



■ **DINNER FOR TWO** Joe Roman hustles out the paella. At 70, he still holds his own.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS/ Kodak DCS620

Singing the nights away



After 46 years at the Columbia Restaurant in Ybor City, Joe Roman still waits tables three nights a week, breaking out in song as the moment strikes him.

Story and photographs by
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TAMPA — To many he is known as the “Singing Waiter.” To his son he is a hero. To those who see him frequently in the restaurant, he is Joe, the people person.

Joe Roman has worked at the Columbia Restaurant in Ybor City for 46 years now. “This is my life,” he exclaims to one of the restaurant owners, Richard Gonzmart who admits, “Joe watched me grow up.”

At 70 years old and claiming retirement, Mr. Roman still works 3 nights a week, earning some “weekend money.” And when Joe works he sings, be it in his own outburst after the Flamenco Dance show or in the way he works his tables and takes care of his guests.

The Columbia is known for its traditional Spanish Flamenco Dance shows which used to have a live band and singers. That is how Mr. Roman got his start. “Sometimes I used sing with one of the Spanish girls who used to sing here so I learned how to sing a little bit. I didn’t know I had a good voice so everybody tells me, oh you can sing so I started singing and after the show finished I make a number or two.”

Sadly Mr. Roman is one of the last of an era. Although he has been a waiter all his life and wouldn’t wish it any other way, he does not recommend it for his younger peers. “But really truly there is no future in this business. There is no retirement so really there is nothing. You pay your social security and then you get your check according to what you pay. But otherwise there is no future. So this generation, I tell them, you better go to school because I’ve been here for 46 and what I get is my check and social security and that’s all.”



■ **AFTER THE DANCING, HE SINGS** Roman breaks out into song sometimes after the show to entertain his customers (top). The flamenco dance show is a preview to Joe’s performance (below).



■ **LAST CALL** Joe ends another weeknight of waiting tables, handing over the evening’s earnings to one of the restaurant’s newer employees.