

## **'It's a really neat time for anybody who's in the restaurant business to be a cook'**

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NORTHFIELD - Fifteen years ago this September, Lou Di Ventura took over popular watering hole The Rugby at 2015 Shore Road. Since then, the 44-year-old Linwood resident has made the renamed Ventura's Offshore Cafe his passion and has carved out a solid niche in the local restaurant scene.

Following in the family business after his father, who runs Ventura's Greenhouse in Margate, Di Ventura has made Ventura's Offshore Cafe a destination for local diners. The father of four who grew up in Medford sat down on a recent Monday afternoon to talk about his profession.

Q: How many days a week are you involved in the running of this restaurant? Is it a 24/7 job?

A: Actually I'm scheduled to work five days a week. Tuesdays and Wednesdays are my days off, but as a restaurant owner you have to bring home your work with you. So, basically I'm here 24/7.

Q: What about running the restaurant gives you the most enjoyment?

A: Actually, the most enjoyment is seeing a lot of happy, smiling faces. Customer feedback that they enjoyed their experience here. They could be here for a birthday, an anniversary or just coming in for a family gathering. I'm proud of the whole experience we offer here at Ventura's.

Q: A lot of people from the Northfield/Linwood area think of this as their "local pub" or their local restaurant. Does that give you satisfaction?

A: It certainly does. To see a lot of repeat customers is key, because we're a customer service-oriented business. That's what any kind of owner would want. But we're always looking for new customers.

Q: What's the hardest part of your job?

A: The hardest part is actually keeping the knot tight. What I mean by that is I'm kind of like a baby-sitter here. We have 80 staff members, and you're always keeping an eye on the customers to appease them and making sure you have everything on the menu you can have. When I designed the menu, I wanted it to be very diversified. We have everything from soup to salad, to tuna, to desserts. Instead of being just a chain restaurant ... something like P.F. Chang's is just Chinese. But you can come here and have sushi, you can have filet mignon, you can have a burger ... it's kind of a diversified palate.

Q: What's your favorite item on the current menu, because I know it changes from year to year?

A: My favorite item would probably be the eggplant rollantini. That's a new addition to the family. It's a little bit different to eggplant rollantini you could get somewhere else. I start with some fresh spinach, some jumbo lump crab meat, Reggiano cheese ... It's got a lot of attitude.

Q: I'm sure you've heard this before. People who eat here more than once or twice, they always talk about the pizza. What makes Ventura's pizza so good?

A: Pizza here is a little bit different as far as preparation. We don't use just a flour and water base. I can't give you the recipe, but it's got a different texture to it. It's very bread based.

Q: What's the farthest away someone has called for takeout? Have you ever had to ship anything?

A: We did have somebody recently from Florida call for our pizza turnovers and cheesesteaks, because they can't get cheesesteaks in Florida. They come here all the time, so we said, 'Sure, it's no problem.' So we sent it to them FedEx. They have that program for 'freeze shipping.' It then comes to mind of taking a place like this (Ventura's) and moving it to a place like Florida would be a good venture. I'm actually in the process of working with a couple of lawyers to see if we could downsize this a little bit and go for a franchise. Maybe not a chain, because that changes the whole thing, but a franchise would be nice.

Q: You watch some of these cooking shows on TV - I'm thinking of the Rocco DiSpirito one from a few years ago. Obviously they dramatize everything for television, but have you ever had a night or series of nights where the kitchen is just an absolute disaster like you see on these shows?

A: Umm ... disaster? No. But as far as the pressure being applied? Yes. Usually on a Friday, Saturday night it's like that, because of the high volume we have here. We do anything from 700 to 800 orders a night. And, again, you're kind of like a circus ringleader. You're making sure the staff in the back is doing their job, and you're also making sure the staff in front is doing their job. Plus, overseeing the whole business. Again, I peek my head out here once in a while to make sure people have smiles on their faces, what kind of atmosphere is going on. So, yeah, it gets a little pressurized at times.

Q: As a chef, do your wife and family expect 5-star meals at home as well?

