

While making cacio e pepe tableside, owner and chef Marco Tarantino explains the history and process to diners as he prepares in the dining room of Spiaggetta in Stone Harbor.



Cacio e pepe, a simple Roman dish on the menu at Spiaggetta, is served tableside.

Marco Tarantino believes the dining room is just as important as the kitchen for a restaurant to be successful.

At Spiaggetta in Stone Harbor, owner and chef Tarantino can be seen walking table to table, greeting customers, checking on their meals, the consummate host. “The presence of the owner is very important in the dining room, more so than in the kitchen,” he explains. “It gives my customers that personal touch feeling that many restaurants don’t have. In my operation I put myself at center stage. I’m willing to take the kudos and the complaints. You need to make sure the customer is happy. I want the customer to come back.”

His philosophy, along with his delicious meals, appear to be a successful combination. He’s also distinguishing himself from the sea of Italian restaurants in South Jersey by offering dishes from his hometown, Rome.

“Most Italian restaurants, including mine, have the basic popular items like chicken parmigiana and veal parmigiana. Great selections, but since all the Italian restaurants have the same menu. I said I have to do something a little bit different. So I introduced, because I’m from Rome, my Roman cuisine.”

The menu at Spiaggetta is separated into two parts: Roman cuisine and classic Italian cuisine.

The classic Italian dishes are what we expect at a fine-dining Italian restaurant: chicken and veal parm, bolognese, meatballs and branzino. On the Roman side we find items like cacio e pepe, pollo coi pepetroni, out of this world lamp chops over farro, and a Roman-style tripe.

“Roman cuisine has always been a rustic, Continued on pg. 16 >>

simple cuisine,” he explains. “There’s nothing super fancy in the preparation, all local ingredients, which is typical of Italian cuisine throughout Italy.


Something rustic and simple can be extremely tasty. That’s the bottom line here, we’re not trying to rewrite the book of Roman cuisine.”

Tarantino took over Spiaggetta, formerly Sole, in 2012 after a successful career opening and operating several restaurants on the Main Line and in Delaware County. Spiaggetta is an Italian word that means present “little beach” and is pronounced “spee-ah-jet-tah.”

His roots go back to Rome, where he grew up, attended the University of Rome and served in the Italian army as a food service specialist. It was on a trip to the United States that he met his future wife and decided to continue his education at St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia. In need of cash for college, and given

his military experience and college courses, he got a job in the front of house at a restaurant near the Main Line called Ristorante San Marco, moving to Alberto’s, and then La Colina in Bala Cynwyd, all fine-dining Italian restaurants.

He says he learned a lot about cooking when he was involved in the business end and the front of the house side of the restaurant business, but it was when he opened Spiaggetta that he really immersed himself in the menu and the kitchen. When he opened Spiaggetta in April of 2012, he decided to differentiate his place by specializing in Roman cuisine and developed a menu that was smaller and more focused than it is today with a modern Italian tone.



For the final step in preparing cacio e pepe, the pasta is added and tossed in the cheese sauce and served.



Tiramisu is made daily in the kitchen at Spiaggetta.

“At the beginning there were not that many people that were receptive to Roman cuisine, or at least any regional cuisine,” he recalls. “Everybody was looking for classic Italian-American, and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

The difference between Roman and Italian-American cuisine is subtle, a difference of ingredients and some technique. “It’s something that people have not been exposed to until recently thanks to social media and TV shows.” Hurricane Sandy ripped through the state with devastating damage just months after he opened, destroying kitchen equipment, carpets and furnishings, but he renovated and managed to reopen in 2013. Today, the restaurant is thriving, with many of the most popular dishes found on either section of the menu like cacio e pepe, chicken parm, eggplant rollatini, meatballs and the branzino.

“Cacio e pepe is a simple dish in the sense that it only has four ingredients,” he explains. “You have the cheese, the black pepper, pasta, and you have to use the pasta water, that’s the secret in a sense. The pasta needs starch and you use that starch to glue your sauce together with the melted cheese. We use pecorino, that’s Romano cheese. In the dining room, I melt the first layer of the cheese, like when you make a creme brulee where you melt the first layer of the sugar. You basically do that with the cheese. You collect the cheese with the pasta water, which makes a cream. You toss the pasta around, black pepper, more cheese, and then there’s a visual thing where I have to make sure it’s creamy enough, and we serve it. People love it.”

Also popular is the branzino.

“The branzino is served fileted. It’s basically plain grilled. We really don’t do much with the branzino because it’s a very delicate fish,” Tarantino says. “Cooking Italian is not 55 ingredients. It’s very simple, five or six ingredients. Simplicity is the most important ingredient. We serve it over Mascarpone polenta with broccoli rabe which is extremely popular. And then we make a buttery orange sauce on top.” He says some customers for special occasions request fileting the branzino tableside, as he does the cacio e pepe on Thursday nights, or making a Caesar salad tableside and he tries to accommodate those requests when possible.

“You can only do that kind of request if you are in the dining room,” he says. “If you are in the kitchen, dishing out a great product, but you don’t have the feedback from the customer, how are you going to know? It goes back to square one: I want



Tarantino works alongside Lazaro Lopez in the kitchen at Spiaggetta.

the customer to come back and bring their friends.”

He is still hands on in the kitchen, but believes in looking at the big picture, which includes the customers associating Marco with Spiaggetta.

“The hospitality” industry is not food only. It’s also hospitality,” he says.

That outgoing showmanship extends to summer cooking class he offers, along with his wife Analia, and his 85-year-old mother-in-law, Enza, where you can learn to make items like gnocchi, tiramisu, fettuccini, and even small doughnuts infused with wine, a Roman dessert specialty. You not only get to learn how to make it during the three-hour class, you get to sample it with a luncheon afterwards.

“This is not a YouTube kind of class,” he says. “This is something like you get your hands dirty kind of class.”

He also opened a shop next door, the Stone Harbor Panini Company, where he serves a variety of hot and cold panini, sandwiches, focaccia and salads.

“You have to offer something different,” he says, which could be his mantra. “Every sandwich shop offers an Italian hoagie. I don’t have it. I have a porchetta sandwich. I have a prosciutto mozzarella sandwich. I have an octopus and burrata sandwich.”

The most popular sandwich is the chicken caprese — grilled antibiotic-free chicken, fresh mozzarella, tomatoes, roasted peppers, basil pesto and a balsamic reduction on a Formica baguette placed in the panini press. They also can get it on gluten-free bread, or panini.

Spiaggetta has a large upstairs dining room for special events, weddings, welcoming parties and private events that also is BYOB, like the rest of the restaurant. They also have special events like jazz nights and the feast of the seven fishes, which is one of the most popular special dinners, this year on Dec. 14, which was featured in Flavor.

You will be sure to see Tarantino in his white chef’s jacket, the face of Spiaggetta, bringing a little something extra to a fine-dining experience.

“A lot of people will tell you, I went there because the owner was there and the vibe was good.”

SPIAGGETTA

9800 Third Ave., Stone Harbor
609-368-0400

Little neck clams appetizer is served cioppino style, sautéed with garlic, white wine and grape tomatoes.



Spiaggetta’s focaccia board includes slightly toasted house made bread, tomatoes and cheese.





The first step in making cacio e pepe requires using a torch to heat and melt the pecorino romano cheese inside a cheese wheel.





Marco Tarantino

STORY AND PHOTOS BY VERNON OGRODNEK

