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GEORGE FORMARO, CHEF PARTNER

*Centro, Django, Gateway Market & Café,
South Union Bakery and South Union Bread Café*

George Formaro is the accomplished restaurateur behind some of Des Moines' most successful eateries – South Union Bread Café, Centro, Django and Gateway Market & Café. He is also the founder of the first artisan bakery in Iowa, South Union Bakery.

Raised in an Italian family on the city's east side, the gregarious Formaro knew the power of good food in strengthening bonds among family, friends and business associates. His education in the restaurant trade began in several of Des Moines' well known restaurants, such as the former City Grill, Winston's and the Des Moines Embassy Club. Formaro supplemented his hands-on experience by enrolling in Des Moines Area Community College's well-regarded culinary arts program, graduating from DMACC in 1988.

Formaro was ready to open South Union Bakery by 1996. The artisan bread bakery, creates handmade loaves of various Italian bread baked slowly in wood burning brick ovens. South Union distributes bread to area restaurants, Gateway Market, Dahl's and HyVee grocery stores. The bakery was the first to satisfy what is now a thriving demand for high-quality, specialty breads in Des Moines.

Seeking to develop additional markets for his one-of-a-kind artisan breads, Formaro opened South Union Bread Café in the spring of 1996. The café is now a mainstay for downtown lunch crowds. Formaro originally wanted more people to experience the quality of his breads. Unwittingly, South Union Bread Café began what Formaro now jokingly refers to as a "sandwich cult" – and he's not kidding. The café has lines of patient diners snaking out the restaurant's doors most days of the week.

South Union's success prompted a move to larger quarters. Formaro was introduced to developer Harry Bookey and his vision for renovating the old Masonic Temple at 10th & Locust in downtown Des Moines. The soaring ceilings and wide spaces of the main level gave Formaro other ideas. He successfully pitched a concept for a new, sit-down restaurant called Centro (which means "city center") featuring wood-grilled specialties, pastas, classic Italian entrees and New York style pizza from a coal-fired brick oven. The two restaurants opened in 2002 to immediate success.

Years later, the opportunity to develop a gourmet market & café knocked on George's door. As a longtime traveler who was used to visiting larger cities for such stores; Formaro longed to bring hard to find quality ingredients to Des Moines and pair them with unique Iowa products. George teamed up with hospitality executive and Centro partner Paul Rottenberg on the concept for a European-style grocery that would soon be known to the metro area as Gateway Market & Café. Located on the edge of downtown at the corner of Woodland Avenue and Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway, Gateway opened to large crowds in the spring of 2007. A second location is set to open in the West Des Moines mixed use development known as Village of Ponderosa in June 2008.

A passionate lover of all types of food, George never stops developing menus and restaurant concepts in his free time. His latest venture is Django, a casual French brasserie located in the heart of the 10th Street entertainment corridor of downtown Des Moines. Nestled between the Hotel Fort Des Moines and Raccoon River Brewing Company, the new space features an interactive chef station that serves jet-fresh seafood, cheese plates, cured meats, artisan bread and house-made desserts. The menu boasts French classics such as Steak Frites and Duck Cassoulet.