



Kitchen WISDOM

ABOVE LEFT: Thoughtful touches in preparation, presentation and accompaniments distinguish the service and attention at Frank's Gourmet Grille in Mystic.
 ABOVE RIGHT: Frank Grace, owner of Frank's Gourmet Grille, catches up with longtime customers.

At Frank's Gourmet Grille,

By Jenny Quill — Photos by Seth Jacobson
Frank Grace is not a complicated man. He loves one thing: cooking. And it's a subject upon which the chef and owner of Frank's Gourmet Grille in Mystic will rhapsodize for hours at a time, skipping from subject to subject with the rapid-fire pacing inherent to someone who spends his days on the line. With his Long Island accent and gravelly voice, he expounds upon the differ-

ent flavors green garlic versus mature garlic will bring to a dish. Or how his Russian grandma once gets its tang from just the slightest bit of sugar. And how crucial it is to lower the exact moment when your oil is hot enough—*not too hot*—to sauté a breaded veal cutlet.
 The menu at Frank's revolves around the sort of classic dinner-party dishes that graced the pages of humor-entertaining cookbooks for decades—escargot, Veal Oscar, Coquilles St. Jacques.

simple ingredients build unforgettable flavor

"I love the phrase, 'old school,' because I'm 55 and I've been cooking 46 years," said Frank. "I never see Coquilles St. Jacques or escargot or Veal Oscar or Beef Tenderloin Oscar on the menu anywhere. Every chef around wants to be ultra-creative all the time and use different foods. I just want something to taste delicious."
 These are elegant but unpretentious dishes—no foams or deconstructed this or that. But their straightforward nature belies the complex

flavors and techniques required to prepare them. In other words: the simpler the dish, the harder it is to get absolutely right. For Frank, getting it right is all about building layers of flavor.
 Sauce is the backbone of Grace's cooking, with a few dozen utilized on the dinner menu alone. "Every entrée in my cooking world requires a sauce because that's a layer of flavor," Frank explained. "You can make a sautéed

chicken breast taste a thousand different ways with the right sauce." An aged balsamic glaze makes an appearance in several dishes, including the bruschetta and portabella mushroom more appetizers. The latter isn't really a torte at all (Frank cheerfully admits to taking liberties with culinary terms). Instead, three countries' layers of ingredients, a moosey strata of portabella mushroom caps, roasted red peppers, sundried tomatoes, sautéed spinach and



slices of Buffalo mozzarella doused in the aforementioned balsamic glaze: a sweet-but-not-too-sweet reduction of balsamic vinegar, a little brown sugar and white sugar. It's a fiddly sauce to prepare—too much sugar, too much time on the stove, and it will instantly overpower even the most savory dish.

The marsala wine sauce, a customer favorite, is another lesson in building layers of flavor with just a few select ingredients. Frank starts with a house-made demi-glace, to which he adds four different types of mushrooms and Marsala wine, finishing with butter. The flavorful sauce tops chicken, veal, pork tenderloin medallions or beef tenderloin medallions.

Frank isn't one to cut corners when it comes to cooking, and the house-made veal stock, which features in several dishes, is one example. It's a time-consuming, laborious task, a day of simmering, reducing and then simmering and reducing some more until you're left with a fraction of what you started with. But the result—a rich, full-bodied demi-glace—is worth it, as it imparts a vivacious flavor you simply can't recreate with canned stock.

"So many restaurants don't make their own veal stock because space on the range is tight in a tight kitchen and the stock requires a lot of simmering and reduction," he explained. "Even to prepare the stock is laborious." Indeed, Frank starts by brushing veal bones with tomato paste, roasting the bones, then adding carrots, celery and onion to the pan. Everything is roasted until it caramelizes, at which point he deglazes the pan with wine and water. He lets that simmer, pulling all of the yummy bits out of the pan, before dumping all of it in a stock pot and adding more water. He'll reduce that down until the flavors intensify. "We'll reduce five gallons of stock and, by the end, we'll only have 10 percent of that left as a finished product for demi-glace," he said.

Taking the time to slowly extract flavor, as with the veal demi-glace, is an essential element of Frank's cooking. Another example: his slow-roasted garlic and shallot purées. Raw garlic and shallots have a pungent bite; roasted, they're tenderly transformed, softened and caramelized until nutty-sweet. These purées are the unsung heroes of his menu, mak-



FROM TOP: Manager Blyssa Kerryon laughs with patrons; Head Chef Orlando 'Al' Allerado, at work in the kitchen





PHOTO LEFT: Elyssa Kenyon is a familiar face as the longtime manager of Frank's.
PHOTO LEFT: Online reviewers praise the ample portions at Frank's. House specialties include wonderful variations of lobster, sea scallops, veal, pork tenderloin and New Zealand lamb, as well as salmon, tuna, prime rib and filet mignon.
PHOTO CENTER: Ryan Johnson serves with a smile.
PHOTO RIGHT: Bartender Jessica Fenner laughs with patrons.

ing their way into many of his best dishes. The pasta particularly entices the gemelli pasta, a diverse dish with broccoli rabe or florets, sun-dried tomatoes, artichoke hearts, Kalamata olives, zucchini, summer squash, roasted red peppers, caramelized onions and wild mushrooms sautéed in a cream sherry, balsamic vinegar sauce. The dish is garnished with Parmesan and Asiago cheeses and can be topped with sliced ribeye steak, lobster meat, jumbo shrimp or marinated chicken breast.

Frank's attention to detail extends to the dessert menu as well, the cannoli, crème brûlée, bread pudding and tiramisu all made in-house. The tiramisu is especially sweet-tooth satisfying, with light-as-air, custardy sheets of whipped sugar, mascarpone, milk, vanilla, egg yolks and heavy cream nestled between layers of ladyfingers soaked in a dark-meat Italian-collie reduction, dark rum, Kahlúa and Frangelico, all dusted with cocoa.

The result is a just-right balance of alcohol, sweetness and creaminess, the components expertly layered to achieve that perfect bite.

Like everything on the menu, the tiramisu is a classic dish that requires a steady hand. It's also emblematic of Grace's approach to cooking: delicious, simple food, made one layer at a time. "I love food," he said. "Customers always say to me, 'We've had this dish 100 times—what do you do to your food to make it taste so good?' It's love. That's it. That's my secret ingredient and it's one that no one can ever emulate."

Frank's Gourmet Grille is located at 56 Whitehall Ave., Stratford, CT 06355, near the heart of Mystic's former attraction. Call 860-413-4666 or visit franksgourmetgrille.com to view the menu and learn more.

