

Creating a New Standard

Standard Bistro at the Town of Mt. Laurel reflects the passions of Chef Michael Locascio and the inspirations of the seasons.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH



Photo: B. Gustafson

For the Birmingham area, the early 21st century has ushered in a type of new urbanism that has produced a new definition of "community" for the region's suburbs. The planned town of Mt. Laurel and its flagship restaurant Standard Bistro are the best known and perhaps most extreme example of this phenomenon.

Located just over Double Oak Mountain on Shelby County Highway 41 off U.S. 280, Standard Bistro opened its doors in the late summer of 2002 but has quickly developed a buzz among Birmingham food enthusiasts based on the reputation of owner and executive chef, Michael Locascio. Many will remember Locascio from his years of working under the tutelage of Frank Stitt at Highland Bar & Grill and Bottega. Together with Chris Hastings (executive chef of Hot & Hot Fish Club)

Locascio has long been considered one of the most talented chefs to come out of Birmingham.

Locascio, whose father was a butcher for many years in Birmingham, has been working in the food business since he was 15, starting out washing dishes in a local restaurant. After working in the kitchens of Stitt, Locascio left his hometown in order to continue his culinary education, both in the classroom and in the workforce.

Locascio landed in Portland, Oregon where he studied at the Western Culinary Institute. In 1994, he also began working under renown chef Cory Schreiber at the Wildwood Bar and Grill. It was from Schreiber that he learned the concept of cooking from the source, a philosophy that continues to influence Locascio's cooking today.

