

A chef who takes the cake

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

Urbane and utterly charming, Luigi Diotaiuti has the distinction of opening one of Dupont Circle's first upscale restaurants, featuring high-end Italian cooking in a small, intimate setting. The name: Al Tiramisu, referring, of course, to the famous Italian cake.

Viewing all the photos lining the restaurant walls, visitors get a sense of how this singular fellow from southern Italy has charmed and cooked his way into the hearts of Washingtonians for the past 15 years. Because he grew up on a prosperous farm, Diotaiuti was exposed early on to a seemingly endless supply

of great ingredients. "We were self-sustaining," he said. "We would grow and sell beans, eggplants, tomatoes and anything that a farm could produce. We used to buy grapes and olives and made wines and olive oil."

As a teen, Diotaiuti enrolled in a nearby culinary school in the same region of Italy. "I was inspired [to cook] by growing up on a farm," he said. "I was really intrigued by the program at the school. I loved it right away, and thought that this is what I was made for," conceding now that, years later, food has always been an important part of his life.

Moving to the United States was purely by happenstance, he said, and not a planned relocation. "I came to the U.S. by accident," he said. "I was supposed to help someone with a restaurant for a few months. But at some point, in order to stay on, I decided that I would need to open my own place to make it worth staying here. That was in March 1995."

Years later, Diotaiuti can look

IF YOU GO Al Tiramisu

» **Where:** 2014 P St. NW
» **Info:** 202-467-4466
» **Hours:** Lunch, Monday to Friday, noon to 2 p.m.; dinner, Sunday to Thursday, 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday until 11 p.m.

back and see how his approach to presenting his native cuisine has fared. Competition is stiff, of course, but he has created a restaurant with its own personality. "My cuisine is influenced partially by my childhood," he said. "It's original yet contemporary. In terms of our daily menu, it's 100 percent Italian. Even the fish comes in daily from Italy." And when the catch is plentiful, Diotaiuti makes a point of carrying around a tray of the fresh seafood to show off to customers.

But why name a restaurant after an Italian dessert? That's simple, he explained. "I used to be the chef at Primi Piatti [in D.C.]," he said. "It had an open kitchen, and patrons



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

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used to call for me to save some tiramisu for dessert when they sat down. So when I opened my own place, I said to go to 'Al tiramisu.'"

Of course, he has that classic

dessert on the menu and he has absolutely never changed the traditional recipe. "I say to customers, 'Have tiramisu in Al Tiramisu,'" he says.

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Wines, gifts and gadgets for Father's Day

When I was a child, I always felt cheated that mothers and fathers had their own "day."

Of course, I was given the standard "every day is children's day" retort whenever I voiced concern over the injustice of having to buy cards once a year for people who seem to have it their way all year long. It is amazing what several decades and a few children of my own did to change my perspective.

Now that I am a proud member of the fathers club, I am looking forward to kicking back and relaxing in my favorite chair this Sunday as my children gather at my feet and bestow upon me cute cards and gifts that they have been saving all year long ... yeah, right.

If you believe that, I have a vintage bottle of Manischewitz I'd like to sell you. But I am hoping for at least one card and maybe, just maybe, a present that won't end up on the top shelf of my closet or relegated to the pegboard in the garage.

Here are a few ideas that I am sure any dad who is either new to wine or already a connoisseur would love to get this Father's Day. Retail prices are approximate.

Wine Library's owner and energetic wine expert, Gary Vaynerchuk, has put together a collection of his favorite "wines

for dudes" in a sampler six-pack (\$50, shipping included). These wines were picked by Vaynerchuk specifically for guys who might not ordinarily try wine or are looking for wine to match with more masculine epicurean feats from the grill. In addition to the six miniature bottles (think hotel minibar size), a \$30 gift certificate is included so that dad can buy bigger bottles of his favorite wine. Available online at tastingroom.com.

Wine-tasting seminars are a unique and practical gift and there are so many cool choices in our area. The Washington Wine Academy in Alexandria offers a wide range of courses, starting at \$35 for single-night classes and topping \$300 for the lengthier professional wine certification classes. Not sure which class dad wants? Buy a gift certificate online and let him choose.

A wine-loving dad can never have too many decanters. They are not only practical, but can be works of art as well. My favorite is the Wine Enthusiast "U" Decanter. It's only \$20 and shipping and handling is included (wineenthusiast.com). For \$10 more, add a special touch and engrave dad's initials on the



decanter. He is sure to think of you whenever he uses it.

When dad wants to open a special bottle of wine, but doesn't want to finish the bottle, he'll be glad he has the automated Wine Vac (\$30) vacuum pump. It uses two

AA batteries to perfectly seal an open bottle of wine, protecting the bouquet and flavors from oxidation. It's a high-tech way to protect and prolong the enjoyment of any wine. It also has a built-in thermometer to let you know when it has achieved the ideal temperature. Available at Sharper Image and wine specialty shops.

Does dad like to travel with wine from time to time? The Jet Bag is an inexpensive, lightweight solution to provide protection for breakable items stored in checked luggage. The biodegradable carrier features a reusable zip seal closure that is lined with the same absorbent materials found in diapers which pad and protect the bottle breaks, the Jet Bag rapidly absorbs any liquid spilled, preventing leakage in the suitcase. It's also an ideal way to safely travel with other valuable liquids such as liquor or perfume. A three-bag pack costs \$15.

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