

# AT THE TABLE

VANTAGE POINT

LIDIA GOES BEHIND THE CAMERA

FORTUNATO AT FELIDIA

IN SAFE HANDS WITH CHEF NICOTRA

A GRAPE COLLABORATION

MEDITERRANEAN VARIETALS IN TUSCANY

AN ALL-STAR CULINARY ROSTER

PLAYING FOR A COMMON GOAL



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PHOTOS AT LEFT: CASTELLUCCIO, UMBRIA: DRY LENTIL BUSH

FROM TOP: TRENTO ALTO ADIGE: COUPLE LISTENING TO BIRDS SINGING; SARDEGNA: YOUNG PANE CARASAU BAKER;

BASILICATA: HEADING BACK HOME WITH THE HARVEST; PIEDMONT: ARTIST/WINE LABEL DESIGNER, DOLENGA;

UMBRIA: YOUNG UMBRIAN POTTER OF DERUTA; CALABRIA: FRUIT VENDOR

# From Lidia's Vantage Point



On a drive through Italy's Trentino-Alto Adige region, Lidia spotted a couple sitting on a park bench. She asked Mario to turn around and head back toward them. After chatting with them for a bit, Lidia and Mario learned that the couple had been out for a little walk, and had stopped to sit and listen to the birds.

One morning this past summer, Lidia Bastianich looked out into her garden and was struck by the diversity of the vibrant red, yellow, orange, and green tomatoes that were practically begging to be picked. Harvesting a good quantity of them, she brought them into her kitchen and set to work. But rather than using a knife and whipping up some tremendous dish, she hauled out her camera, arranged the tomatoes in various still-life poses, and photographed their splendor. Still not yet ready to devour them, Lidia sliced up a few of the tomato beauties and photographed them in their new form. She added a bit of sea salt to the shot, then a wedge of purple onion, and finally a bottle of Bastianich Rosato—which, as she will tell you, was not meant as a marketing ploy but just happened to look nice with the red fruit.

The very definition of an overachiever, Lidia is a supremely multifaceted woman who manages to straddle the roles of chef, entrepreneur, television star, tour guide, mother, grandmother, cookbook author, and educator, without missing a step. And if that's not enough, she's recently added yet another title to her repertoire: photographer.

"Photography is my way of capturing a moment," Lidia says. "When I'm taken by something, I go for my camera." This medium has become a way for Lidia to communicate her take on what she encounters in both her travels and her daily life, and it's almost strictly focused on the subject of food. Her

photographs evoke a sense of place and person with a timeless quality—as though these moments are firmly set and can be easily revisited. The cherries are always ripe, the pasta shells always perfectly formed by wrinkled hands, and the Umbrian potter remains in pose, making his rustic pots.

Capturing characters that she encounters along her way, from shepherds to zucchini farmers, Lidia is incredibly fascinated by food people, focusing on their hands. "Their hands speak of food," she explains. "I see what they do. Hands almost seem to give a profile of a person; they have a lot to say."

Beyond communicating a moment, Lidia communicates culture, with ease, since the Italian way is intrinsic to her very person, to who she is all about. For decades, she has imparted Italian culture to the American public at large through food. "Italian cuisine is so logical, flavorful, diversified, and communicative," notes Lidia. These qualities have enabled her to talk about Italian culture—in her own words. "Cuisine is a profile of a culture. Food is my life and my medium. It's full of affection, love, color, and flavor. It is my way of communicating."

With an eye always toward her next project, Lidia is currently working on a new cookbook, *Cooking from the Heart of Italy*, the sequel to *Lidia's Italy*, which took readers to ten different regions in Italy. The new book will cover 12 more, and in addition to including notes and recipes from her travels, it will feature Lidia's own photographs of

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- Montalcino, the homeland of one of the most famous wines in the world, saw the acquisition and renovation of the *Coldisole* estate.
- Lastly, the foundation of *Poggio alle Sughere* in the Tuscan Maremma area.

