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Director Keith Famie (left) interviews John del Signore as part of the "Our Italian Story" documentary.

Chef turned filmmaker to tell 'Our Italian Story'

By KURT ANTHONY KRUG
Special to The Oakland Press

Even though he had a great time on "Survivor: The Australian Outback," Keith Famie would rather be remembered for his other endeavors rather than his 15 minutes on the reality TV show.

"It was a fun, adventurous chapter in my life, but I'd like to think I've progressed since then with my two books, my TV show on the Food Network, and my documentaries," says Famie, a 1978 Farmington High School alumnus.

Through his company, Visionalist Entertainment Productions, the 46-year-old has produced and directed "Our Italian Story," an hourlong documentary about Detroit's Italian heritage. It's scheduled to air commercial-free on WXYZ-Channel 7 three times in December — 7 p.m. Dec. 9; 1 p.m. Dec. 16; and 9 a.m. Christmas Day.

"The show's running without commercials thanks to Lipari Food," Famie says. "Because of them, there's 12 extra minutes of content so there doesn't have to be a break. To run three times without commercials is unheard of."

In conjunction with the Italian American Community of Michigan, Famie will be presenting the documentary

If you go

The Flavors of Italy event is 5 p.m. Sunday at the Rock Financial Showplace in Novi. The event includes dinner, wine, entertainment from the Italian American Cultural Society Coro Italiano and opera singer Dino Valle, and screening of the "Our Italian Story," a one-hour documentary about Detroit's Italian heritage that will air on Dec. 9, 16 and 25 on WXYZ-Channel 7. Tickets are \$200, with proceeds benefiting The Salvation Army, St. Louis Center and ANFE, and are available at all Nino Salvasaggio International Marketplace locations (248) 624-9636. Learn more at www.ourstoryof.com.

at the "Flavors of Italy" event 5 p.m. Sunday at the Rock Financial Showplace in Novi. It will feature live opera and offer Italian cuisine from select metro Detroit restaurants, and fine wines from Ciccone Vineyards and Winery, which is run by Madonna's father, Tony Ciccone.

"We are very fortunate for what our elders sacrificed when they came to America with no money, no language, and some with no family to start a better life," Famie says. "Can you fathom it? It's a pretty unbelievable thing."

Famie started working in restaurants at 16.

"I sucked at school, but cooking was something I gravitated to," he says. "I enjoy the camaraderie and the creative aspects of being in the kitchen. I studied the works of famous chefs and worked in restaurants in Europe and New York. The whole creative process got me jazzed about the whole cooking thing."

It was through his production company, which he founded in 1997, that inspired Famie to host cooking shows. He did 32 episodes of "Keith Famie's Adventures" on the Food Network from 2001-03. He also produced "Ice Warriors," a reality-based documentary that followed a team of Detroit Red Wings alumni throughout Russia. It was nominated for two local Emmy awards.

This is the first documentary in the "Our Story Of" series of documentaries. He is working on "Our Polish Story."

"It's an intense, joyful and touching story about our Italian heritage," says Famie, who shot 70 hours of film. "It'll move everyone and touch everyone who watches it. It's a pretty astonishing-looking show."