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## THE NEW TABLE MEET THE CHEFS

### BEHIND THE KITCHEN DOOR

ELIZABETH JOHNSON The Journal News

Modern restaurants are embracing upscale casual dining, and a new guard of chefs is helping to bring it to Westchester. For most, it's not about foams – it's about flavor: cooking ingredients simply but with unique flourishes. The talent pool is big, but here's a look at a few of them.

### COMFORT AND SURPRISE

"People want food that they're comfortable with," says David DiBari, the chef at Zuppa in Yonkers. "As long as you have all the components, that will make it a good dish."

The stuffed pork chop on his menu, for example, is something diners might be familiar with. But instead of the usual mozzarella-and-peppers filling, he stuffs it with black currants and cottechino, an Italian sausage.

"We do what people want, in a funky way," he says. There's a branzino he likes to butterfly and rub inside with lemon jam, wrap in sliced potatoes and roast in a wood-burning oven.

"It's complex, but served simply over braised cabbage, pine nuts, capers and spicy tomatoes."

DiBari, who is 27, worked with at Windows on the World with Michael Lomonaco, Patroon with Craig Cupani, Danube with David Bouley and at Babbo with Mario Batali, whom he now considers a mentor.

"(His is) simple Italian food with interesting flavors exploding all over the place," he says. "He embodied that, he still does – that's why he's on top of the world."

DiBari's first job was at a pizza place – Paradise in Cortlandt, his hometown – and he worked at Crystal Bay in Peekskill as a teenager. At 24, he earned an "excellent" from the New York Times for his cooking at Eastchester Fish Gourmet. But his maternal grandmother inspired him to go to cooking school – the Culinary Institute of America.

"I'll still go home and cook with her and she'll do something really simple like cabbage," he says. Most of the time, he'll tinker with it, and it ends up on the menu at Zuppa.

Zuppa, 50–61 Main St., Yonkers. 914–376–6500, [www.zupparestaurant.com](http://www.zupparestaurant.com)

## FINDING A FLAVOR PROFILE

Jeremy Smollar, the chef at Crabtree's Kittle House, gets testy when he's asked about his credentials. At 29, he thinks he deserves to be known for what's on the plate, not what's in his past.

And on the plate? "Singular flavors," he says. "New textures, temperatures and tastes."

He'll finesse a dish until the "flavor profile" matches what he imagined. Take his lobster, corn and coconut soup, which is poured tableside with a tower of mussels, lobster nuggets and baby corn.

"All it is is corn – soup," he says. "It's bright yellow and it tastes like the ocean. We pick up the vegetable flavors with the mussel liquor."

It's no Campbell's. There are hints of vanilla in one bite; lemon in another. It's the kind of dish he's hoping will help the Kittle House become the suburban interpretation of an upscale neighborhood restaurant in Manhattan – something he knows about from working with chef Pat Trama at the Myriad Restaurant Group, which owns Tribeca Grill and Nobu, among other restaurants.

A place "where you can have a simple two– or three–course meal," he says. "Where it's not a three–hour experience. It's simpler and more subdued."

Perhaps in the dining room, but not on the plate. Owner John Crabtree tells the story of a the first time a longtime customer ordered Smollar's lamb dish, which is comes with spinach puree and coriander potatoes made with Russian fingerlings picked five miles away

She said simply: "I don't like this."

Since then, she's paid five visits to the restaurant, and she's ordered the lamb every time.

Crabtree's Kittle House, 11 Kittle Road, Chappaqua. 914–666–8044, [www.kittlehouse.com](http://www.kittlehouse.com)

## KEEPING IT REAL

Lisa Graziano Petrucelli admits she's not as trendy as most.

"I'm not trying to be like anybody else," says Graziano, who became chef at the Fish Cellar in Mount Kisco a year ago.

Her work at places like Maxime's in Granite Springs and her training at the CIA shows up on her menu, where you'll sometimes find old–time favorites like coquilles St. Jacques. But even with a classic French sauce, she'll add a modern touch like exotic mushrooms. Her cooking has all the dimensions you'd expect: colors, textures, seasonings.

"I make all the components come through and use all the senses," she says. "The eye appeal, the aroma, the flavors, the textures."

Her chipotle–rubbed tuna, for example, is served with a ginger cream and mango puree with a salads of snow

pea sprouts and cashews.

"We're a fish restaurant, but we can cross borders," she says. "Which is pretty cool."

## RELAXING IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Craig Cupani needed a lifestyle change. He was working 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., commuting to his job as executive chef at Patroon in Manhattan. He never saw his daughter. The only reason he saw his wife is because she worked there, too.

The solution? Open a neighborhood restaurant near home.

And so was born Lia's – named after their daughter, whom they now see every day.

"All the restaurants we worked in were three–star dining – expensive," says Cupani. "It makes it a chore for people to go out. They have to get dressed up, wear a tie – we wanted to do the opposite."

They didn't want people to have to worry about whispering, or be afraid to ask the waiter 100 questions before ordering.