LIONELLO **M**ARCHESI



## SAFFRON: THE COOK'S GOLD



To watch the rust-red strands of a dried *Crocus stigma*—better known as saffron—turn a dish, or even a piece of fabric, a luminous yellow-orange hue, is to behold the work of nature at its best. Lidia does her utmost to capture this process frame by frame.

While the majority of saffron's production happens in Iran, Navelli, in Abruzzo, Italy, is considered the world capital for high-quality saffron. Saffron comes from the fall-blooming *Crocus sativus* flower that has been cultivated for some 5,000 years. And since it takes anywhere from 45,000 to 90,000 flowers to make one pound of saffron, it's easy to see why this spice is considered one of the most expensive, by weight, in the world.



Besides cooking properties, both as a seasoning agent (with an aroma of metallic honey with grassy notes) and a coloring instrument (also used to dye cloth), saffron also has a long history of use in traditional healing.



people and food in each of the regions. *"Italy will be done and done well,"* she assures.

When she finishes recording the winding roads of a country she knows intimately, Lidia will be off to learn more about other cultures and cuisines. When asked what she would like to explore next, a waterfall of interests tumbles out: Chinese and Thai, Korean and South American. And with plans to travel to Brazil and the Middle East in her immediate future, it seems Lidia will have no problem working a world of cuisines into her life.

On an afternoon drive through Italy's Trentino-Alto Adige region, with one of her favorite travel companions, her longtime friend Mario Piccozzi, Lidia Bastianich spotted a couple sitting on a park bench. She asked Mario to turn around and head back toward them. After chatting with them for a bit, Lidia and Mario learned that the couple had been out for a little walk, and had stopped to sit and listen to the birds. *"There was something so nice about them just sitting there, watching birds. It was evident enough that they wanted to be together,"* says Lidia. And then she snapped a photograph to remember the moment.

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Executive Chef at Felidia

# Fortunato Nicotra

As one of the country's most-beloved and well-respected chefs, surely it must be a daunting task, to say the least, to select the right person to man the kitchen of your namesake restaurant?

But Lidia Bastianich found exactly who she was looking for when she hired Fortunato Nicotra, a Piedmont-trained and Michelin-starred chef, nearly 13 years ago. Nicotra brings the same sense of adventure and appreciation for quality to his cooking at Felidia that Lidia brings to each of her endeavors around the world.

The inventive and refined palate of flavors and ingredients that Chef Nicotra employs in his dishes are his way of cooking as true to his Italian roots as possible. *"I don't really like the term 'modern Italian cuisine,' "* states Nicotra. *"Using fresh, local ingredients is more traditional in terms of Italian cuisine than anything else. When Italians cook, they get the best and the freshest tomatoes they can—they'd never use any that came from far away or were out of season."*

Speaking of tomatoes, when in season, guests at Felidia encounter a large variety of local heirloom tomatoes on Nicotra's menu—called out by their individual names, like Toy Box and Lemon Boy. The chicken comes fresh from Four Story Hill Farm in Pennsylvania, and Long

Island fluke and tuna are used whenever possible.

Beyond what's local, Nicotra especially enjoys using a variety of ingredients that he's discovered since moving to New York, experimenting with items that aren't frequently put to use in Italy. One such ingredient is peanut butter, which Nicotra has become fanatical about. He has found inventive ways to integrate it seamlessly into his dishes through such recipes as his foie gras sandwiches and the peanut-butter-and-jelly panna cotta. He has also developed quite a taste for corn, which is usually found in Italy only in polenta, and it is used in a variety of Felidia's menu items. During the fall and winter months, Nicotra loves cooking with American-style squashes like the acorn, butternut, and hubbard varieties, which have never been readily available in Italy.

