



Chef Michael Thomas Zito

August 31, 1968 - December 12, 2023

Chef Michael Thomas Zito, 55, (“Chef Bear Italia” and “Big Chef”) passed away December 12, 2023, unexpectedly at home in Chicago’s Belmont Gardens neighborhood.

Born in Kentucky to Pentecostal missionaries from New York, Mike began cooking at the age of 13 in Florida to help his family pay bills. The family moved to North Carolina where Mike attended North Buncombe High School Weaverville before earning his GED. At age 17, he was a prep cook at Marriot Resorts, where he learned his love of baking.

Mike moved to Lexington, Kentucky where he was involved in the Leather Community and was also an AIDS activist. He had his first Pastry chef job at the age of 28. He was proud to make a cheese platter for the Queen of England, while she was on one of her horse-buying visits. Mike was Executive Chef at two restaurants, one 75-seat, full-service French restaurant and one American Bistro. He also did catering for private clients and businesses.

In 2006 Mike moved to Chicago where he graduated in 2008 from The Cooking and Hospitality Institute (CHIC) with an Associate’s in Applied Science in Le Cordon Bleu Patisserie and Baking. Through Mami Camilla Italian Cooking School, Mike did his externship at Tasso Restaurant in Sorrento, Italy, with an emphasis on Neapolitan Cuisines.

Mike worked at many restaurants including The Olive Garden, Mrs. Green's Natural Market, Hopcat Bar and Grill, Whole Foods Markets, and Mike's most recent gigs were at Owen and Engine, where he baked bread and Frank and Mary's Tavern in Logan Square.

Mike is survived by Stan Shellabarger and Dutes Miller (his partners of seven years), Nathan and Anthony Pascual (his roommates of ten years), and his faithful companion Onyx the tuxedo cat. Former partner of sixteen years to Gregg Ray of Lexington. Preceded in death by parents Anthony Alfred Zito, Jr. and Erika Habel Zito.

Mike was gregarious, with a boisterous and infectious laugh. He will be missed by many colleagues, regulars, and friends.

Friends are gathering on Sunday, January 21, 11am-3pm, at Frank and Mary's Tavern, 2905 N. Elston Ave., Chicago, 60618.

Arrangements by Inclusive Funeral Care, 773-370-2959 or www.InclusiveFuneralCare.com.

Previous Events

Celebration of Life

JAN 21. 11:00 AM - 3:00 PM (CT)

Frank and Mary's Tavern

2905 N. Elston

Chicago, IL 60618

<https://www.facebook.com/frankandmarystavern/>

Tribute Wall

CJ

“ *Michael Zito welcomed me as a kindred spirit instantly
I will carry his fervor along with my own for all the days* 🍀

Christine Celeste Jennings - January 21, 2024 at 02:06 AM

TH

“ *Michael was truly a gift to those lucky enough to know him. His
gentle demeanor and sense of humor will live on in my memory of
him forever. Love, Tracy.*

Tracy Hurst - January 03, 2024 at 01:16 PM