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wine, food, and leisure in northern michigan

P R E M I E R E I S S U E

From Chaos to Classics

Conquering the kitchen at

TRATTORIA

STELLA



Dining out is always a tradeoff. On some nights your generally agreeable meal is tainted by a brazen waiter insistent that you try the Bulgarian merlot. On other occasions, the fantastic Dover Sole is offset by a thirty-five minute wait in a deafening bar surrounded by money managers and trays of wine glasses crashing at your ankles. Rarely does a night go perfectly, but we hold out hope. While you're picking shards of glass out of your socks, you can take solace in knowing the meal ahead is destined to be very good because busier means better in the world of fine dining.

Unfortunately, waiting for a table to be readied is the norm. Over the years, I've learned to pacify myself by imagining the pandemonium taking place in the kitchen. How do chefs do it? How do they consistently perform under the long days of prepping a slew of different menu items followed by the dreadful, unrelenting pressure of cooking for dozens if not hundreds of diners?

It is instructive to remember that the French Revolution inspired more than guillotines and political intrigue. In fact, upscale restaurants can trace their lineage to this period of the late eighteenth century because *haute cuisine*, as it was being practiced in royal kitchens, was booted out the door along with the king and his court. Europe's top chefs were forced to slip past the gathering mobs outside Versailles and the Louvre, grabbing their kitchen knives and cleavers on the way out. Into the heart of Paris they scattered, preparing to serve food fit for a king to any boozy bourgeois with francs to spare. Anyone with an understanding of the food business can recognize the sweet-and-sourness of that irony: How fitting that the restaurant chef position was borne of bloodletting and bedlam.

I started my restaurant career at age thirteen, scraping crusted whitefish skins from sheetpans at the Homestead's old Inn. Over the next twenty years, I sequentially bussed, served, and managed dining rooms in fifteen-plus restaurants from Northern Michigan to Miami, not forgetting a brief, miserable stint on a cruise ship in the western Caribbean. I know intimately what can go wrong in a restaurant. Miraculous things must happen for a simple house salad to arrive at the proper place setting in a timely fashion. I still have the waiter's nightmares to show for it. What has all this experience taught me? Get a bottle of wine to the table pronto to help anesthetize yourself from the regularly scheduled disappointments!

by Matt Sutherland

Heirloom Tomato Salad: heirloom tomatoes with house-made mozzarella, basil, and balsamic honey glaze.



White Potatoes: oven baked white potatoes, mozzarella cheese, peppered baby spinach, cream, and chives.

Burrata Pugliese: shaved Prosciutto di Parma, tomatoes, chilled tomato brodo, red amaranth microgreens.



Panna Cotta with apricots and citrus glaze.

Banana pecan bread with vanilla gelato.



Tiramisu



With people whirling in every direction, knives a-blur, the kitchen staff has to operate seamlessly, know their roles, and set their sights on the common goal: a wonderful dining experience. Just remember that next time you think the beef wasn't cooked exactly the way you like it.

That is, of course, unless you choose your restaurants carefully. And while Trattoria Stella is as sure a bet as you'll find in this corner of the world, on a busy mid-week night, I still hedged by quickly ordering our table a bottle of dry Riesling from Left Foot Charley and a couple special martinis made with Traverse City's own True North vodka.

Local for local's sake is a motto for some. My preference for local food and wine is predicated on knowing which local items deserve attention. Not all local is created equal. Not at all. Left Foot Charley's bone-dry Rieslings are as crisp and brightly acidic and stunningly drinkable as any Riesling made worldwide. Serious oenophiles generally agree that dry to slightly

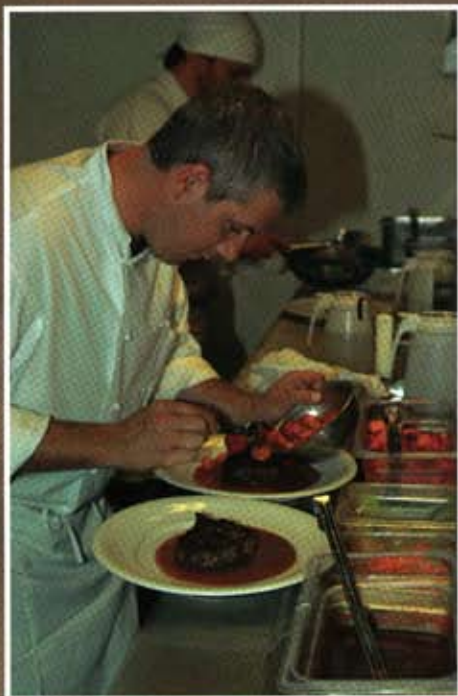
off-dry Rieslings are the ultimate food wine. If you still think Piesporter or Blue Nun, you're in for a surprise.

