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PASTA FANTASTICA

Freshly made pasta in **traditional** strands and shapes? Served with enchanting, **authentic** sauces? In wonderfully **intimate trattorias**? **Portland's** the place.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

THERE'S ALWAYS BEEN an Italian community in Portland, and Italian restaurants. DiMillo's, Maria's, Bruno's, and the bygone Village Café are part of our DNA. Vignola/Cinque Terre brought upscale Italian cuisine. More than 10 years ago, the Front Room on Munjoy Hill turned us all into gnocchi fiends—for brunch, no less, with eggs and hollandaise sauce. Chef/owner Harding Smith subsequent-





Ribollita chef Kevin Quiet has been preparing fresh pasta by hand for the past 20 years. He uses a wooden drying rack to hang strands of spaghetti and pappardelle.



ly opened the Corner Room, with an Italian menu featuring such pastas as pappardelle and bucatini made on the premises. And today, the bar for authentic Italian pasta in this city has never been higher.

BACK COVE SUPER FINE

"All of our pastas are handmade by our morning prep guru, Camille," says chef **Mike Smith** at **Tipo** on Ocean Avenue. "She has what we refer to in the business as 'pasta hands.' She does a killer job. We use different flours and combinations of flours for each pasta. We like super fine pasta flour, semolina, and rye flour. The gnocchi are both potato- and ricotta-based, with some flour and egg."


“We have an electric pasta roller made in Italy to roll out the sheets. The *fazzoletti* (handkerchiefs) and the *garganelli* (tubular quills) are cut with a “bicycle” cutter, with five small-wheel blades that can be [adjusted] and locked into place. The spaghetti is cut on a *chitarra*. The *corzetti* (flat circles) are hand-stamped with a custom corzetti stamp from Florence.”

We find **Camille Mann** making pasta in Tipo’s spotless kitchen one recent morning. A restaurant veteran who’s worked at Fore Street, Hugo’s, Eventide, and Pai Men Miyake, she moves with practiced, economical motions at a broad stainless counter. She sends a long, wide band of pasta dough through the electric roller several times, after which she lays it out on the flour-dusted counter.

“This is a *garganelli* board.” She sets down a wooden board less than a foot square. It’s surface is carved with tiny parallel ridges. “Wood enhances the texture of the pasta, and *rigates* carry the sauce better.” A couple of passes of the bicycle cutter over the sheet of dough turn it into neat two-inch squares. Working quickly, she rolls each square diagonally onto a thin dowel over the garganelli board. *Voilà*—ridged tubes with a quill point at each end. In a couple of minutes, she’s heaped a drying tray with a slew of them.

“Right now, we serve these with lamb *sugo*. In the spring, it was spring peas and scallions.”

She pulls a brick of bright red dough from the cooler. “Corzetti dough—we put beet powder and a little wine in it.” Another long sheet is rolled out and cut into lengths which are placed on a wooden board and punched into circles about the circumference of a golf ball, using the ring piece of the corzetti stamp. She uses the floured stamp piece to imprint each red circle with Tipo’s motorcycle logo. “We’ll



Camille Mann puts her famous “pasta hands” to work stretching out dough through an Italian-made pasta machine at Tipo.

sauce these with pork, Calabrian chilies, and a little chard.”

MILANESE CORNER

“We make pasta every day,” says **Enrico Barbiero**, chef and co-owner of **Paciarino** with his wife, **Fabiana de Savino**. The pair left their native Milan with a young daughter seeking a more peaceful place to raise her and have since made their living with

the charming *pastificeria* on Fore Street they opened nine years ago. High ceilings, simple pine furniture, brick walls, and potted plants lend a rustic atmosphere.

Enrico’s assistant, **Martha Page**, tends to a noisy contraption the size of a washing machine. Inside, a batch of ravioli dough is mixing. She lifts up a hinged hatch cover, peeks, and pours in a slosh of tomato paste and water. “This is ravioli *Milanese*, so it

gets a bit of tomato.” When a five-inch-wide belt of dough starts rolling out, it’s a rich, rosy, buff color. The continuous strip winds around a vertical dowel. Once two dowels have been wound with dough, they’re mounted on another part of the machine. She loads a canister with a mixture of ricotta, eggs, Parmesan, and black pepper. Next, she snaps it into place on the machine. A flick of a switch, and perfect pairs of ravioli



Chef Paolo Laboa (right) and Frank Lehman prepare tortellini for the night's service at Solo Italiano.



squares start dropping out of a chute onto a broad drying tray dusted with rice flour. In no time, two large drying trays are heaped with ravioli. "This is only enough ravioli for today," Page says.

“I had to learn a lot,” she says. “Since I grew up in Maine, the joke here is that I believed there were only two types of pasta—macaroni and spaghetti.”

Don't overlook Paciarino's retail fridge case just outside the kitchen. I ask Enrico about the black *tagliolini*. “Ah, that's made with squid ink, which I get from Browne Trading. It loves any sauce made with *frutti di mare*.” I purchase a package and make a quick scampi for dinner with fresh tomatoes and lots of garlic from the farmers' market. Boiling water turns the tagliolini a dark, dramatic green-black, and the tender noodles really do love the shrimp sauce. Do try this at home!

ON TO LIGURIA

Paolo Laboa, executive chef at **Solo Italiano** on Commercial Street, is another native Italian in charge of a Portland restaurant kitchen. Like Milanese chef Enrico Barbiero, he too has regional pride and a glorious accent. Laboa's home town is Genoa.

“*Genova*,” he corrects. “*Genovese* food has the light hand, very healthy. Today, salt and sugar are put into everything. We don't do that. My food is real. Everything here is local. Produce and duck eggs come from Stonecipher Farm; other vegetables come from Dandelion Farm.” He shows us his corzetti stamps—“made by a Ligurian stamp-making family who's carved them for 400 years.”