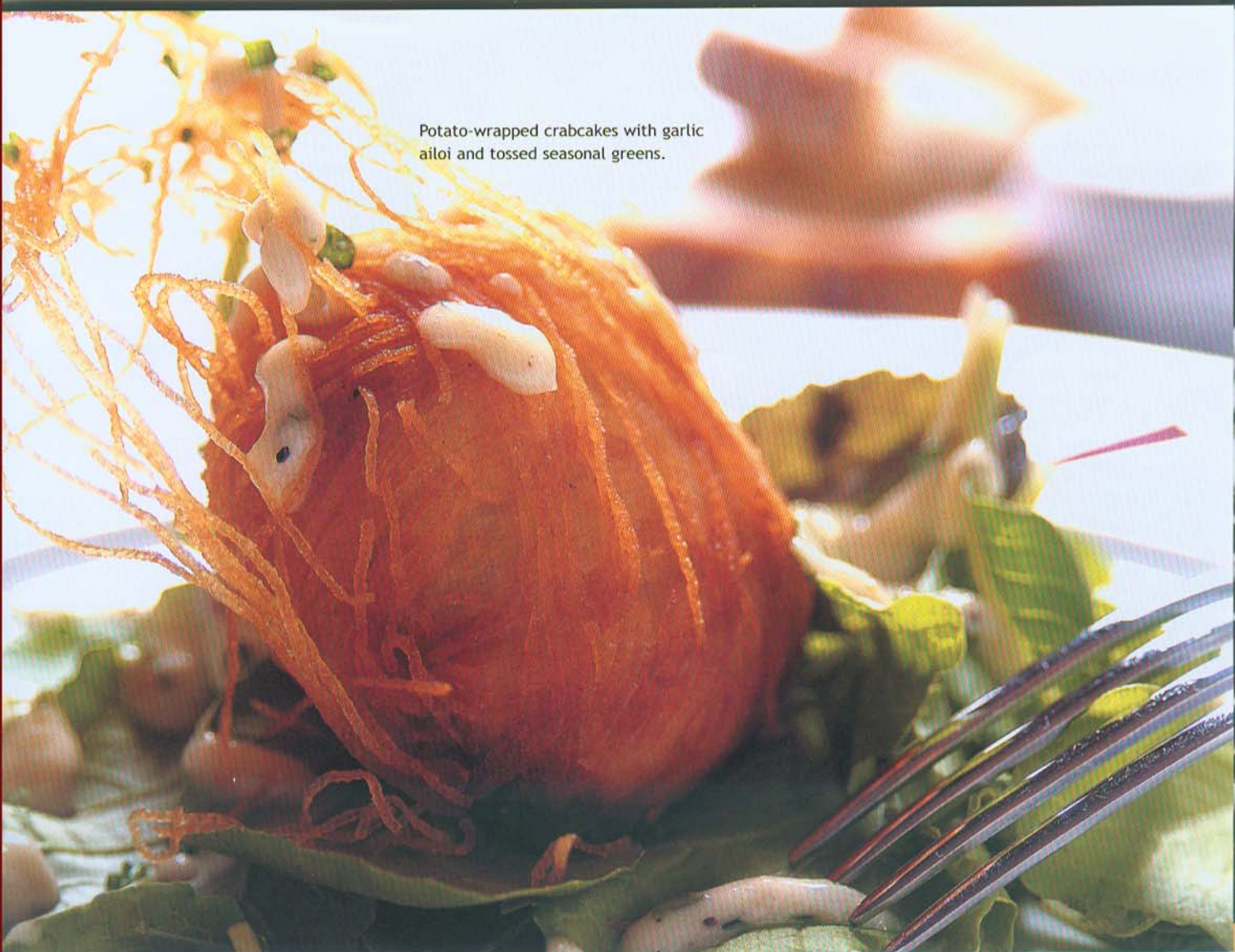
Locascio developed an interest in

cooking with products indigenous to the Pacific Northwest including fresh salmon and halibut as well as the cornucopia of vegetables available in the region that enjoys plenty of rainfall throughout the year.

The John Carroll graduate then went on to spend much of the 1990s in Europe, developing his craft in some of the most famous kitchens in France, Italy, Germany and even Sweden, a nation that was going through a culinary renaissance at the time. Locascio returned to the United States in 1998, landing in New York City where he eventually found his way to Fellonica, a classic Italian restaurant that Locascio helped earn a four-star rating in *The New York Times*, a rarity for Italian restaurants at the time.

Shortly thereafter, Locascio returned to Birmingham and worked at Arman's and for his old friend Hastings at Hot & Hot, before being introduced to the family of Elton B. Stephens, the president of EBSCO Industries and the founders of Mt. Laurel. Locascio signed the deal, built the restaurant and opened Standard Bistro in August 2002. Standard Bistro combines classic American and European styles and flavors that directly reflect its owner's tastes and culinary experiences.

"My food is more Italian influenced than anything else, because I like the flavors; they're clean and they're crisp. I'd say my restaurant is American-inspired and America to me is 'I'm Italian and I was raised in Alabama.' I love fried chicken but I'll eat lasagna, too," Locascio says. "I think the beauty for us is that I cook with French technique, but I'm always inspired by the Italians."



Potato-wrapped crabcakes with garlic
ailoi and tossed seasonal greens.

Locascio is very much a believer in seasonal cooking, his menu changing depending on what is available and coming into season during the year. Fall and winter tend to be his favorite time of year as he makes use of the abundance of endless varieties of vegetables coming into harvest along with the red meats and game that seem appropriate for cooler temperatures and spirited appetites.

"I like the slow braises and the heartier meats. In the summer, people are too worried about going to the beach and putting on a bathing suit. In the winter, they've got big sweaters and heavy coats and they just eat," Locascio says. "I like things like ossobucco and braised short ribs. I love rabbit, duck, big large veal chops, bone-in ribeyes and foie gras."

In addition, Locascio enjoys preparing dishes utilizing seafood from the Gulf of Mexico and other

areas during the fall and winter months. He says that many people don't realize that cold weather months are actually great times of the year for many species of fish.

A fine example on Locascio's cold weather seafood menu is the porcino-seared diver scallops. Locascio dips each side of a fresh gulf scallop into a porcino mushroom puree that has been rendered down into a powdered form. He then sears the scallops in a small amount of duck fat, Locascio's preferred cooking fat, then removes the scallops from the pans when they're just about medium in temperature.

"Then I add baby corn chutes that are coming in. This is the second crop they've planted this year; they knew the weather would change and the corn is not going to get very big. We slice it about three times and sauté the corn so it becomes almost like a

cream corn or a stewed corn with Jerusalem artichokes, fresh Christmas peas that are coming in,—these are winter limas that react better to cooler weather—fava beans, and then I mix in fresh black truffles," Locascio explains. "I sauté that down with a little butter and a lot of herbs—chives and basil—and then we mound that ragout onto a plate with this really buttery, brothy sauce with the porcino scallops. Then, we toss some sunflower chutes with a little lemon juice and more shaved black truffles."