If you've not had the pleasure, you'll find that Stella is down-under, as in below ground level in a mind-bogglingly large and convoluted four-floor building in the vibrant Village at Grand Traverse Commons on Traverse City's west side. Walk the grounds now and it feels like a Midwestern university campus; in fact, it's the site of a former psychiatric hospital dating from the 1880s. The yellow brick Victorian-Italianate buildings are striking architecturally. You will not find a more unique or serene setting to take sustenance.

Nerves settled, we tucked into the dinner menu noting the mid-summer

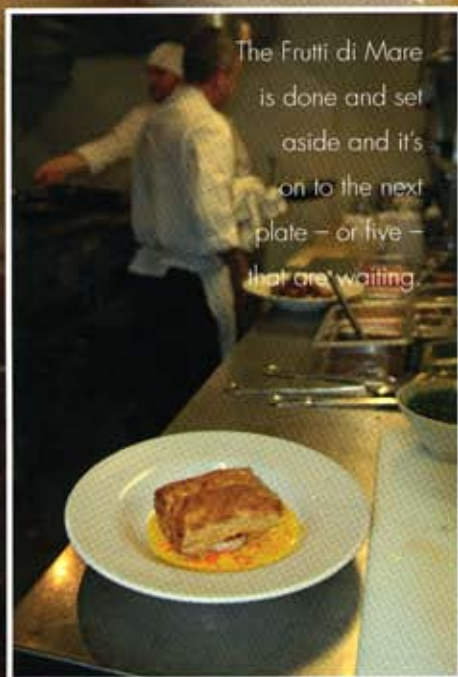
bounty of Northern Michigan vegetables and fruit awaiting us. Chef Myles Anton and his staff buy from an astounding twenty-five different local farmers, all of whom receive top billing on Stella's nightly menu. For example, the Squash Blossoms were grown by Buckley farmers Mike and Tina Werp. Anton stuffed them with ricotta and nutmeg before a quick pan-searing with garlic and olive oil. And yes they were delicious, thanks for asking.

For starters, we also enjoyed plates of Italian-style sushi called Crudo sided with fresh date, onion puree, and Caciocavallo cheese, in addition to Chicken Liver Pate accompanied by blackberry gelatini, blueberry-bourbon vinaigrette,

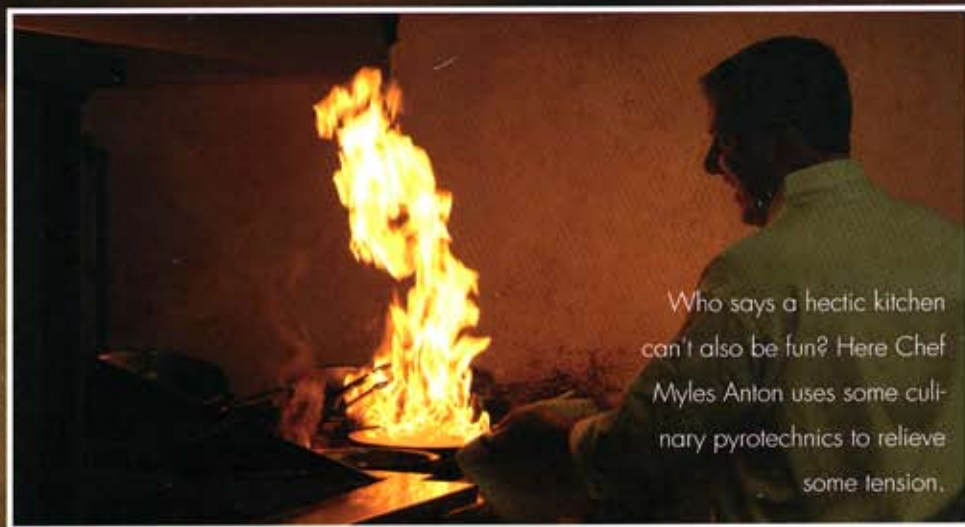


While wondering how the swordfish is cooking, Chef Anton adds the tomato insalata touch to the Wagyu Beef Eye of Ribeye. If you can't multi-task, don't apply to culinary school.

