

- HOME
- RESTAURANTS
- LIFESTYLE
- JERSEY SHORE
- ATLANTIC CITY
- TOWNS & SCHOOLS
- TOP DOCTORS
- EVENTS
- BEST OF JERSEY
- FIND A BUSINESS

Restaurants

Smells Worth Handing Down

Chef: Luca Valerin, Osteria Giotto, Montclair; Mamma: Graziella Varotto, Castel d'Aiano, Emilia-Romagna, Italy; Nonna: Esterina Schiavon, Padua, Veneto, Italy

Posted January 18, 2012 by [Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco](#)

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Chef Luca Valerin of Osteria Giotto sniffs a handful of sage and rosemary. He uses these herbs fresh and also grinds them with salt in a food processor, later drying the mixture for days to make what he calls "magic salt."

Walk past Osteria Giotto most afternoons, and the enticing aromas wafting from the kitchens evoke chef Luca Valerin's native Italy. But even after eight years of concocting savory fragrances here, Valerin, who turns 42 this month, is most viscerally transported by those from his mother's stove, like the scent of her soffritto, the sautéed, chopped carrots, celery and other aromatics at the foundation of many a classic dish.

"When I sniff them, I go back in time," he says—back to Padua in the Veneto region of northern Italy, where Valerin grew up in an apartment with a plot of land planted with ten 100-yard-long rows of merlot and cabernet grapes. "We didn't have microwaves there," he says.

After a full day working as a dental assistant, his mother, Graziella Varotto, now 68, would cook dinner for the two of them—pasta with sautéed zucchini or all'amatriciana. "The moment I opened the door, I knew what she'd cooked for me," he recalls. "My mother didn't ask, 'What do you want to eat?' She would cook one thing; she'd cook it very well." He wasn't crazy about liver or bollito misto—a traditional dish of boiled meats and greens—but whatever she made, he ate, realizing "she put her love into it." Even then—long before she became a cook late in her working life, outside Bologna, where she now lives—his mother embodied his definition of a good cook: someone who can make a great dish with simple ingredients.



Valerin's mother, Graziella, at home in Italy in December.

Valerin's maternal grandmother, his Nonna Esterina, now 89, had her own tempting repertoire, like baccalà alla vicentina (dried cod cooked in olive oil and milk) and gnocchi in sauce made from tomatoes she'd preserved herself. Come harvest time, the extended family, some 35 strong, would pitch in to not only pick and crush the grapes, but also lay out an al fresco feast. "It was like a family reunion," says Valerin.

With every member of the family engaged in some aspect of food preparation, it was only natural that by age 10 Valerin was tinkering with dessert recipes. "I was very precocious," he says. But as a gifted athlete, he trained in the hope of playing professional soccer. A swimming accident at age 15, in which he broke his neck, derailed those plans, and he opted for culinary studies at the Pietro d'Abano school of hotel management in the nearby spa town of Abano Terme, from which he graduated in 1988.

There he learned that the secret to making the gnocchi he now serves at Osteria Giotto—as good as his Nonna Esterina's—was to let the mashed potatoes cool off before kneading them. "When they're hot, they still have water in them. If you make the dough when they're hot, you'll end up using more flour than you'd have to if the potatoes were cold," explains Valerin. The result will be tough, and "instead of tasting the potato, you'll taste flour."

He went on to hone his skills at the exalted San Domenico restaurant in Imola in the Emilia-Romagna region, Italy's gastronomic mecca. That's where he learned to bake the breads that he insists on making daily at the restaurant he co-owns with Robert Pantusa (an American chef whom he met at San Domenico).

At home, just a short walk away, he and his wife, Debora Galassi, strive to pass on their appreciation for the scents and flavors of fresh ingredients and homemade dishes to their daughter, Anna Esterina, 8. "Every time I cook something, I ask her, 'What did you smell? What does your nose sense?' It's very important to me," he says.

As for his mamma, he notes that when she visits his restaurant, she often tells him, "You eat very well here; much better than in a lot of restaurants in Italy."

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