

Unique path, unique food

Chef takes journey from baseball to fashion to food

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Examiner

With its high-profile buzz and hungry throngs at mealtimes, it's no wonder that newcomer Bibiana has become the go-to place in D.C.'s downtown corridor, just at the edge of fashionable Penn Quarter.

And it's no wonder executive chef Nicholas Stefanelli exudes a certain air of slightly ruffled yet edgy excitement: His kitchen and his food have hit a D.C. home run.

That's good news for a native son: Turns out Stefanelli was born and raised in Prince George's County, and despite having a Greek mother, an Italian father and grandparents who loved cooking and good food so much they raised their own vegetables, Stefanelli dreamed of becoming a baseball star ... until he broke his foot.

Switching gears, he then decided to become a fashion designer and traveled to Italy to visit fashion institutes and learn some industry basics. Of course, he said, while there he visited local markets and ate at numerous local restaurants. This trip ultimately and finally changed his career focus to the kitchen.

On his return to the metro area, he enrolled in Gaithersburg's L'Academie de Cuisine, and with diploma in hand, he worked first for Roberto Donna at his famed, now-defunct Galileo restaurant. Later, he signed on to work for superstar chef Fabio Trabocchi at Virginia's Maestro restaurant at Tysons Corner's Ritz-Carlton hotel, where he cooked and learned about high-class Italian gastronomy for the next five years.

As he reflected on his busy apprenticeship with two top-tier chefs, Stefanelli said he never had the need to move away from the metro area for other culinary training.

"I had great teachers," he said, of Donna and Trabocchi. "Roberto is from the north in Italy, and Fabio is from the south," thus helping him learn the subtle distinctions in regional cooking.

Additionally, Stefanelli worked briefly at Northern California's ultraelegant and trendy French Laundry with Thomas Keller, and this provided a final element to his training.

"I got to see the organization of this other house," he said, "so I was mentored by great cooks who were also great teachers."

Not surprisingly, given his mentors, Stefanelli produces some first-rate Italian regional fare, basically traditional dishes tweaked by his interpretations and based on the fresh ingredients he has on hand.

"The dishes bear my influence," he said, "but they are true to the Italian tradition."

For one, consider the dynamite starter the burratta d'Andria, a soft, heavy cream-infused cheese Stefanelli describes as "mozzarella on steroids." Served with seasonal heirloom tomatoes, the cheese is a bit like eating solid heavy cream.

And what does his family think of this baseball player-turned fashion designer-turned chef?

"I don't know whether they expected this," he said. "But they are as happy as can be. My mother came in twice last week."

And why not? Her son's cooking lures in the hungry like a powerful magnet.

What is your comfort food?

When I am really stressed out, I don't want to eat. But for comfort food, it would be my mom's stuffed peppers, tomatoes and Sunday gravy at my parents' home.

What is your favorite dish?

Like today, I'd want to eat our beef tripe. But in Rome last year, it was roasted porcinis. So it really depends on the season.

How do you get your inspiration?

From past experiences. As I am waking, I start to think. I can

get inspiration from anywhere: dinner with friends, drive on weekends, my wife, notebooks.

What's in your fridge right now?

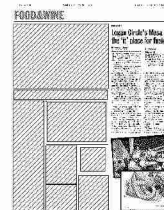
Cured pork jowl. Milk, Italian soda, eggs, pecorino cheese, red onions and a load of bread.

What has been your luckiest moment?

My whole career, as I have been in the right place at the right time. Also having the relationship with the people I have worked with, travel, being able to work and interact with the people with whom I work.

IF YOU GO Bibiana Osteria & Enoteca

» **Where:** 1100 New York Ave.
» **Info:** 202-216-9550
» **Hours:** 11:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.
Monday to Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday, 5:30 to 11 p.m.
Saturday, closed Sunday





ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Chef Nicholas Stefanelli is the executive chef at Bibiana Osteria & Enoteca in Penn Quarter.