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Chef Chat

Michael Pellegrino

Max's Wine Dive

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For the past year, Michael Pellegrino has commanded the reins in the kitchen at Max's Wine Dive. About two months ago, Max's changed its culinary program so that the menu incorporated a left and right side: the former housing the "Max's Classics" and the latter serving as the chef's creative playground. We visited with the San Antonio-born, Detroit-raised chef to discuss his inspirations.

EOW: How did you get into food?

Pellegrino: It came from my father, who loved food. Whenever we went out to eat, he would only want meals that he couldn't cook himself. So fortunately for us, we would end up going somewhere really nice. Being exposed to that as a little kid, it inspired me from day one to provide the same experience.

EOW: Sounds like you got into the industry at a young age. For our young readers contemplating a career in the culinary field, what words of wisdom do you have for them?

Pellegrino: Get into it as early as possible. I got to work for the award-winning chef, Jimmy Schmidt of the Rattlesnake in Detroit, when I was 15. I knew I wanted to be a chef, I got in there, I washed dishes, I bussed tables, I cut vegetables, I worked pantry and so by the time I went to culinary school, I was already exposed. So I try to tell everybody that if you want to be a chef, you must first make sure that you love it. You're going to work every night and weekend. You have to have a passion to be successful.

EOW: Sounds like a lot of sweat equity. Did you ever have days when you thought to yourself, "Man, I'm not sure if I made the right career choice?"

Pellegrino: I never had days where I said, "I don't want to do this." However, there were definitely days where I thought, "Man, this really sucks. Why didn't I become an engineer?" It was usually because everyone I knew would be off doing this or that but here I am stuck on the line cooking for six people at one in the morning. That's the sacrifice you make for the ultimate goal, but it's worth it.

EOW: Max's Wine Dive serves up Southern comfort food. Is it a challenge for you to write and execute these menus since you were raised in Detroit?

Pellegrino: No, because my family's from Texas, and we came back every summer. We would visit my grandmother in San Antonio. So I had plenty of exposure to Southern cuisine. Also, it's from my grandmother that I learned Mexican cuisine. I also have a lot of Italian influences from my father's side. Actually, it was because of my family, specifically my grandparents, that I moved back to Texas to go to the Culinary Academy of Austin. I believe that all chefs express themselves from what they've seen, been taught, and ate as a child. This combination is what creates each chef's flavor profile.

Come back tomorrow to learn the method to Chef Pellegrino's madness when he devises creative concoctions for the right side of his menu.

We continue our discussion with Chef Pellegrino, learning about how he creates new concoctions for the menu at Max's Wine Dive.

Eating Our Words: Now that Max's offers more creative fare on the right side of the menu, how do you go about creating dishes for this side of the menu?

Pellegrino: There are two ways. First is what I'm craving at the time. As I mentioned, my cooking has a heavy influence of Italian cuisine. Lately, I've been craving spaghetti. I love spaghetti, but specifically my family's

spaghetti, which is different than anything I can get here. So a version of my family's spaghetti will be offered on the menu soon. The other way is from seasonal inspirations. For example, the other week I was driving through Luling and saw they were having their Luling Watermelon Thump. I ended up buying 10 watermelons and we ended up with watermelon on the menu.

EOW: Describe the process of how you create a specific menu offering.

Pellegrino: One thing I love to do is involve my kitchen staff. That way, everyone contributes and feel they own a part of a dish. I'll get everyone together, we'll talk about what makes sense and then try out the good ideas to see what works. If it works and it's delicious, then it goes on the menu. It typically takes about a week for an idea to show up on the menu, but sometimes it just takes a few days. For example, [two days ago] I was thinking about halibut and thought it would be great with a succotash made with our sweet cream corn. So I called my sous chef to get it in. Then yesterday we played with it, and it made sense. And today we added to the menu. So the timing can vary.

EOW: How do you decide what makes sense when experimenting in the kitchen?



Pellegrino: I believe that the ingredients tell me what to cook. So I literally taste each ingredient with the idea, "Okay, what does this tell me?" So the ingredient might tell me that it needs to be with bacon, or something sweet, or something vinegary, or something acidic. I let the ingredients tell me what it wants. Then from there I compose a dish.

EOW: So people already know of Max's classic fried chicken and mac-and-cheese. But what creations on the right side of the menu are near and dear to your heart?

Pellegrino: I like the crackling chicken. We're currently offering a crackling chicken with spring mushroom risotto. I love risotto. I grew up eating risotto. It's my favorite

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way to eat rice, period. We also have a cool Hungry-Max, which is a play on the TV dinner Hungry-Man. It's served on a school-style cafeteria tray.

EOW: Like the Hungry-Man, is the Hungry-Max a pound of food?

Pellegrino: Oh no, it's definitely more. *Laughs boisterously*

Tune in tomorrow for photos and detailed descriptions of Chef Pellegrino's crackling chicken and Hungry-Max.

In Chef Chats parts one and two, we talked with Max's Wine Dive Chef Pellegrino about his creative contributions to the restaurant's menu. Then we tried two of them.

The Hungry-Max is a revisit to the grade-school cafeteria lines, with the items served in its nostalgic compartments changing depending on seasonality. The Hungry-Max shown here came with a wild game meatloaf of venison and buffalo. Layered into this loaf were an assortment of different roasted peppers (bell, poblano and Anaheim) and a special house barbecue sauce. It was topped with a delectable mushroom gravy that seeped nicely into the fluffy loaf. Served up alongside it were some more old-school staples: mashed potatoes, corn (in this case a jalapeño corn succotash), cornbread and a little dessert (apple strawberry cobbler). This dish made me feel like a kid again. Of course, this time around, I felt like more like Richie Rich than the little confused Vietnamese boy munching on his first chimichanga, but you get the picture.

The crackling chicken is a skin-on but boneless chicken breast and thigh. The skin side is seared on a screaming-hot skillet so that it crackles and crisps as if it was deep-fried. The crackling chicken is then roasted in the oven and served with a mushroom risotto. The lightly seasoned chicken was a great complement to risotto perfectly shaken, not stirred, with chicken stock, butter and Parmesan until nice and creamy. The dish was finished with a little bit of chives on top and some truffle oil. The perfectly cooked chicken in both dark and white meat varieties pleased the palate, and the chicken and the risotto together danced on the tongue, while the truffle oil and spring mushrooms added a sophisticated yet subtle flavor to the dish.