

Masseria

BY NICHOLAS STEFANELLI

In Style

Nick Stefanelli embraces his inherent taste

Growing up in suburban Maryland did not limit **Nick Stefanelli's** global aspirations as he emerged out of a family with European sensibilities, having grandparents of Greek and Italian origin. A style savvy and athletic young man, Stefanelli's initial dreams of playing pro baseball were derailed his senior year of high school when he tragically broke his foot. With a secondary desire for a career in fashion and reason to switch gears, he took his passion for fine linens and textiles to learn the trade of clothing design. Stefanelli went to work for a tailor, concentrating on men's suiting, and then traveled through Italy en route to Milan to further his studies.

What he found in Italy was a nation immersed in a culture of food, drink, and the enjoyment of life -- the same values that his grandparents had brought with them to America. In Puglia, the impoverished region of southern Italy where his grandfather is from, Stefanelli was enchanted by the *masseria*, centuries-old agricultural estates whose residents worked the land, created their own food, and hosted strangers with great warmth. Some of these are now 5-star hotels. Remarkably, when he returned home, Stefanelli's own culinary awakening and venture was spawned by the fashionable restaurant revolution in Washington, DC. It did not appear like too much of a departure from his interests in clothing as cooking incorporates similar components of design -- a look, vibrancy, creativity, texture, and of course -- quality and taste. "It felt so natural for me to move in this direction" said Stefanelli.

Graduating in 2001 from L'Académie de Cuisine in Gaithersburg, Maryland, Stefanelli sought after a chef that would marry the interests and knowledge he learned of Italian cooking at home. He secured an externship at Roberto Donna's Galileo in the nation's capital, where he quickly advanced to chef de partie, prior to taking on the same role at the exclusive Laboratorio del Galileo, a private dining room within the acclaimed Italian restaurant. Stefanelli fondly recalls that Donna was practicing farm-to-table before it was 'a thing,' with a regular parade of Amish farmers coming to the restaurant's back door; it's a practice the young chef fully embraces in all his cooking, noting with pride that his purveyors are his friends -- sometimes even houseguests.

His progression in the world of high-end Italian cuisine continued at Fabio Trabocchi's Maestro in northern Virginia. Under the rigorous tutelage of the Italian-born James Beard Award-winning chef, Stefanelli learned the regional culinary nuances of Italy, and all about sourcing rare ingredients. With his mentor's encouragement, he completed a stage at Thomas Keller's French Laundry in 2004. In 2007, he was made chef de cuisine at Trabocchi's Fiamma in New York, which earned three stars from *The New York Times* while he was there. Returning to Washington, in 2009 he was asked by legendary restaurateur, Ashok Bajaj, to develop the menu for Bibiana. An instant success, the high-style Italian restaurant became known for Stefanelli's signature cuisine that imbues the ages-old culinary heritage of Italy with his own contemporary sensibilities. While he was at the helm in the kitchen for its first five years, Bibiana was named *Esquire's* Best New Restaurant [2009], received three stars from *The Washington Post*, and was a perennial on *Washingtonian's* 100 Best Restaurants list. Stefanelli himself was named the 2010 Rising Star by the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington [RAMW], and was a long-list nominee for the James Beard Rising Star Award. In 2016, Masseria was named a "Best New Restaurant" finalist by RAMW.

Stefanelli gives the name **Masseria** to his first restaurant, where he channels the warmth, life, and craftsmanship that he discovered in Italy in all he presents. Bringing the Italian countryside to the still-gritty Washington warehouse district near the colorful food halls of Union Market is something that suits his relaxed and approachable style. The farmhouse-meets-industrial aesthetic is right in keeping with Stefanelli's exuberant talent for mixing-it-up for the sake of a great dish: don't be surprised to find Chinese xo sauce in his signature *Aglia e Olio*, for example, or a version of *Pork & Beans* that involves a Korean white bean sauce. "My foundation in Italian food is based on an understanding

of its history," he explains. "My grandmother is from Sicily, which has been conquered by every single nation in the Mediterranean, so its cuisine has influences from all over." If not from the far east -- yet -- Stefanelli is game to be the chef who adds another layer of influence to the flavors. But this is not about gratuitous fusion, he notes. "No false floors: a dish must always have a good reason to be on the menu." Stefanelli's authenticity garnered praise from critics and patrons alike – and in October 2016, earned a Michelin star within Washington, DC's first-ever guide.

With an eye still on the fashion industry, the sharp-dressed Stefanelli is [nearly] as invested in the tailored design details of the restaurant and its courtyard lounge, as in its menu -- which he plans to draft in-season, a year in advance, taking a note from fashion designers. "How can I be thinking of spring when there are nine inches of snow on the ground? But I do! And I get excited about chestnuts and foie gras in July," he challenges.

In 2016, Stefanelli announced his plans to open a new concept within The Wharf, DC—the mile-long neighborhood currently under construction along the city's southwest waterfront. Opening spring 2018, it will be an expansive three-story complex featuring a specialized Italian market food emporium; a *trattoria* serving his trademark cuisine; and a rooftop with a bar and private event space boasting a breathtaking view of the revitalized waterfront.

Stefanelli serves on the American Lamb Board. When not at the restaurant, he is often on a bicycle, and as Chef Chair of Share Our Strength, he is committed to long-distance Chefs Cycle fundraising rides for No Kid Hungry. His love for his rescue dog spurred his charitable involvement with the Washington Humane Society.

At his very own Masseria, Nick Stefanelli takes ownership of his rightful heritage and keeps it real -- very real, his way.

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