I prepare the whole fish, which is presented at the table and then filleted. To make a special sauce I believe that nobody has around here," he says, listing the ingredients as garlic, shallots, cognac, Pernod, lemon, olive oil and herbs. "Everybody says to me –

from here to Italy, nobody can make this kind of sauce."

Other customer favorites are the veal chop, linguini with lobster, and ethereal homemade ravioli stuffed with spinach and ricotta. "I make stuffed jumbo scallops with crabmeat for an appetizer – people just can't believe that!" says Gino. He also prepares



**FIRE UP** Chef Gino feels most satisfied in the kitchen.

tender grilled calamari glazed with balsamic vinegar and a luscious shrimp and avocado appetizer. "If I don't have that, I'm in trouble!" he insists.

The chef is assisted in the creation of this bountiful menu by two sous-chefs, a number of cooks, and a "prep" staff – up to 10 on the weekends. "Nothing is prepared before – never ever," he proclaims. "Busy or not busy."

Although Dimora is not a small restaurant – use of the upstairs party room gives Gino 120 seats on the weekends – the chef goes to the New York markets himself, three to four times per week, rather than have his

primary ingredients delivered. "I tried to take deliveries [of food] a couple of times, but I was never happy," he says. "You want to see [your customer's] faces smiling all the time. If you have fresh fish, it's the best; if it's not fresh, you can work on it and work on it, but you're not going to like it."

On market days, he leaves at 4 a.m. for Fulton Fish Market in lower Manhattan and Hunts Point in the Bronx, where he selects meat and vegetables. "I like to see the fish before I bring it here," Gino says. "If I like it, I buy it; if not, I go to something else."

Even with his exacting standards for freshness, Gino maintains his commitment to providing extraordinary variety for his customers. "From the day I started, I love to work in the kitchen ... but I go out [into the dining room], I talk to people – in case they need something special they call me," he explains. "If I can make it in the kitchen, it has to be done. I never refuse them."

While he has a large staff, Gino makes it plain that his success depends on his control of every detail, coupled with a deep affection for his clientele, who clearly adore him. In two years, he says, he has not taken a day off. Dimora is open seven days a week for lunch and dinner and it does not close, as most restaurants do, in the afternoon between meals. "I like to see people," he says. "My customers look for me and I am here – always."

On a bustling Saturday night at Dimora, the kitchen door opens and Chef Gino emerges, smiling. Before beginning his rounds in the dining room, he stands, arms folded, and surveys his customers like a benevolent monarch surveying his peaceable kingdom.

"A restaurant, when you do well, is very lovely," he says. "Lots of long hours, you work hard, but you're happy dealing with people all the time – it's got life."

And the work he loves seems to love him back. "It has to be for anything you do – if you love it, then you'll have success." ■

*Dimora is located at 100 Piermont Road, Norwood, (201) 750-5000*