And while he's happy to use whatever can be found close at hand, there are still a few staples that Nicotra has sent from Italy—like the big, cylindrical wheels of Grana Padano cheese, melt-in-your-mouth burrata, and aged Balsamic vinegar. His guests seem pretty content to have a taste of the old world, too.

## PEANUT BUTTER AND JELLY PANNA COTTA

Serves 6

- 2 cups of heavy cream
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 vanilla bean
- 2 sheets of gelatin
- 6 tablespoons of peanut butter
- 12 tablespoons of Concord grape jam

Bring 1/2 cup of the cream, sugar, and vanilla bean to a boil. Remove from heat and cool to room temperature.

Soak the gelatin in 4 cups of cold water until soft, about 3 to 4 minutes. Drain with a small sieve and add to hot cream mixture.

With a paring knife, open the vanilla bean and scrape seeds into cream mixture. Then strain the mixture through a sieve and let cool.

Whip 1 1/2 cups of heavy cream until stiff, and fold whipped cream into the cooled and strained cream mixture.

Place 1 tablespoon of peanut butter into the bottom of 6 4-ounce cups. Add 1 tablespoon of Concord grape jam on top of the peanut butter. Pour in the panna cotta and allow to cool for 1 to 2 hours. When panna cotta is cool, bring the remaining Concord grape jam to a boil and spread the melted jam on top of each panna cotta. Place in the refrigerator for at least 2 hours or overnight. Invert and serve.

## A FINGER ON THE VINE

*"I'm always running back into the kitchen with a glass of wine for the chef to taste and try out with a dish,"* exclaims Nicholas Finger, Wine Director at Felidia.

Nick prides himself on plumping up his Italian-focused wine portfolio with bottlings of food-friendly, esoteric varietals from Italy. With names that sound like they're straight out of a science-fiction novel—pignolo, schiopettino, and tocai—these cooler-climate, northern Italian grapes produce wines that have a perfect balance of acidity and fruit, an excellent complement to Chef Fortunato Nicotra's dishes. *"I find the wines of northern Italy very balanced with vibrant acidity—always great for food pairings."*

### NICK'S FAVORITE PICKS:

**Vignai da Duline Schiopettino 2006** This wine is a great illustration of what I like about schiopettino: young, elegant, and vibrant. Nice mix of pepper, fruit, and earth with that Burgundian character that makes people like pinot noir. Really drinkable and food friendly.

**Gagliasso, Barbera d'Alba 2006** Another young wine that is great with food. No oak; pure and fresh. Won't fatigue the palate, and works with a large cross-section of fare.

**Moscioni Refosco 2004** This is a more "serious" and somewhat fuller-bodied wine. It reminds me of a cross of Rhône syrah and Oregon pinot noir, but it still tastes totally northern Italian and doesn't lose its own identity.

**Bastianich Tocai Friulano 2006** I really love northern Italian whites. Stainless steel, super vibrant, almost has a bit of spritz to it, and just delivers on all fronts. Great fruit and that typical almond quality that tocai is known for.

**Lupi Pigato** From Liguria, Lupi Pigato is all citrus and white pepper, with a green, almost mirepoix quality that is really interesting and unique.