With everything else swirling around, one thing stands still for the chef: the plate. And amidst the chaos comes the classic – in this case, the Burrata Pugliese.



The Frutti di Mare is done and set aside and it's on to the next plate – or five – that are waiting.



Who says a hectic kitchen can't also be fun? Here Chef Myles Anton uses some culinary pyrotechnics to relieve some tension.

From Chef Anton

Squash Blossom Ripieni

Serves Four

Ingredients

8 large squash or zucchini blossoms (we use local ones from Werp Farms)
½ c. ricotta cheese
¼ c. shredded mozzarella
1 small onion, diced
2 cloves garlic, minced
pinch of nutmeg
olive oil
salt & pepper
flour for dredging

Method

Gently wash blossoms. They must be open, like blossomed flowers.

Sweat onions, garlic, and nutmeg in olive oil with salt & pepper. Chill in refrigerator.

Combine chilled mixture with ricotta and mozzarella. Whip into a paste in mixer. Stuff blossoms with mixture. We recommend a piping bag, but a tiny spoon will also work.

Lightly dredge stuffed blossoms in flour and sauté in medium-high pan with olive oil until just starting to brown.

Serve with fettuccini (freshly made is best, but dry will work) tossed with sautéed baby squash, an additional clove of garlic minced, 2 teaspoons olive oil, and 2 tablespoons of the pasta-cooking water. The water will combine with the other ingredients to form a sauce.

and a crisply decadent potato and parmesan wafer known as frico, perfect for dabbing into the buttery terrine. And finally, Burrata Pugliese, shavings of Prosciutto di Parma plated with tomatoes, chilled tomato brodo, and red amaranth microgreens. My tablemates and I marveled at the variety of the menu items and flavor combinations. We knew each needed to be prepared and plated by hand at the last possible moment. Other diners in the restaurant were on different courses, requiring Anton to oversee the action at grills, sauté stoves, salad, and dessert stations. What kind of brains do these guys have, and why aren't chefs running our government?

Parma, in Italy's famed Emilia Romagna region, is renowned for the world's finest cured ham (although a handful of Spanish producers would argue). Many Italians and culinarians the world over consider the verdant region unmatched in the whole of Italy because it is also home to Parmigiano Reggiano and a slew of traditional dishes like Lasagna alla Bolognese and Tagliatelle al Ragu. Historically, excess whey from the Parmigiano-making process (cow's milk is used) would be fed to the lucky Parma pigs, assuring their haunches a little extra flavor. Stella fan and famed chef Mario Batali spent three years working in Bologna just down the road from Parma. He wouldn't make his

way to this old psych hospital if Anton served anything less than Prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano Reggiano and authentic dishes like Crudo, popularized by David Pasternack, chef at Esca, one of Mario's dozen or so restaurants around the country.

Entrées ordered, I studied the wine list for something red and jumped at the hard-to-find Bowers Harbor Vineyards "Dijon Clones" pinot noir from Old Mission peninsula. Again, unapologetically local. Would I rather drink premier cru Pommard, or Chambolle Musigny, both available on the Stella list? Absolutely, but not for three or four times the money. This Bowers Harbor wine showcases the direction Michigan pinot noirs are heading: bright, vibrant fruit flavors backed by a hint of Burgundian-style earthiness, even rusticity. Unlike warmer regions such as California and Oregon where the fruity character often gets baked out, Michigan's colder climes help the wines retain the cherry-berry punch with good acid. While the Bowers Harbor Vineyard Dijon clone reference is deceiving – virtually all pinot noir grown in the U.S. comes from clones developed in Dijon, France – Bowers Harbor Vineyard used new French oak barrels in this pinot, and the results will appeal to any red Burgundy lover.



Stella's amazing wine list isn't the only thing worth enjoying. Bar manager Jon Ingham finishes a couple specialty martinis made with True North vodka.



Hawaiian Swordfish: char-grilled Hawaiian swordfish; sweet pea, pistachio, and parmesan risotto; pea shoots; torn mint; lemon butter.

