



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Massimo De Francesca is the executive chef at Domaso Trattoria Moderna at the Hotel Palomar in Arlington.

Sky-high Italian cuisine

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to *The Examiner*

Sizing up Massimo De Francesca, you might think he's spent his life cooking in Florence, Naples or Tuscany, steeped in the culinary traditions of his native land. Instead, De Francesca — now the executive chef of Arlington's sky-high Domaso Trattoria Moderna on the fourth floor of the Hotel Palomar — is a Canadian native, born and raised in Toronto.

But don't let that fool you: This young chef may be Canadian, but he grew up in an all-Italian, all-foodie household and is passionate about Italian cooking. Raised by parents who had emigrated from southern Italy, De Francesca learned at a very early age to prepare and appreciate the authentic cuisine of his parents' homeland, cooking alongside his parents in their home kitchen.

"My dad was very particular about what he ate," De Francesca says. "He often cooked for himself. He created his own kitchen outside with a grill. I was exposed to that at an early age," he said, adding that his dad also hunted, gathered wild mushrooms and fished for fresh catch from local lakes. His mother, meanwhile, excelled in making pastas and risottos and triumphed over her freshly picked vegetables right out of her back garden.

Working as a dishwasher in a local restaurant while in high school may have further whetted his appetite for the culinary world. Whatever his incentive, De Francesca enrolled in the George Brown College Culinary Arts School in Toronto, where he completed a degree in hospitality operations.

After he finished an apprenticeship in culinary arts, he relocated to the Adriatic Coast in Rimini, Italy, where he honed his professional culinary skills by learning firsthand about his native cuisine. He also was fortunate to train

What is your most outstanding kitchen memory?

Doing a charity dinner for . [Italian classical tenor] Andrea Bocelli. He came into the kitchen and we cooked a dinner for him. After the meal, he performed a concert right in the dining room.

Do you cook at home?

I'm rarely there. If we do get a day off, I don't cook, except maybe simple things like soup and sandwiches.

What is your comfort food?

A good pizza of any kind, even from

Domino's. It can do the trick.

What are your tips for successful cooking?

It's to be simply risky. Don't complicate a recipe, but introduce certain ingredients not normally paired together, such as spaghetti carbonara garnished with a raw quail yolk.

Where do you get your inspirations?

The region where I am cooking has a lot to do with it. Here in the Chesapeake, there is seafood and a lot of what Virginia has to offer.

IF YOU GO Domaso Trattoria Moderna

- **Where:** 1121 N. 19th St., Arlington
- **Info:** 703-351-1211
- **Hours:** Breakfast — 7:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. daily; Lunch — 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday to Friday; Dinner — 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. Monday to Friday

For more on this chef, visit washingtonexaminer.com.

with Michelin-star chef Vincenzo Cammerucci at Lido Ristorante in the port town of Cesenatico, Italy, which added a little gloss to his training.

Upon returning to Toronto several years later, De Francesca worked in several high-end hotel restaurants, before fleeing the fierce Canadian winters for the Caribbean, where for four years he worked in the Grand Cayman in hotels and privately owned restaurants. Besides soaking up the sun and local Caribbean culture, De Francesca garnered a significant cooking advantage.

"The island is multicultural," he says. "Besides the European and American influences, I cooked with people from India and the Philippines. I learned how to cut up fresh fruit from trees, and developed a great relationship with local fishermen. ... I learned to fillet fresh fish and mastered those techniques with 70-pound tunas and wahoos."

Coming back to what he calls the "real world," De Francesca eventually came on staff at Domaso, a restaurant that boasts a contemporary Italian menu. Well suited to this challenge, De Francesca describes his cooking as "Frit-

alian," a robust melding of French and Italian flavors and techniques. But he nonetheless admits to injecting some Caribbean influences into his food — for example, by cooking fruits in savory ways and by pairing them with or simply marinating them together raw to make ceviche.