UMBRIA: MACCHERONI ALLA CHITARRA



LIDIA'S KITCHEN: DRYING PERSIMMONS



BOLOGNA: TORTELLINI

SMOKED CACIOCAVALLO

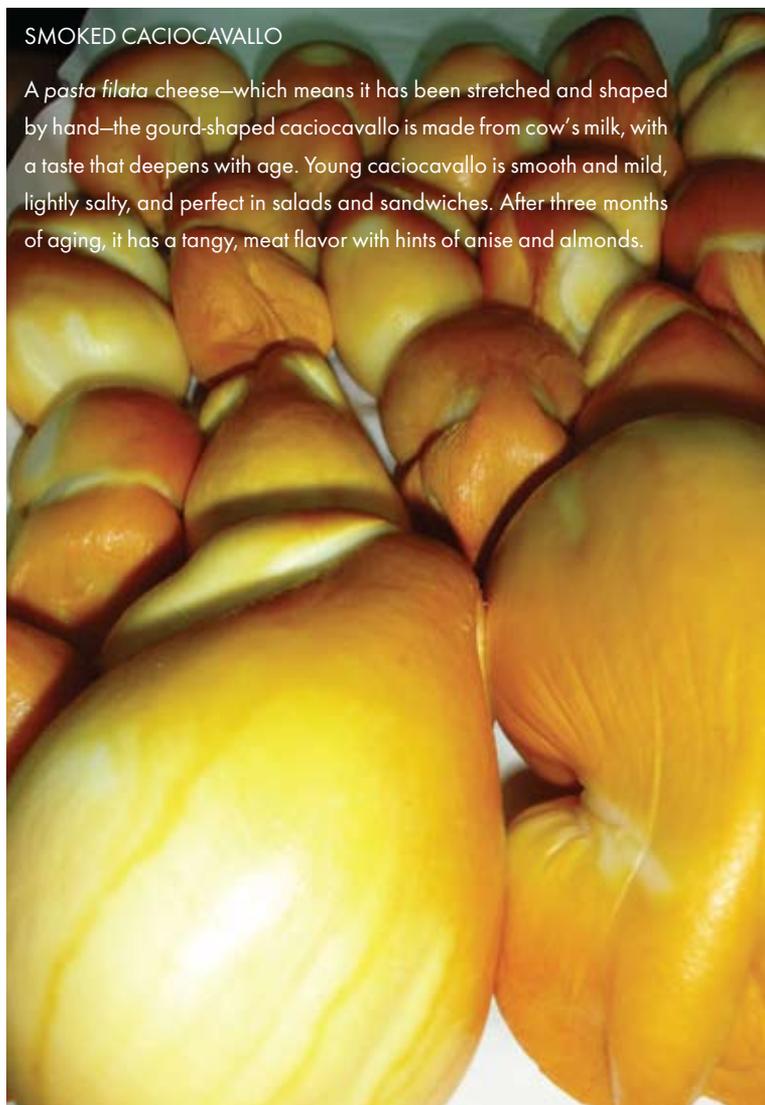
A *pasta filata* cheese—which means it has been stretched and shaped by hand—the gourd-shaped caciocavallo is made from cow's milk, with a taste that deepens with age. Young caciocavallo is smooth and mild, lightly salty, and perfect in salads and sandwiches. After three months of aging, it has a tangy, meat flavor with hints of anise and almonds.



SARDEGNA: PANE CARASAU



UMBRIA: SAUSAGES





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# A LOVE FOR PANINI

Fortunato features several Italian-style panini on his lunch and bar menus, including the focaccia with speck and taleggio and the Felidia favorite: the smoked salmon, egg-white frittata, and robiola sandwich.

## SMOKED SALMON, EGG-WHITE FRITTATA, AND ROBIOLA SANDWICH

Makes 4 Small Panini

### FRITTATA INGREDIENTS:

- 2 egg whites
- 3 tablespoons chives, chopped
- 2 scallions, chopped fine
- Salt to taste
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

### SANDWICH INGREDIENTS:

- 2 slices of whole wheat bread
- 1 tablespoon soft robiola cheese
- 2 slices of good quality smoked salmon
- 2 slices of tomatoes plus a few arugula leaves for garnish

### FRITTATA:

Whisk the egg whites, chives, and scallions until blended together. Salt to taste.

Heat the oil in a small frying pan until it just starts to sizzle, then pour in the egg-white mixture and turn the heat down very low. Cook gently for approximately 2 minutes. Lift a corner of the frittata with a spatula and check to see if the bottom has started to brown. When it has, flip the frittata over by giving the pan

a firm, quick shake up and over toward you so that it dislodges and flips over in one piece. (Or you can turn it over gently with a spatula.) Cook the second side for 1 1/2 to 2 minutes, again checking to see if the bottom has browned to your liking. Slide the frittata out of the pan and onto a plate.