Sweet Pea & Pistachio Risotto

Ingredients

- 2 c. Arborio rice
- 5 c. water (or chicken stock, but we like to keep our risotto vegetarian friendly)
- ¼ c. toasted shelled pistachios
- ½ c. sweet peas
- 4 T. extra virgin olive oil
- ½ c. shredded parmesan cheese
- 2 T. heavy whipping cream
- salt & pepper to taste

Method

Sauté rice in olive oil until just coated with oil. If you like a nuttier flavor, keep going until just turning golden.

Add enough water to just cover the rice. Stir until liquid is absorbed. Keep adding water, a little at a time, while constantly stirring until the rice is done.

Add the pistachios, sweet peas, parmesan cheese, and cream. Stir until incorporated. Finish with salt and pepper to taste.

Stella also does all its own baking in-house. This freshly baked focaccia is going to find its way to someone's table tonight.



Wagyu Beef Eye of Ribeye

Ingredients

2, 8-oz. eye of ribeye (this is a very unique cut; you can substitute with normal ribeye or strip steak)
2, 4-oz. links of calabrese sausage (spicy Italian pork sausage)
2 c. cooked gnocchi (we make our own, but store-bought is fine)
3 T. butter
½ pint teardrop tomatoes, cut in half
½ pint sungold tomatoes, cut in half
1 T. extra virgin olive oil
1 tsp. minced garlic
1 bunch adult arugula, washed
½ c. veal stock
salt & pepper

Method

Score Calabrese sausage links with deep cuts along the length of the link. This allows for quick, even cooking.

Sauté sausage in a sauté pan, turning to ensure browning on all sides. Add gnocchi and a little olive oil. Continue stirring, making sure gnocchi doesn't stick. When sausage and gnocchi are nice and brown, remove from pan. Adjust seasoning with salt and pepper, set aside in a bowl for serving.

For insalata: Combine tomatoes, garlic, olive oil, and salt and pepper to taste.

For sauce: Heat veal stock in a sauté pan, add butter and salt and pepper. Bring to a boil to incorporate butter. Set aside.

Char-grill heavily seasoned meat to desired doneness. Serve on a large serving plate with sauce. Garnish each piece of meat with a pile of tomato insalata and a small handful of arugula tossed with olive oil, salt, and pepper.



Even with fourteen different things on the mind in the chaotic world of a restaurant kitchen, the main course still needs to be cooked to perfection, as is this Wagyu beef. Now it just needs to be plated... along with those thirteen other things.



Chef Anton with owners Amanda and Paul Danielson.

The Stella wine list is built with one mission in mind: No dogs allowed. It is repeatedly granted an Award of Excellence by Wine Spectator because sommelier-co-owner Amanda Danielson handpicks every bottle to the great dismay of wholesalers representing the common, heavily promoted wines available everywhere else. Stella is not a place to bring your ego, not unless your wine knowledge approaches Master Sommelier status. The list is heavily Italian with a smattering of insider wines from Michigan, California, France, Spain, and Australia. Foremost, it is user-friendly with dozens of easy-drinking food wines; but you must ask for recommendations because Italian wines are maddeningly complicated, bordering on incomprehensible. That said, if you're willing to experiment a bit, the Stella staff will shock you with quality selections.

We paired our Bowers Harbor pinot noir with venison; a couple different cuts of Wagyu beef; and a delightful order of sweet pea, pistachio, and parmesan risotto served next to grilled Hawaiian Swordfish. Four entrées, four different cuts of meat and fish with various hot vegetables, sauces, and sides. I winced for Anton and his staff working their various stations, factoring in our order along with the dozens of other tickets, all listing two or three individual dishes per diner. On a night like tonight, over a thousand plates will be prepared and served.

The pantry station, for example, is responsible for cold appetizers, salads, and desserts – over twenty different items on the dinner menu. Should fate conspire, the guys working this station might suddenly get buried in tickets, which is why Anton always has a floater or two in his kitchen to assist where they're needed. One of the more dangerous periods is mid-evening, when a hundred or more early diners are waiting for dessert and recent arrivals are placing appetizer orders. Every dish requires last-second prep. Anton does not want his cooks to pre-cut fresh fruit and delicate vegetables too early because of the mush factor, so knives are always flying on this station.



Wagyu Beef Eye of Ribeye with tomato insalata, arugula, and beef stock.