



GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER

"I was about 5 to 7 years old when I started rolling meatballs," says Graffiato chef Mike Isabella.

Mike Isabella: D.C.'s celeb chef

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

With his new restaurant, Graffiato, Mike Isabella is now focusing his energies dealing with his new celebrity (he was runner-up on "Top Chef: All-Stars") and with the fame of his Italian-inspired comfort-food restaurant. Reports tell of long waits and lines out the door for drinks and dinner at Graffiato.

Good food, yes. But fame has also hit Isabella head-on with fans running up to him on sidewalks and at airports. "When you go on national television," he said, "that opens a million doors. It's hard for a chef to make money, but people believe him when they see it on television. That's what really happened." After all, 10-plus million viewers watched him, he says, and most of them remember his gnocchi and the chicken with pepperoni, both dishes he prepared on the show.

But Isabella's celebrity has become only one outcome of his TV stint. The other, and obviously more important, has been his evolution as a top chef. "I grew a lot during the two years I was on Top Chef," he said. "That person wasn't who I was. My food grew and changed, and so did my attitude. I watched how others worked, and that changed me."

Describing how he has become a more toned-down and reflective chef, Isabella speaks quite openly about his being a "blue-collar type of guy," one who can proudly serve in the restaurant the rustic, family-

What is your comfort food?

It's my favorite, spaghetti and red sauce. It is the food I ate growing up. My grandma cooked it for years.

What has been the greatest influence on your cooking career?

It's been that I worked a lot for a lot of great chefs, and of course, Top Chef. Then chef Jose Garces in Philadelphia

Which is your favorite city?

Chicago, because that's where I

got engaged. It's a beautiful city with great restaurants.

Which are your favorite ingredients?

Lemons, olive oil, and sea salt. That's how I cook.

What's in your fridge?

A lot of food. We are testing lots of recipe for my book. Veal cutlets, lasagna, meatballs. All family-centered recipes from my childhood.

IF YOU GO Graffiato

- » **Where:** 707 6th St., NW
- » **Info:** 202-289-3600
- » **Hours:** Lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to Friday; dinner, 5 p.m. to midnight (kitchen closes at 10 p.m.) Sunday to Tuesday, 5 p.m. to 1 a.m. (kitchen closes at 11 p.m.) Wednesday to Thursday, 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. Friday to Saturday

style eats of his youth. "Growing up in New Jersey," he said, "I went to diners that were open 24/7. I serve here a lot of the child flavors, like my cherry tomato sauce. ... It's the food I grew up with in New Jersey."

It's also the food he learned to cook with his grandmother. "My

mom was a single parent," he said, "so my grandmother came to babysit and she cooked with me. I was about 5 to 7 years old when I started rolling meatballs. I was a hyper kid, making and cooking gnocchi. I loved food as a kid." And, he says, he has always loved the bigger, bolder flavors Isabella has re-created in his Graffiato cooking.

Isabella also points out that like he himself, the restaurant is without pretensions, a real homey Italian place. "It's my house," he explained. "So you eat like you are at my house. Everyone gets treated the same." Not surprisingly, Isabella says that his mother, sister, and brother are all proud of what he has accomplished. "I have worked really hard," he says. "I have taken many risks."

At 36, Isabella concludes by saying he has zero regrets about his career choice.

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

Champagne: Cooperatives and growers

Part three of a four-part series

For being relatively small, Champagne may be the most regulated wine region on the planet. Overseeing all of the rules and regulations is the Committee for Viticulture of Champagne, whose professional staff is directed by a board of governors, consisting of both growers and houses.

While growers actually own 90 percent of the 84,000 acres in the appellation, it is the "houses" that produce the majority of all Champagne in the region. Some houses have their own vineyards and buy additional grapes from the growers. Most growers sell the majority of their grapes to houses, but some growers keep the fruit and produce wines for their own label. Other growers have formed cooperatives that use their grapes under a specific label. This arrangement has set up a working relationship filled with layers of complexity — like Champagne itself.

Since one hectare (about 2.5 acres) of vineyard land in Champagne costs approximately \$1.4 million, newcomers are rare. Most growers have had the land in their families for multiple generations and maintain long-term contracts with cooperatives or houses.

Co-ops will usually collect grapes from vineyards in a specific region and will produce wines based on a style. Growers who produce wines from their own vineyards have the ability to make vineyard-specific wines that reflect more of a sense of place as opposed to developing a brand style. This week, I'll review wines of growers and cooperatives and next week I'll cover houses.

A quick reminder; only wines made in the tiny Champagne region in France — using the strict Methode Champenoise — can be called Champagne. The term non-vintage (NV) indicates that it's a blend from several other years worth of wines from the same producer. For example, a current NV might be made mostly with wines from the 2005 vintage with a blend of wines from earlier vintages. This method is used to achieve uniformity in style from year to year.

The largest cooperative in Champagne is Nicolas Feuillatte. With more than 5,500 growers in the co-op, it produces more than 8 million bottles of Champagne annually. That may sound like a lot of wine, but considering that the region produces more than 340 million bottles of bubbly per year, it's just a drop in the Champagne bucket. Given the sizeable production, the **Non-vintage Nicolas Feuillatte Brut (\$28)** is remarkably refined, with notes of toasted brioche and crisp apple on the front of the palate and a touch of



COURTESY PHOTO

roasted hazel nuts on the medium-balanced finish.

Representing one of the oldest wine regions in the area is Champagne Maily, a prominent co-op made up of 70 growers. All of the grapes sourced for the wine come exclusively from Grand Cru vineyards near the village of Maily. This quality is expressed in the chalky minerality of the **Non-vintage Maily Brut Reserve (\$55)** which supports flavors of rip apple, honey and beeswax. Moderate acidity keeps the wine fresh and in balance.

Growers pride themselves on making wines that have a sense of place, or terroir, and few do it better than Pierrer Gimmonet. The **Non-vintage Pierrer & Fils Blanc de Blancs Brut (\$40)** is made exclusively from chardonnay and boasts flavors of creamy lemon and nectarine that are elegantly woven into a round, balanced wine with wonderful structure and tiny, precise bubbles.

Collard-Picard is a grower/producer with deep roots — figuratively and literally — in Champagne. Husband Oliver Collard is a fifth-generation grower and his wife, Caroline Picard, is fourth-generation. Together, they make wines of artisanal quality, like the **Non-vintage Collard-Picard "Prestige" Brut Champagne (\$45)**. A blend of chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier, the wine is aged in oak casks, blended, and then aged for more than three years. Flavors of biscuit highlight notes of apple blossom, peach and honey on the front of the palate. Crisp acidity and mineral notes provide a remarkably fresh and balanced finish.