### SANDWICH:

Meanwhile, toast the bread in a panini press or nonstick pan. Spread the robiola onto one toasted slice, then add the smoked salmon, frittata, tomatoes, and arugula. Top with the second slice of toasted bread, press down firmly, and cut into four triangles and serve.

## GULF SHRIMP WITH GARLIC-LEMON SAUCE AND SALT-BAKED RED ONION

Serves 6

This Felidia wintertime favorite is Fortunato's version of the Italian-American shrimp scampi.

Fortunato chooses not to use butter and creates a milder garlic taste by cooking the garlic in milk.

### ONION INGREDIENTS:

- 6 large red onions with skins on
- Enough rock salt to cover onions
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil plus 3 tablespoons to sauté the shrimp
- 1 tray of cornstarch
- 24 jumbo shrimp, peeled, and butterflied

### ONIONS:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Wash onion, cover completely with rock salt, and place on baking sheet. Cook in the oven for approximately 1 to 1 1/2 hours. You can test the onion with a long skewer. It should be soft, but still firm.

Remove the onions from the oven and cut the tops of each one like you would a pumpkin, saving the tops. Scoop out the onion so that you are left with the skin and two layers of the outer part. Slice the onions that were scooped out and set aside. In a sauté pan over very low heat, add two tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil, then add the scooped onions and caramelize over very low heat for approximately 45 minutes, until very soft.

### SHRIMP:

Pat the shrimp in the cornstarch and shake off any excess. Heat three tablespoons of olive oil and sauté shrimp until crispy, about 3 minutes total. Remove from pan and pat dry.

### SAUCE INGREDIENTS:

- 3 cloves garlic
- 1/2 cup of heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons toasted pinenuts
- Salt
- Pepper

### SAUCE:

Bring a small pot of water to a boil. Add the garlic and boil for 10 minutes. Remove the garlic and cook with heavy cream over low heat until the garlic dissolves, approximately 3 to 4 minutes. Add lemon juice, salt, pepper, and pine nuts. Mix, add the shrimp, and turn until the shrimp absorb almost all of the sauce (it should stick like a glaze). Remove the shrimp from the sauté pan.

### ASSEMBLY:

Pour the onion mixture into the whole onions, add two shrimp to each onion, and cover with the saved onion top.





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# SUPER-MEDITERRANEAN

Like mother, like son: Lidia is not the only Bastianich to devote her time to bringing an authentic glimpse of the Italian lifestyle to the United States.



to buy another winery, this time on the warm, rustic coast of Tuscany, in an area called Maremma. Named La Mozza, this winery uses the hot climate to its utmost potential by growing not only the expected sangiovese grape, but also such Mediterranean varietals as grenache, syrah, and carignan. Although rarely encountered in the region, these varietals are incredibly well suited to the soil and climate and seem to naturally progress in the area.

*"We pioneered the planting of Mediterranean grape varietals in Tuscany," Joe says. "Super-Tuscans are great, but it's been 40 years since the first Super-Tuscan was produced, and it was time for something new."* The team has coined the term "Super-Mediterranean" for this new genre of wine and use it to describe their special bold, red blend, Aragone.

In Aragone, the indigenous sangiovese is blended with Mediterranean varieties, like syrah and carignan from southern France and alicante from Spain, to create this "Super-Med." Its color is intense ruby red with reflections of violet. The sangiovese and alicante grapes contribute to the structure and complexity of the blend with spice and licorice flavors. The syrah and carignan add a fresh dark-berry component. Aragone hints at a southern Rhône style with black-olive aromas, and its ripe fruit evokes the depth of Spanish Priorat.

Whether he's creating appellations of wine or refining the diner's experience, you can be certain Joe Bastianich lives by one motto: Great food should always be enjoyed with equally outstanding wine.