Cupani cooks with seasonal ingredients, but ones you might not expect. His veal stew is braised with Chianti.

Cupani, who is 42, went to the CIA to learn classical French cooking. After graduation in 1988, he got a job in garde manger at The `21' Club. His wife, Imre, was hired the same day, and they've been together ever since.

Over eight years, he worked his way up to executive sous chef. Later, he moved on to Buttefield 81, opened Tabla with Danny Meyer and was chef de cuisine at Brasserie. He worked at Patroon for 2½ years.

"We do it because we love to cook and we want people to be comfortable," he says.

Lia's, 202 E. Hartsdale Ave., Hartsdale. 914–725–8400.

## SEASONAL AND SIMPLE

The journey from flipping burgers at Squire's in Briarcliff to preparing seasonal cuisine at Valley at the Garrison took many turns: the Culinary Institute of America; Peacock Alley at the Waldorf Astoria; the Breakers in Palm Beach; Halycon at the Righa Royal and five years at the Sea Grill at Rockefeller Center.

And through the years, chef Jeff Raider, who grew up in Yorktown Heights, learned respect for products.

"It's knowing that you don't have to have 30 things on the plate," he says. "It can be simple. Let the product speak for itself, and only use the freshest stuff available."

It's sound advice that Raider, who is 35, learned from Ed Brown, his mentor at the Sea Grill. But just because he wants to cook simply doesn't mean he has to cook sparingly. That's why he calls his cooking "seasonal American."

"If you say, `I only do Italian or Asian,' you're limiting yourself," says Raider. On his menu, "there's things with Asian influence, French, Italian, American. I try to use the freshest products available." Plus, it keeps

things interesting in the kitchen – "for myself and my cooks."

So that's why free-range chicken with bacon is found on the menu next to Niman Ranch pork chops with Asian barbecue glaze, braised bok choy and Thai basil.

"One of the things growing up here – there weren't enough restaurants to learn that kind of cooking," he says. "So I knew I had to go to the city. Now, I'm in a good place, I do the food I've learned how to do over the past 10 years, but I get to do it closer to home."

Valley at the Garrison, 2015 Route 9D, Garrison. 845-424-3604, [www.thegarrison.com](http://www.thegarrison.com)

## BLUE RIBBON COOKING

Matthew Karp, the chef and owner of Plates in Larchmont, had his epiphany at Nick & Eddie's.

The restaurant was a pre-cursor to Blue Ribbon – trendy, with models and celebs as the clientele. But what struck Karp was the food: Southern cooking by chef Eric Bromberg, who had studied at Tulane and Le Cordon Bleu in France.

"Instead of cooking fancy food, he was cooking simple American food," says Karp. At the time, Karp was honing his skills by grilling flank steaks at home. "When I tasted theirs, I put down my knife and fork and went into the kitchen as asked for a job."

He got it, and he went on to cook at Blue Ribbon, too. From there, he cooked at Bouley, where he eventually became sous chef. When business took his wife, Wendy, to Europe, he followed in Bromberg's steps to Le Cordon Bleu and cooked in kitchens all over Europe.

But when he opened Plates, he wanted to return to the simple (but classically trained) style of cooking he learned at Blue Ribbon. (Cordon Bleu means blue ribbon in English.)

"Make it as simple as grandmom and add a few twists and people say `Wow.'" says Karp, who is 35. "You don't have to be a scientist. If you're cooking the basics with sincerity and are earnest, you're ahead of everyone."

He sometimes uses foams and jellies – and doesn't say whether they're trendy or modern. He just likes the way they walk the line and balance the menu. But it's his Country Doughnut dessert – inspired by the former Schultz Cider Mill in Armonk – that truly embodies his philosophy.

"It's a fresh doughnut made to order with homemade ice cream," says Karp. "You're not going to evoke a happier thought than that."

Plates, 121 Myrtle Blvd., Larchmont. 914-834-1244, [www.platesonthepark.com](http://www.platesonthepark.com).

## A F.I.S.H. TALE

William Rosenberg was always everybody's sous chef, but never an executive chef. So he went to the Culinary Institute of America.

"Everyone thought I was a brand new graduate," he says. But he'd been cooking for 10 years.

Still, by the time he opened f.i.s.h. – Fox Island Seafood House – he had plenty of experience: Maxime's in Granite Springs and Bistro Maxime's in Chappaqua; City Cafe and Second Avenue Brasserie in Manhattan. He was the chef at Two Moons in Port Chester for four years.

Rosenberg, who is 38, was born and raised in Port Chester. He learned French cooking at school, but put his own touches on it through the years. "Without it – there's no real base," he says. Now, he's serving what he likes to eat.

"Simple, less is more, let the ingredients talk," he says. "The least we can do and show the fish, the better."

f.i.s.h., 102 Fox Island Road, Port Chester. 914-939-4227, [www.fish.foxisland.com](http://www.fish.foxisland.com).