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The Epicure's Corner Chef Du Jour; Ralph Pisani of Abatino's

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After school, most 12-year old boys come home and feast on Fritos, Pop Tarts and any junk food they can find. Not Ralph Pisani. Growing up in White Plains, Ralph tells me he looked forward to walking in the door and having sauteed pig's feet with tomato sauce. The squeamish look on my face brings the interview to a momentary standstill. Thankfully, he's not offended and reassures me that it's "truly delicious". Right away I can tell this was no ordinary kid and, as it turns out, Ralph is no ordinary chef.



He is owner and top chef at Abatino's Restaurant at 670 North Broadway in North White Plains and has been in business an impressive 21 years. Ralph learned authentic southern Italian cooking from his mother, Elisabetta, and his grandmother, Maria. The Abatino family owned a restaurant in Argusto, Italy, and migrated to White Plains in 1956. They brought with them the European tradition of Sunday afternoon meals resplendent with mouth-watering courses of meat and pasta, as well as aunts, uncles and relatives in between. "Everyone had to be at the table at 2 p.m.," Ralph recalls. "No exceptions."

Ralph said his mother and grandmother never actually took him aside and taught him how to cook. "That's because in Italian culture, men do men's work and women do women's work and it wasn't customary for men to be in the kitchen." Nevertheless, Ralph liked to hang out in the kitchen and observe his mother and grandmother cook, which they did all day long. Incredibly, he picked it all up "just by watching".

From a young age, Ralph knew he wanted to be in business for himself. So, in 1985, at the age of 21, he made a bold decision with the support of his mother to buy an existing Italian restaurant and make it his own. "It was a lot of trial and error", Ralph recalls, and he relied solely on Elisabetta to guide him through those early years. Although she died just five years after opening what has become a very successful establishment, she left behind a legacy that's in every dish.

While many chefs and restaurateurs are forced to buy canned and frozen ingredients due to the cost and convenience, Ralph won't ever consider it. Although he can't go to the backyard and pick fresh tomatoes like his mother did, he does the next best thing. Twice a week at 5 a.m., the energetic chef ventures to Hunts Point, Bronx, with his 16-foot refrigerated truck and spends several hours walking through the various loading docks and stores that are brimming with the freshest produce, meat and fish. Ralph touches, smells and closely examines everything from broccoli rabe

to Chilean sea bass to make sure it's of the highest quality.

Not surprisingly, Ralph's motto is, "what you start with is what you end up with. The better the individual ingredients, the better the end results". Which is why upon entering the kitchen, I see a huge 100-quart pot of chicken soup boiling on the stove. "You don't use canned broth?" I asked. "Never," he replies emphatically. "A good chicken or veal broth is the basis of many of the sauces here. "Ralph's chicken stock is made with chicken parts--back and necks because "they have the most flavor." They produce more fat than other parts, however, which is why the soup has to be strained several times to remove the fat. If you don't have the time to make your stock from scratch, Ralph advises, though reluctantly, "College Inn makes a suitable substitute--in a pinch, that is."

The same principled philosophy goes for cooking with wine. "If you use a cheap wine it will be reflected in the sauce. The better the wine, the tastier the dish. "However, you don't have to go crazy. Ralph suggests a moderately priced wine, "something in the \$8 to \$12 range." When making veal marsala, he cautions not to buy the marsala wine in the supermarket, but instead recommends Florio sweet marsala wine.

As for mozzarella cheese which is a restaurant staple, packaged brands like Polly-O and Sargento are simply unacceptable. Ralph makes his own mozzarella from fresh curd and you can absolutely taste the difference as I did during my visit. It's lighter, fluffier and has a smoother taste. Acknowledging that our readers are unlikely to make cheese from scratch, Ralph advises buying it fresh from the speciality store.

The base for Abatino's tomato sauce is whole canned peeled plum tomatoes which Ralph says "is the only way to go" and is easily found in any supermarket. A 100-quart pot is filled with tomatoes and then crushed with an industrial mixer. He recommends that those of us at home use a blender or food processor to achieve the same results. As for the best pasta--De Cecco.

Just like the ingredients have to be of the highest quality, so too does the cookware. Ralph uses the Mercedes of pans, All Clad, because it is the best for sauteing meats and reducing sauces.

The inspiration for Abatino's nightly specials comes from visiting other restaurants. Angelo's on Mulberry Street, where's he's been going since he was a child, is Ralph's favorite haunt. He's also spurred to creativity by visits to Mario Batali's restaurant, Po and Otto, as well French and Caribbean restaurants in St. Martin where he likes to vacation. Emeril Lagasse on the Food Network continues to be a source of ideas and information.

But touchingly, Ralph's most important inspiration is his devoted wife of 17 years, Jackie, who manages the front of the house. This warm and inviting lady considers herself to be an accomplished cook like her husband, but admits it didn't start out that way. The couple met when she was 14 and he was 16.

Whenever Ralph visited Jackie at her home, Jackie's mother would invite him to stay for dinner. You can imagine his horror when, at the beginning of their courtship, he saw a jar of Ragu tomato sauce being taken out of the pantry. While some Italian men would have run from the door, Ralph stayed, but insisted on making the sauce from scratch. Once Jackie and her family tasted the real thing, there was no going back. Even today, Jackie's parents come to the restaurant to pick up their weekly quota of the "genuine thing."

When asked about his favorite hobbies, Ralph's answer is, "eating," but you wouldn't know it from looking at him. Ralph is fit due to the fact that he works out every morning for an hour doing cardio and weights. This regimen allows him to eat all the pasta he wants. During the rare respites from the restaurant, he also likes to escape to a bookstore for a few hours and browse through the aisles. "You get stale and you have to rejuvenate yourself." His three favorite cookbooks which are weathered from use, are "Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking" and "More Classic Italian Cooking" by Marcella Hazan and "Food and Memories of Abruzzo" by Anna Theresa Callen.

So, what would Ralph be doing if he weren't operating a restaurant? When asked the question he tilts his head and pauses. "Ah...I don't know...ah what would I be doing...Hmm..." He has to think long and hard about that one, because the answer is--nothing else!