Does he have any regrets, perhaps harboring a secret fantasy to be a beachcomber? Yes, cooking is a challenging career, he admits, but despite the long hours, he's in the kitchen because he loves it.

Scott Greenberg » The Vine Guy

Paris travelogue: Part two

We started the next day of our trip back at the south leg of the Eiffel Tower, where we met our guide, Crystal, for the Fat Tire Bike Tour (arranged through Viator at viator.com). The four-hour tour is a fun way to see Paris from the street point of view. The bikes are comfortable, the ride is easy and there is a short break in the middle to give riders a chance to grab a snack. Bike About Tours (bikeabouttours.com) offers more intimate guided rides with a maximum of 10 people and takes you to popular sites, as well as less traveled hideaways.

After a late lunch, we made our way to the Paris Vision tour office on Rue du Rivoli where Viator had arranged for us to take one of the famous Seine River cruises. This being the City of Lights, we opted to follow up the twilight cruise with a narrated nighttime "Illuminations" bus tour through town. Both were a great way to kick back and relax while taking in all of the sights from two very different perspectives. For a real treat, we added the dinner option at Chez Clement at the end of the tour — it makes for a very long day, but the chance to sit down at a notable restaurant in the shadow of the Arc de Triomphe on the Champs Elysee was memorable.

Now it was time for art and to help make the world of art come alive for the boys. We decided to hire a guide through Context Travel, a company known for providing guides who make art and architecture fun for children and adults alike.

Michael — who has a doctorate in European architecture — began our tour outside the Louvre in the original courtyard, explaining to the boys how the museum started out as a medieval fortress, complete with dungeon and tower. Michael continued to captivate all of us as he led us through the museum with tales of war, betrayal and artisan rivalry, all the while slipping in educational tidbits about the evolution of sculpture and painting. By the end, the boys were looking for "perspective and vanishing points" in every piece of artwork.

We caught a quick lunch at one of the museum's cafes and then headed off on our own to see the not-to-be-missed elaborate Apartments of Napoleon and other exhibits.

That evening, we headed over to the Marais district for our only "reservations required" dinner at

Le Gaigne Restaurant (12 Rue Pecquay). This tiny restaurant seats about 20 people, and the small, reasonably priced menu had something for everyone. To make reservations, visit its Web site at restaurantle-gaigne.fr.

The next day we visited the Chateau de Versailles, an easy 40-minute trip from Paris on the RER (line C). The biggest tip we can give you about visiting Versailles is go early. The lines to buy tickets can get very long (up to two hours), so try to buy your tickets online directly from the chateau (chateauversailles.fr/fr). The immaculately sculptured gardens are typical of the French style, and the chateau is a simply amazing display of opulence and wealth. Make sure to purchase an audio guide (included if you opt for a "day pass"). It's invaluable as you go through each room.

The grounds are massive, so consider using the minitrain or renting bikes to get around the estate. And don't miss the Grand Trianon and Petit Trianon, which were built as a "small" retreat for royalty — a place to escape from palace life on the palace grounds. Both have a more intimate feel and are far less crowded than the main chateau. Don't forget to pick up provisions for a picnic at one of the local markets before entering the grounds. We enjoyed a leisurely lunch alongside the chateau's lake that was more memorable and far less expensive than dining at one of the restaurants on the estate.

Wednesday we tackled the most popular museum in Paris: Musee d'Orsay. The former train station is famous to the greatest collection of Impressionist art in the world. We were back in the capable hands of Michael from Context Travel, who picked right up in the d'Orsay where he left off at the Louvre. As Michael guided us through the museum, he built on all of the things that we learned a couple of days earlier.

Price of admission to the Musee d'Orsay: 8 euros (children under 18 are free). Hiring a guide to make art come alive for your children: 100 euros. Having your three teenage boys ask about the difference in the perspective of Gustave Caillebotte's "The Floor Planers" versus Edgar Degas' "L'Absinthe": priceless.

(The final installment of The Vine Guy's trip through Paris will appear next week. For previous columns by The Vine Guy, visit washingtonexaminer.com.)