The end result is a scallop unlike anything you may recollect having on a trip to the beach during the summer. The dish is bold and rich and heavy enough in the cooler months of the year for the heartiest of eaters. However, the dish allows lovers of fresh seafood a chance to continue to enjoy their favorite varieties throughout the year.

food reservations

Another one of Locascio's favorites is a seared yellow-fin tuna steak. He uses a thick cut sushi-grade tuna steak which allows him to prepare the meat to any temperature: rare, medium-rare, medium, etc.

"We sear it and then right as we're almost finishing it we cut a chunk of foie gras and put it in the pan with the fish and sear it. We pull it out of the pan and let the foie gras rest on top of the tuna after it's cooked," Locascio says. "And, with those drippings from the foie gras we add Brussels sprouts, salt and pepper and shallots and sauté them."

Locascio places the seared tuna and foie gras on top of a bed of purple mashed potatoes with a thick veal stock reduction over the top, almost a veal gravy. The final dish is an eye-popping extravaganza in color utiliz-

ing only a handful of ingredients, three of which come from either land, sea or—in the case of the foie gras—air.

Despite the intricate nature of the presentation, the food at Standard Bistro is not complicated according to Locascio. While he regularly incorporates French techniques and flavors into his cooking, he strictly adheres to the Italian philosophy of less is more.

"I believe there should be no more than five ingredients on a plate. That's everything, starch, vegetables, proteins, salt and garnish. That's the Italian influence," Locascio says. "The French influence is in the veal sauce with the foie gras. I use technique with good common sense, because anything over three flavors, you're body can't pick up. Your taste buds shut down after a while and all your body is catching is the salt level on the top or the pepper on your tongue."

The wine list at Standard Bistro is developed and maintained by Marco Butturini, a close friend of Locascio's. The two see eye-to-eye on developing a wine list that is able to provide appropriate choices for Standard Bistro's diverse and ever-changing menu and flavor combinations that are becoming Locascio's trademark.

On the sweet side, Standard

Bistro features various flavors of homemade ice cream, as well as more adventurous desserts such as a Tollhouse ice cream sandwich with three chocolate sauces and malted milk balls, and a tiramisu tower wrapped in chocolate.

Appetizers include Southern favorites such as peel-and-eat shrimp, oysters, as well as caviar and the Standard Bistro version of a crab cake. Locascio wraps lumps of fresh crabmeat in finely shaved potatoes. The cake is then fried until the crust is crisp and is served with a plate of fresh greens.

The restaurant's interior beautifully combines the arts and crafts feel of the town's architecture with a classic art deco look that Locascio knew he wanted for Standard Bistro. Helping him achieve the desired look is Michael's wife Nena Locascio, an interior decorator with HKW Architecture who met Michael in the early stages of the project.

"We could do whatever we wanted on the inside, but we had to stay true to the character of Mt. Laurel," Nena says. "When I met Michael, he wanted to keep the arts and crafts feel but he also wanted to incorporate some art deco. We had to try to figure how to mesh the two styles."

The Locascios decided to use dark, rich cherry wood for much of the trim and furniture while choosing other touches that are pure art deco, including a fantastic chandelier in the bar made out of red crystal that adds a touch of urban modernism to the space. Other touches, such as a cell phone bench made of dark wood and etched glass above the door frames that separate the entrance, bar and main dining room, provide a distinct, old world appeal. The bar top is made from Sylacauga white marble and sports a leather bumper, adding more elegance to an already classic and comfortable space. ☺



Tiramisu Towers, made individually and wrapped in chocolate with cream anglaise.

THE DETAILS:

STANDARD BISTRO

ADDRESS: 3 MT. LAUREL AVENUE

PHONE: 995-0512

HOURS: LUNCH MON.-FRI. 11-2;
DINNER TUES.-SAT. 5-11

RESERVATIONS ENCOURAGED

SCHEDULED WINE TASTINGS

PRIVATE DINING ROOM