The Bastianich winery mission is to understand the history and culture of the area and take it to a new level, creating unique wines that speak of a place, but at the same time show remarkable power and balance.

LIDIA'S SON, JOE, is a major proponent in his own right. Through his partnerships in restaurants and wineries (with his mother, Lidia Bastianich, and Mario Batali) and through his books on wine, Joe has become the go-to authority on Italian wine in New York, if not the country.

However, simply advocating Italian wines was not enough for either Lidia or Joe, so 12 years ago they founded their own winery called Azienda Agricola Bastianich. *"The magic in wine comes in pairing it with food," Joe explains. "We wanted to make wines that both paired well with food and were expressive of the terroir, the place where the grapes are grown."* Located in the cool climate of Italy's northern Friuli region, the Bastianich winery produces wines from indigenous tocai and refosco grapes.

Recently, Joe and Lidia teamed up with Mario Batali

**Vespa Rosso is an estate red that balances power and finesse through a combination of indigenous and international varieties. A wine with ripe fruit and a slightly new-world flavor profile, the lush palate makes it drinkable upon release, though it is structured enough for aging. Vespa is Italian for "wasp."**

**Calabrone is an estate reserve released only when an excellent vintage is followed by a dry and mild September and October, when a percentage of the refosco and cabernet franc undergo *appassimento* or drying. As in the case of Amarone, the drying process not only intensifies the flavors of these distinctive grapes, but also softens some of their natural tannic bite.**





# A Common Goal

Playing for Team Lidia





photographed by  
Michael Harlen Turkel

In the end, there might not have been a whole lot of foosball played that night; instead, there was more snacking and joking around between old friends who hadn't seen each other in a while. The chefs were more interested in relaxing and having some fun. And while they all go in separate directions, it's obvious this isn't a competitive bunch, in sports or in the kitchen.



Late one rainy weekday evening, Lidia's guys—that is, the chefs from the restaurants Lidia Bastianich has full or part ownership of—did something they rarely ever do: they made some food, wrangled up some beer and a few good bottles of wine, and hung out together under the auspices of some good, clean competition over a game of foosball. The location, the upstairs dining room at Felidia, is not usually home to a foosball table, but a portable one was installed just for the evening and somehow seemed a perfect fit, along with the meatball wedges and the big wheel of Grana Padano, in the elegant wood-walled space.

Being a player for Team Lidia is not unlike playing for an Italian National Soccer Team whose players also participate on a variety of other professional teams, both in Italy and around the world. While they go out and accomplish their own goals, when it comes time to play for Italia, they all return with a common objective in mind. Lidia's guys play the same way.

The chefs straggled in, one by one, after working the dinner service in their respective kitchens. Host **Chef Fortunato Nicotra** busily put together several stacks of panini, some stuffed with smoked-salmon pastrami and egg-white frittata and others speck and fontina. This dish is featured on his new bar menu at Felidia. Sometime between service and heading upstairs, Dodo—as Fortunato is adoringly called by almost everyone he meets—had donned a jersey from his favorite Torino soccer team, Juventus, which a friend had made especially for him, with his name on the back.

The first to arrive is **Mark Ladner, Executive Chef** at Del Posto, the hip, upscale *ristorante* on the Hudson River. Ladner came armed with a bag of “pecorino cheese poofs” that he whipped up with a little help from his friend and molecular gastronomy chef, Wylie Dufresne, of restaurant wd-50. These “poofs,” made with something called methylcellulose, are served in Del Posto's bar and are dangerously addictive—Dodo may have even slipped a few in his pocket. Perhaps inspired by being in Lidia's eponymous restaurant, Ladner muses: “I don't know if you know this, but Lidia knows more about regional Italian cuisine than anyone else out there. She is single-handedly responsible for preserving Italian cuisine in this country.” And Ladner is happy to help carry out this mission by serving incredibly polished, delicious, and timely authentic food in Del Posto.