A: Sometimes ... yeah, they do, they do. They enjoy what I prepare for them. I like to experiment all the time. To be a cook/chef right now ... it's a very exquisite time for everybody because of the fact that you have so many flavors you can incorporate. You can pull a little bit of Italian flair, you can pull a little French flair, you can pull a little Asian flair, you can pull a little bit of southwestern flair like Bobby Flay does. It's a really neat time for anybody who's in the restaurant business to be a cook because there are a lot more flavors out there right now, a lot more mixes, just a lot more fun.

Q: And do you think the dining public are a lot more educated because of all these shows on TV and the fact that cookbooks have gone mainstream?

A: Yes. Definitely, definitely.

Q: What one style of food could you not do without?

A: Italian.

Q: Have you watched the Food Network?

A: Oh, yeah, constantly, constantly.

Q: What's your favorite show?

A: I like watching Bobby Flay. I like Bobby Flay's cooking.

Q: Have you eaten at his restaurant in Atlantic City?

A: Yes I have. I was very impressed. Very impressed.

Q: OK - you're on a desert island. You could only eat three types of cuisines for the rest of your life. What would they be?

A: I would say seafood, fruit ... and I hope they have a nice rum bar.

Q: Have you ever been injured or burned in your own kitchen?

A: Don't jinx me now! No, I haven't ... actually, I have. Not here, but at a pizzeria we had in Mount Laurel, I had an oven explode in my face. That was pretty ... pretty drastic.

Q: If your skill set didn't allow for you to be a chef, what would you do for a living?

A: I'd be a pilot. Actually, I am a commercial pilot.

Q: What did you think of the US Airways pilot landing safely on the Hudson?

A: That was awesome. That was awesome. That was awesome. He did a great job there. But, definitely a pilot. That was my venture, my dream. That's why I have that wooden pilot out there (he gestures to the cool, flight-themed decor in Ventura's fireplace room).

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**A mixture of fresh baby greens**, baby spinach, port wine pears, crumbled blue cheese, sliced strawberries, candied walnuts and fresh plum tomatoes that's available at the restaurant for \$14. For more information, call Ventura's Offshore Cafe at 609-641-5158.

n 12 ounces spring mix

n 2 ounces baby spinach

n 2 dozen fresh ripe strawberries

n 16 ounces candied walnuts

n 2 cups granulated sugar

n 1 cup port wine

n 16 ounces crumbled Gorgonzola cheese or Maytag blue cheese

n 4 fresh Italian Roma tomatoes

n 4 medium Bartlett pears

n 16 ounces strawberry vinaigrette

n 1 cup blended oil, 90/10

n 1/2 cup red-wine vinegar

n Blackened shrimp or blackened chicken breast (optional)

**Yield:** 4 servings

*Candied walnuts:*

Start by placing 16 ounces of shelled walnuts in pieces in an 8-by-10-by-2 baking pan with the one cup of sugar. Place baking pan with walnuts into a 350-degree oven. Stir nuts occasionally to prevent burning. Once sugar starts to caramelize, pour 1/4 cup of port wine on to the walnuts. Stir and mix. Lower heat to 250 degrees and stir occasionally until liquid evaporates. Remove nuts and transfer nuts to cookie sheet to cool.

*Pears:*

Start by removing a quarter from the bottom of the pears with a sharp knife, then place the 4 pears into a bread pan approximately 8-by-4-by-3. Pour the port wine into a mixing bowl with a cup of sugar. Mix with a spoon. Pour syrup over pears, and cover with aluminum foil. Bake in preheated oven at 350 degrees for approximately 35 minutes. Check to see if the pears are soft (not mushy). Remove pears from the oven and let cool. Once cooled, use an apple slicer and cut pears and core into quarters.

*Strawberry vinaigrette:*

Start by placing 2 cups of strawberry puree (fresh or frozen) into food processor or blender. Slowly add 1 cup of blended oil to the mixture. Slowly add 1/2 cup of red-wine vinegar. Mixture should become emulsified. Taste for personality. You may add more vinegar if you like.

*Plating salad:*

Start with 4 cold 12-inch salad plates, and place equal parts of baby greens on each plate. Top the baby greens with equal parts of blue cheese, port-wine pears, candied walnuts, cut strawberries, fresh, quartered Roma tomatoes and, if you like, put blackened shrimp or chicken on top. Drizzle with strawberry vinaigrette and use a pepper mill for extra zest.

Enjoy with a bottle of Simi Savignon Blanc 2004.

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