



Taste Of The Tomato

A Neapolitan-style place in north Naples grows with a new chef

By Daniel Lindley • Photographs by Ronald Dubick



Out in the strip-mall wastelands of north Naples, a small restaurant has sprouted that's drawn accolades from the local and national press in its short life. The Naples Daily News has called it "fabulous"; the New York Times has praised its lasagna and seafood.

Naples Tomato began almost two years ago with a simple concept: provide the freshest or highest-quality food possible, like heirloom fresh tomatoes grown just outside Naples, Florida, and San Marzano canned tomatoes imported from just outside Naples, Italy.

The restaurant makes its own pasta. All this is complemented with an extensive wine list and a small retail store. It adds up to what Naples Tomato calls a Neapolitan-American menu.

The dedication to good food took another twist last summer when Sebastian Mazzotta, formerly executive chef at Aqua Grill in Naples' Waterside Shops, became head chef at Naples Tomato. Aqua Grill had closed its doors several months earlier during expansion at Waterside.

Jack and Nadine Serfass had started Naples Tomato because of their love of good food and wine. The restaurant provided a change of pace from Jack's software business. Mazzotta provided changes of his own. "The majority of the menu is his," Mazzotta said. "I added a big seafood part of it. We changed presentations around a lot. Textures are a big thing." The result: American Neapolitan food that combines Neapolitan cooking techniques with local ingredients.

"We do a traditional Naples, Italy, style of cooking but the ingredients you get, obviously you can't get in Italy except for the tomatoes," Mazzotta said. "We get more American ingredients."

You have your basic pasta recipes. For specials it ranges from my style that I did at Aqua Grill. You can get anywhere from foie gras down to Kobe beef. Daily specials are totally changing. To me, on the menu, there is nothing that is not good, which is a great feeling. You can come in and order anything and know it is going to be good, which is a great thing. That's the reason I'm here. And Jack's given me the ability to do whatever I want."

Mazzotta's roots are in Italian cooking. His grandmother Theresa Mazzotta owned a restaurant in Hartford, Connecticut, and he can still remember helping his uncle turn veal in a pan in Theresa's kitchen when he was seven years old. After his father died, Mazzotta moved to Naples, where his mother and stepfather lived. He attended Naples High School and worked at Kensington Country Club. After he graduated he went to culinary school at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale.

Financial constraints caused him to leave before graduating to take a job at East City Grill in Lauderdale. "It was really, really, really intense, and I loved it so much that I was actually working there hours for free," Mazzotta said. "It was almost like an Asian-American fusion, California style with Hawaiian flair and a lot of French and European style. What they did was eight courses and up, and it changed daily. I was a roundsman line cook. I did everything. Every single position."

In 1999, tired of city life, Mazzotta came back to Naples, where he served a stint as assistant sous chef downstairs at the Bayside Bar and Grill for a year. Then it was over to Chops City Grill on Fifth Avenue South for three years, where he worked his way up from appetizer line cook to executive sous chef.

In 2004 Aqua Grill hired him as executive chef. He built a following and a reputation for nouvelle American cuisine there. His definition: "American cuisine is the realm of everything. You have French, you have Italian, you have German, you have any kind of European flair. Everyone lives here. So I just bring it all together."

After Aqua closed in April, Mazzotta launched his own business as a private chef, concentrating on high-end dinners and using organic ingredients whenever possible. One night he stopped at Naples Tomato with his wife for dinner. "I had the food. I could automatically taste the quality and the potential that come from this place," he said. "I knew they used quality ingredients when I was here. I met the owner, Jack. He came to the table. He knew who I was from Aqua." Soon Mazzotta was working there.

Naples Tomato has an open kitchen and a pasta room where women roll sheets of pasta by hand, and a \$33,000 pasta machine imported from Italy cranks out ravioli, potato dumplings and other finished pastas. A small retail shop at the front of the restaurant offers frozen sauces and fresh pastas, assorted delicacies like white truffle butter, and big cans of San Marzano tomatoes (\$8.99 apiece).

The restaurant can be crowded and lively, especially at night. Next to the main dining room is a wine lounge, which features high-tech wine-dispensing machines. Customers purchase cards with magnetic stripes to sample wines by the ounce. Recently the gleaming Enomatic automatic wine dispensers offered everything from a Penfolds Bin 407 at \$1.80 an ounce to Château d'Yquem sauterne at \$22. Assorted hors d'oeuvres are available in the lounge during the evening, and the restaurant offers an extensive wine list of some 600 labels.

Red snapper's an example of the kind of specials the restaurant offers - fresh ingredients, some organic, handled gently and plated stylishly. In this case, it's cooked at a very low temperature - 120 degrees - and handled with care.

It's touched as little as possible and kept on ice as much as possible before cooking. Mazzotta's advice on the dish: "Be very gentle; if you cook it at high temperatures, you're going to fry it. You don't want to fry

it. You want the oil just to seep through. The cool thing about it is when it's fully cooked it almost still looks like it's rare."

And, of course, find the best fish you can, in line with Naples Tomato's focus on freshness: "If you buy garbage fish you get a garbage dish. But if you use the freshest, best ingredients, you get the best plate."

Coastal Elegance & Weath

Naples Tomato's head chef, Sebastian Mazzotta offers this issue's recipe.

**OLIVE OIL ROASTED RED SNAPPER,
LOBSTER CAPRESE, ORGANIC QUINOA (serves four)**

FOR THE SNAPPER

Buy a two- to three-pound red snapper. Skin and fillet, and cut into fourounce pieces. Make sure the fish has white meat, not yellow, and that the bloodline is still red.

METHOD OF PREPARATION

Set the oven at 120 degrees. Put the fillets in a two-by-nine-by-12-inch pan (glass is best). Cover fish with extra-virgin olive oil and slow-cook at 120 degrees for one hour. When done, fish should be extremely tender. Be careful when taking the fillets out.

FOR THE QUINOA

1 cup organic quinoa (high-protein grain available in local organic-foods stores)
2 tablespoons chopped shallots
1 teaspoon chopped garlic
2½ cups lobster stock (or seafood stock, which you may find at your local butcher shop or fish market)
1 ripe heirloom tomato
8 ounces fresh buffalo mozzarella
¼ cup diced red onion
2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
4 ounces of the best claw and knuckle lobster meat that you can find
¼ cup olive oil

METHOD OF PREPARATION

In a medium-sized pot, turn on medium-high heat, put in olive oil and shallots and garlic, and sweat, then add quinoa. The quinoa will soak up the olive oil. Then add the stock, and stir. When finished in 15 to 20 minutes, it should be al dente. Then add rest of ingredients.

HERB SAUCE

2 tablespoons chopped mixed herbs (oregano, basil, thyme, sage, parsley)
¼ stick unsalted butter
1 teaspoon chopped shallots
1 cup white wine
½ lemon
2 teaspoons olive oil

METHOD OF PREPARATION

In small pot add shallots and olive oil. Sweat shallots and whole peppercorns and then deglaze with wine and lemon juice. Reduce by half, then slowly add in butter. When fully emulsified, add chopped herbs.

FOR PLATING

In the center of a white plate, put a dollop of the quinoa mixture. Add the fish on top. With the herb sauce, take a tablespoon and lightly go around the plate, and put a little on the fish too.

The sauce is optional. Enjoy this healthy dish!