

YOUNGSTOWN: A taste of Italy at Niagara Frontier Golf Club

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Chef Mario Bianco holds a dish of the pan seared filet of Atlantic salmon served with crab potato salad in the kitchen of the Niagara Frontier Golf Club.



A Sicilian-born chef is now running the kitchen at the Niagara Frontier Golf Club, which is offering a new dining membership with the goal of drawing the community to the clubhouse.

Chef Mario Bianca, whose peripatetic career has led him from Italy to Spain to Los Angeles, and finally to the Niagara Frontier Golf Club in Youngstown, will be offering a full menu for both golfing members and those who purchase dining memberships.

According to Henry Sandonato, president of the NFGC, diners can expect the menu to reflect on Chef Bianca's extensive knowledge of Italian food and wine.

"He changed the menu entirely," Sandonato said. "He's going to bring excitement to the menu, offering specialized dishes and weekly specials."

I was lucky enough to have a seat at Chef Bianca's table recently, with club members Beverly Taibi and her sister, Barbara Taibi, in order to experience and share the details of the club's new food direction.

Chef Bianca prepared a four-course luncheon, serving some of his signature dishes.

He started the tasting off with an orecchiette pasta with broccoli rabe and sauteed sausage. The slight spice notes of the sausage were balanced by the gentle flavor of the broccoli rabe. Orecchiette pasta was the perfect choice to capture bits of the creamy green sauce in the little cups of pasta. The toasted breadcrumbs sprinkled on top were mixed with anchovy fillets and garlic and delivered just the right amount of crunch with each bite, but with just a hint of the fish.

Next up was a carefully crafted bruschetta, with brie spread on top of small Italian bread slices softened with a squirt of olive oil before toasting, topped with prosciutto, fig, and a dollop of berry jam. The chef finished the dish with a drizzle of Italian balsamic glaze and a sprinkle of chopped walnuts and a few sprigs of arugula, which gave a crisp and fresh scent to the dish.

With each bite of the bruschetta I found myself thinking, "*How did he create something that tastes so light, yet so full of flavor?*" But then I remembered I'm a writer and not a chef; therefore, the question was readily answered.

Then it was time for the main dish. For those who appreciate the art of presentation, Chef Bianca will likely impress.

Pan-seared filet of Atlantic salmon was delivered on a bed of crab potato salad surrounded by campari tomatoes. It looked almost too beautiful to cut into, but I fought my instincts and dove in. The salmon was cooked just right – not too much, not too little, and it had a *melt in your mouth* sensation, which made the heartiness of the crab and potato salad quite complimentary. The lemon vinaigrette gave it a welcomed light citrus finish.

Chef Mario finished the meal with tiramisu, with a dusting of cocoa – an Italian classic. Like the others, this dish was also presented beautifully. The creamy texture was so light that it could almost pass as a whipped cream, but with a rich aroma of coffee and a note of dark chocolate to awaken the senses. Layers of mascarpone cheese and ladyfingers gave it a creaminess that was heavenly. Topped with sliced strawberry and fresh basil, it was the perfect encore to a delightful meal.

The chef told me his passion for cooking started back in 2001 when he found his first job working in a restaurant in Beverly Hills, California. After a few years, he decided to return to Italy and enroll in culinary school.

Later, in 2013, he owned a food truck called the Aretusa Pasta Food Truck, which he drove throughout northern Virginia offering homemade pastas and sandwiches.

Bianca and his wife Pamela, a Niagara Falls native, moved back to the region in 2019. He landed a job as executive chef at the Aloft Hotel in downtown Buffalo, and eventually made his way to the Niagara Frontier Golf Club, where he will serve both golf and dining members and offering catering to members and non-members alike.

Sandonato says that the new dining membership idea came about as a way to offer more membership options that suit different lifestyles. "We wanted to offer something more so that more people can be introduced to the club and participate in the different happenings we offer," he said.

The dining membership, which requires a \$50 enrollment fee and a minimum of \$50 per month to be spent at the restaurant during the golf season, will give cardholders access to the pub and formal dining areas, which include picture windows overlooking the beautiful golf course. Those with a dining membership at the Niagara Frontier GC can also dine at the Youngstown Yacht Club.

The dining membership includes admission to all social events which, according to board member Beverly Taibi, have been expanding as well.

"We've been adding a lot more events to bring people in," she said. "We have activities other than golf for people to enjoy, like Bocce ball tournaments and wine-tasting parties. Last summer, we started doing outdoor concerts on the patio."

"We're growing our Frontier family," she added.

Beverly and her sister, Kathy Ruggiero, chairperson of the club's restaurant committee, were both as delighted as I was about the delicious meal we shared, and believe Chef Mario will be a true change agent in the golf club kitchen.

"Mario is an artist. We're hoping he is here for the long haul. He wants to stay with us and establish himself in the area," Beverly told me. "I think he's going to be extremely popular once people start hearing about him and come out and try his food."

Chef Bianca will also be offering catering services throughout the year, for gatherings large and small. "When you like to cook, you like to cook everything," he said, adding, "Pasta, meat, fish. I like to do it all."

His catering and dining menus can be found on the club's website.

Beyond the dining membership, there are a variety of golf memberships available for golfers of all skill levels and ages.

Niagara Frontier Golf Club was rated the Best Golf Course in New York State by Golf Advisor in 2016, according to Bev, who said that amenities include a practice facility with professionals who are available for private and group lessons as well as leagues for men and women. The 2020 season begins May 1. For more information, visit online at NiagaraFrontierGolfClub.com or call the club at [745-3329](tel:745-3329).

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