

An Italian Childhood, an American Journey

BY CLARE KLEINEDLER

He was voted “fan favorite” on season five of the hit Bravo network show *Top Chef*. He’s charmed everyone from Ellen DeGeneres to Kathie Lee Gifford with his enchanting Italian accent and comical musings about the competition. But there’s more to Chef Fabio Viviani than being one of reality television’s most memorable characters. The guy can cook.

Born and raised in Florence, Italy, Viviani was baking homemade bread and shaping pasta with his grandmother at the tender age of five. By the time he reached twelve years old, the precocious youngster was working in a bakery after school in an environment that would certainly raise eyebrows with child welfare workers. “It was illegal, yes, I was baking pies in a broiling hot room with no windows,” says Viviani. “I worked almost naked because it was so hot, and I would go outside to cool down. Of course I got bronchitis several times and had to quit!”

Later, he worked peeling potatoes and scaling fish at another neighborhood restaurant, and then went on to attend Florence’s Istituto Professionale per I Servizi Alberghieri, a public culinary school. Stints at restaurants all over Italy followed, and though he says he learned the art of butchering meat and other formal skills during this period, he credits his grandma and mother for teaching him the core values of cooking.

“My family was way, way below middle class, and though I was an only child I was never a lucky child...I used to go out in shoes made of cardboard and fabric!” says Viviani. “When I was little, I got into a lot of trouble and so my mom had my grandma keep me busy by cooking. I made the bread and fresh pasta every day with her. My grandma was always making bread and pasta from morning until night, in order to feed her family. She taught me to do it right, or not at all, because if she wasn’t doing her job right,



nobody would be eating at night.”

Viviani’s sheer drive and relentless work ethic paid off; by 2005, he owned and operated a half-dozen restaurants and food businesses in Florence. But a struggling economy and the overwhelming demands of the business end of things left the chef wanting a new challenge. He sold his businesses, packed his bags and headed to California to meet up with an old friend, Jacopo Falleni, whom he’d known since grammar school in Florence.

The two worked at a “not so great” Italian restaurant in downtown Ventura, and were determined to start their own

restaurant. One night, fate intervened. A woman dining at the restaurant counter caught his eye, and Viviani asked her out. “We dated for about four months, and then I asked her to marry me and she said yes. With marriage, it’s not about time, it’s about the right person,” says Viviani, whose wife Jessica is an architect. “After we married, her father heard our ideas for a restaurant and he invested money in us.”

What resulted is Café Firenze, a large but rustic Italian restaurant in Moorpark, California that Viviani co-owns with Falleni and his father-in-law. Even before Viviani’s *Top Chef* notoriety, business was booming. There was a month-long wait for a Friday or Saturday night reservation. These days? “We do an average of 5,000 covers per week. Last Friday, we served 800 people at dinner and 400 people at the bar from 5 P.M. to midnight,” says Viviani.

In spite of Viviani’s newfound fame, his passion is for the simple, homey food of his childhood. The chef is a proponent of the Slow Food movement and much of the restaurant’s produce is grown on a small farm just across the street from Café Firenze. Whenever he can, he makes fresh burrata and mozzarella, and prefers quality over flash or trends. “Keep it simple; you don’t need to do fancy,” says Viviani. “You don’t need to drop oil from the third floor to make a splash on the plate—I let the guys in Vegas and New York do those things. They need three stars from the New York Times. I need my restaurant busy and packed every night. I serve delicious, simple food for a fraction of the price of those three-starred

restaurants.”

For Viviani, being Italian means taking the time to appreciate not just the art of preparing a meal, but also the art of consuming it: “My family was not allowed to watch television while we were eating. For us, eating is like a religious thing, it’s sacred. You have to pay attention to what you’re eating because somebody took the time to make it, and you have to honor that. I would not think of getting up before my grandpa was done with his meal. Our family was always committed to lunch and dinner...together.”

Viviani reveals his approach in dishes like his roasted tomato and buffalo mozzarella with pesto dressing. He painstakingly grills tomatoes over an open flame for forty minutes, turning and moving the delicate fruit so that every surface is carefully blistered. The flavors marry together perfectly: the creamy mozzarella and sweet basil

complement the rich, slightly-charred flavor of the tomato. Simple and spectacular.

Though he has three new restaurants in the works (one in Los Angeles, two in Ventura), endorsement and licensing deals with a pizza company, gelato producer and wine maker, among others, and is developing two books and a television show, Viviani says he’ll never stray from what brought him all of this in the first place: his love and passion for cooking his native cuisine.