Ladner is also fortunate to be able to travel to Italy several times a year for what he calls a “self-corrective exercise,” in order to honorably represent Italy's cuisine in his restaurant. Much of what he learns is centered on simplicity and regionalism. “Local might not always be the most fashionable,” he declares, “but it is the most relevant.”

Next to arrive is **Chef William Gallagher**, from Becco restaurant, a staple in the theater district for the past 15 years, serving an average 1,200 diners a night. Whereas Del Posto affords more experimentation, Becco is responsible for making exquisite northern Italian cuisine that plucks at the chords most American diners expect when eating at an Italian restaurant. Anything but cliché, Gallagher's food is comforting and homey. He came armed with his famous meatballs, renowned among theatergoers and regulars. If asked what is in them, Gallagher simply replies “love,” with a hearty laugh.

The last to arrive is **Chef David Pasternack**, from Esca, who had just heard about the get-together that afternoon, on returning from a trip, and so came empty-handed. But he made up for it with his conviviality, settling right in and joking with Gallagher, whom he has known since he was ten as they grew up together in Rockville Centre, Long Island. In fact, it was Pasternack who introduced Gallagher to Lidia's son, Joe Bastianich. Pasternack's menu at Esca primarily comprises seafood, and the restaurant can be credited as the first to introduce the Italian notion of *crudo* to New Yorkers. Pasternack stays within the bounds of Italian-inspired dishes by creating a menu that is both simple and beautiful. He is also an avid fisherman, and it is not rare for him to serve his catch at Esca, bringing fresh, local fish directly from the water to the table. This spring, Pasternack will have a fish shack in the new Mets stadium.

At the heart of it all, Lidia serves as the mentor and inspiration. She's the common thread between all these restaurants: from the elegant Felidia and the stylish Del Posto to the family-style Becco and the sea-inspired Esca. And while these chefs and their food can be as different, or not, from one another as they choose, they are ultimately all responsible for respectfully presenting Italian cuisine in Lidia's name—something they all take very seriously.

# HAUTENOTES

From the publisher, Haute Notes is about the discovery of all things innovative and exciting in food and wine, art and design, and style and travel. Visit [hautenotes.com](http://hautenotes.com).

Publisher  
MICHAEL GOLDMAN

Editor-in-Chief  
PAMELA JOUAN

Design Director  
JANA POTASHNIK  
BAIRDesign, Inc.

Managing Editor  
CHRISTIAN KAPPNER

Assistant Editor  
STEPHANE HENRION

Copy Editor  
KELLY SUZAN WAGGONER

Photo Director  
CHARLES HARRIS

Advertising  
[advertising@hautelife.com](mailto:advertising@hautelife.com)

Marketing Director  
KATHERINE PAYNE

Photography  
LIDIA BASTIANICH  
MICHAEL HARLAN TURKELL  
KELLY CAMPBELL

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Suite 1  
Brooklyn, NY 11217

[www.hautelife.com](http://www.hautelife.com)  
[info@hautelife.com](mailto:info@hautelife.com)

Subscription Inquiries  
718.858.1187  
[subscriptions@hautelife.com](mailto:subscriptions@hautelife.com)  
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## HAUTEPHOTO

MICHAEL HARLAN TURKELL is a freelance photographer and free-time cook who used to work in restaurants but now photographs the inner workings of kitchens for his "Back of the House" project. His work was recently published in *25 Under 25: Up-and-Coming American Photographers, Volume 2*, published by powerHouse Books. He is also the photo editor for *Edible Manhattan* and *Edible Brooklyn* magazines, which promote borough-centric food culture. He currently lives in Brooklyn but will travel far and wide for food and drink. Visit [harlanturk.com](http://harlanturk.com).

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**Lidia's Pittsburgh**  
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# Excellence In Italian Wine



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