Solo Italiano has the greatest seating capacity of the fresh pasta palaces we visit, hence the greatest nightly need for freshly made pasta in up to a half-dozen

shapes. Yet the pasta-making work space is the smallest we've seen. What's more, “The menu changes every day,” says **Frank Lehman**, who functions as the one-man pasta station.

He stands at a small counter, hand-cutting and piping tortellini at lightning speed. “The trick here is to roll, cut, and seal every one of these before the dough dries out,” says Lehman, whose eyes never stray from his work. He piles the tortellini onto a baking sheet dusted with semolina.

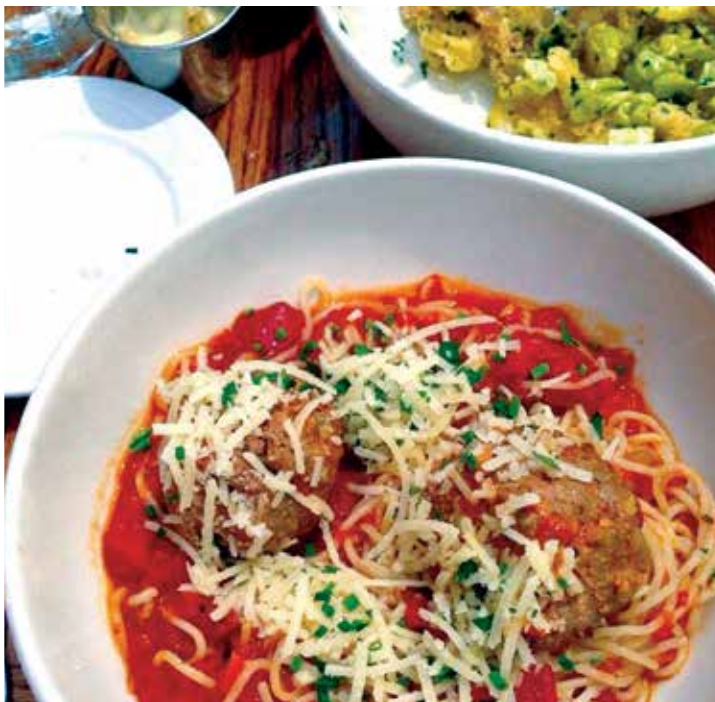
“These are filled with mozzarella, basil, and marjoram,” says Chef Laboa. “Tonight, we'll sauce them with *puttanesca di tonno*—that's a puttanesca sauce with fresh tuna.” He pulls the fingers of one hand together and gazes heavenward to suggest how divine this will be.

Next up are the fazzoletti that Solo sauces with *pesto alla Genovese*. Laboa's pesto won a 2008 best pesto award in *Genova*, and he has the mortar-and-pestle trophy to prove it. “Notice Frank uses only the width of his hand to measure where to cut,” says Laboa as Lehman runs a rolling blade across the sheet of dough along the pinky side of his left hand.

Once these rectangles are dispatched to another flour-dusted sheet, he switches gears to the *orecchiette*. “These will get a traditional sauce of sausage and brocco-



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HUNGRY EYE

li rabe.” He rolls balls of dough into ropes about a half-inch thick, and lines up a parallel row of six ropes. Picking up a straight-edge cutter, he chops the whole row into tiny pieces. One at a time, he gives each piece a quick roll with his thumb, and before our eyes, the “little ears” of pasta pile up. Talk about pasta hands!

If there’s one thing to know about the pasta makers of Portland, it’s that they love what they do.

“Five years ago, I was washing dishes for Paolo at Prides Osteria in Beverly, Massachusetts,” says Frank Lehman. “He taught me to make pasta there. When he moved here, I followed.” He adds, “I was already looking for a way to live in Portland.”

LITTLE TUSCANY

“We make our own gnocchi, ravioli, fettuccine, and pappardelle,” says chef/owner of **Ribollita**, **Kevin Quiet**, pictured below. With its café-curtained façade and whimsically carved sign, Ribollita has been a fixture for 20 years on Middle Street near its terminus at India Street, once the edge of Portland’s Little Italy [See our story “Portland’s Little Italy,” April 1990]. A concrete rooster sits in the window—“the symbol of Tuscany.” When you enter, you’re immediately attracted to the brick walls and the coziness of the small dining rooms.

“This is Old Portland,” says Quiet. “There used to be lots of little places like this.” A vintage black-and-white photo hangs in the tiny foyer, showing the busy barbershop that occupied this space in the 1950s. Today, Ribollita is surrounded by hipsterdom—the



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HUNGRY EYE

Eventide/Hugo/Honeypaw hegemony, plus Duckfat and the East Ender—and an obstructed sky to the east, thanks to the ever-growing condo canyon on Munjoy Hill. Quiet doesn't dwell on such things. "I remember when Jordan's meat plant used to block out my sun, too," he says.

In his tiny kitchen, Quiet rolls a length of dough from an electric machine roughly the size of a toaster. He spoons filling into neat rows. "This is a puree of cannellini beans, romano, and a dash of balsamic. The sauce will be a simple hazelnut brown butter." He takes the edge trimmings of pasta and hangs the strips on a wooden drying rack below the rows of drying spaghetti and pappardelle. "We'll use the trimmings as *stracciatella*."

He pulls a bowl of a different filling from the cooler. "This is simply ricotta, romano, and fresh peas from Snell." He offers a teaspoon.

The filling tastes so simple and enchanting that when I leave, I head straight to Terra Cotta Pasta in South Portland and purchase a package fresh pasta sheets and a tub of creamy ricotta. ■

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