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CARPACCIO OF FILET MIGNON WITH MUSHROOMS AND BLUE CHEESE

SERVES 4

Chef Viviani recommends oyster and shiitake mushrooms for this recipe, which he first quickly blanches to ensure that they are soft, not chewy.

- 8 ounces raw, best-quality filet mignon, sliced 1/2 inch thick
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 cloves garlic
- 6 ounces mixed mushrooms (such as shiitake and oyster), sliced and blanched
- 8 ounces arugula
- 1 cup crumbled blue cheese
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

1. Layer meat between sheets of plastic wrap and pound with flat side of a meat pounder until paper thin, then slice into 3-inch strips. Set aside.

2. In a sauté pan, melt butter and add garlic and sauté until garlic is tender, about 1 minute. Toss in mushrooms and cook until mushrooms are cooked down, about 4 to 5 minutes.

3. Toss together arugula and 1/2 of crumbled blue cheese. Divide meat among 4 plates, then place greens and cheese on top of beef strips. Top each portion with mushrooms and drizzle olive oil on top of each. Add salt and pepper to taste and sprinkle with remaining cheese, and serve.



ROASTED TOMATO AND BUFFALO MOZZARELLA SALAD WITH PESTO DRESSING

SERVES 4

Refrigerate the leftover pesto for up to one week and use to top pasta or fresh cheese ravioli.

For tomatoes

- 6 firm Roma (plum) tomatoes, cut in half
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil



- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

For pesto

- 1 pound basil leaves
- 1 1/2 cups extra virgin olive oil
- 1 cup pine nuts
- 2 cloves garlic
- 3 ounces Parmigiano-Reggiano, grated
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

For salad

- 6 ounces fresh Mozzarella di Bufala Campana, or other fresh mozzarella, sliced into 3/4 inch slices
- 12 fresh basil leaves
- Handful of microgreens, for garnish
- Shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano, for garnish

1. If using a grill, preheat to medium. If using oven, preheat to 425°F.
2. Toss tomato halves with olive oil, garlic, salt and pepper. If using a grill, place toma-



toes directly on grate and roast, turning occasionally, for 45 minutes. If using an oven, place tomatoes on a baking sheet and roast 25 minutes. Set aside.

3. For pesto, blend all ingredients together in a food processor until smooth. Taste for seasoning and adjust as needed.

4. To serve, place tomato half on plate. Top with slice of cheese and a leaf or two of basil. Drizzle pesto over top, and garnish with greens and shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

SEAFOOD CROSTINI

SERVES 4

- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil, plus extra for brushing bread
- 4 slices sourdough bread
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 4 ounces calamari
- 4 ounces clams
- 4 ounces mussels
- 4 ounces shrimp, peeled
- 1 cup brandy
- 1 cup chopped ripe tomato (fresh or canned)
- Salt

- Freshly ground black pepper
- Chopped fresh parsley, for garnish

1. Preheat oven to 375°F.
2. Brush slices of bread with olive oil and place in oven. Toast 5 to 7 minutes, or until crispy.
3. In a large sauté pan, heat 1/4 cup olive oil over medium heat. Add garlic and all of seafood. Cover and cook until clams and mussels start to open.
4. Add brandy. Carefully, using a long kitchen lighter, ignite brandy to allow alcohol to burn off. Add tomato and cook to reduce liquid, about 5 to 8 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.
5. Discard any mussels and clams that did not open. Pour seafood sauce over sourdough bread and sprinkle with parsley. Serve immediately.

CHICKEN PICCATA WITH PROSCIUTTO AND ARTICHOKE

SERVES 4

- 4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts (2 whole breasts cut in half)
- Salt

- Freshly ground black pepper
- 8 leaves fresh sage
- 8 slices prosciutto
- 2 sticks butter
- 2 small jars or cans of oil-marinated artichoke hearts
- 2 cups white wine

1. Place each piece of chicken breast between sheets of plastic wrap, and pound until about 1/2 inch thick. Season with salt and pepper. Place 2 sage leaves on each chicken breast and top with 2 slices prosciutto.
2. Melt 1/2 stick of butter in a very large skillet over medium-high heat. Add chicken to pan with prosciutto side down. Cook 3 to 4 minutes, until edges of chicken are cooked. Turn chicken over and cook on other side. When chicken is fully cooked, transfer to a serving plate and keep warm.
3. Add artichoke hearts and wine to pan. Simmer until wine has reduced by half; sauce will thicken during this process. Finish by whisking in remaining butter, until sauce is velvety and smooth (you may not need all butter) and season with salt and pepper. Transfer chicken to plates and serve topped with sauce.