

## OUTSIDE THE KITCHEN

**Chef:** Christian Petroni**Residence:** Stamford, Connecticut**Restaurant:** Fortina in Armonk and Rye Brook

To get to know Christian Petroni, you don't need to hear him speak. His tattoos do that for him. His life, his loves cascade from shoulder to wrist in vibrant, swirling ink: game birds, hunters, farmland. The hunters are his father and godfather; the farmland, meadows he strode with them. "My tattoos signify what is most important to me, things I believe in," he says.

What he believes in most is family. There were those childhood hunting trips: waking at 4 am and leaving the Bronx to go upstate. There were raucous Sunday dinners. And there were those summers—cousins, aunts, and uncles all gathering on Ponza, their ancestral Tyrrhenian Sea island. "School would finish, and my mother would take us," he says. "All these New York kids would be on this island, hanging out. It wouldn't matter that it was 120 degrees; Aunt Gisella would cook lentil soup, big plates of pasta fagioli, salumi. There were figs from the garden. Uncle Louie would go for squid, and she'd make it with braised tomato and spaghetti." His eyes are luminous. "My cousins and I try to go back every year." Those memories are with him daily; Uncle Louie's portrait hangs in the Armonk Fortina kitchen.

"Italy is my heart," Petroni states, but there's another more recent seductress. It was at White Plains' old Peniche that Spain first transfixed him, and the passion surged at Greenwich's Barcelona. Cooking tapas, he began traveling throughout Spain for education and then solely for pleasure. "I'm conflicted about which country I love more," he admits.

Fortina was Petroni's road back to his heritage and to the food of his youth. It started as a path, really—the dreamy amble of a child. "I'd watch French chefs on the Discovery Channel at 5 years old," he says. "I was intrigued with their classical technique." He shrugs, laughing. "My parents thought there was something wrong with me." But it wasn't a phase. At 12, he worked catered events at Scarsdale's old Alex & Henry's, stocking the bar, decorating



Petroni squashing grapes with his dad in a press owned by his great-grandfather. They use the juice to make the vincotto for all their restaurants.

**Chef Speak**

"I'd watch French chefs on the Discovery Channel at 5 years old...I was intrigued with their classical technique."

the Viennese dessert table, and eventually doing some baking. He stayed for four years. "I loved watching the cooks. I'd see the chef change into a fancy chef's coat to go into the dining room, and thought he was the coolest guy I'd ever seen."

He thought he had it made; his parents thought differently. They insisted on education. He signed up for culinary school but left after a month. "It was too structured," he says. "I was paying to learn, and knew I could learn for free in kitchens; so that's what I did." He found work cooking in local places, in Ponza restaurants, and in unpaid stages in Spain. Then it was back to New York, to Peniche and nearby Barcelona, where he met the co-workers who would become his partners in Fortina. That almost didn't happen. "It was so difficult getting investors to believe in a couple of 28-year-olds," he grimly recounts. He and a partner lived in his mother's basement for more than a year, borrowing money from her to take investors to lunch. "The day we got funding, my life turned around. Our angels came along and gave us this opportunity, and we'll never take it for granted."

Today, there are two Fortinas with a third coming to Stamford, Connecticut, sometime this fall. Petroni has helped open a prepared foods café, Cooked & Co. His mother supplies some recipes for the restaurants. His father builds all the banquets and visits farms and Hunts Point for produce. "It's his dream job," Petroni says. "And it's my dream to be able to pay my parents back for everything they've done for me."

That's one dream realized. Here's another: "We're all excited to come to work, but we make time for things that give us pleasure, like family, like hunting. Otherwise, what are we doing it for?"

—Diane Weintraub Pohl

## WHAT THE HECK IS A...

**Kaffir Lime (Makrut)**

**Description:** A fruit grown from citrus trees in Southeast Asia, the kaffir lime has bumpy greenish-yellow skin and its glossy green leaves are fragrant and impart a lemon-lime flavor in dishes.

**Flavor Profile:** The juice is quite strong and has a tangy and sour flavor similar to lime juice.

**Cuisine Connection:**

Kaffir lime is used in Thai and Indonesian cooking. Most Thai restaurants use kaffir lime and its leaves in dishes like tom yum (a hot, sour, and aromatic soup). Moderne Barn in Armonk serves their Thai coconut lemongrass mussels with kaffir lime basmati rice.

**Name Controversy:** Some wish to eliminate the use of the name kaffir due to its pejorative meaning in other contexts and instead use the name for the kaffir lime in Southeast Asia: makrut. (Note: Barron's Food Lover's Companion uses kaffir lime). The origin of the word kaffir comes from the Arabic *kafir*, which means "unbeliever." In the 19th Century, it became a racial slur used by whites in South Africa toward African blacks.

Not all meanings of the word kaffir are negative however: Sri Lanka is the home of an ethnic group that refers to themselves proudly as the Kaffirs.

—JBT

## SIZZLING...

**Bacon popcorn**  
(popcorn cooked in bacon fat)

## HEATING...

**Sriracha popcorn**



## FIZZLING...

**Truffled popcorn**