

NOSE-TO-TAIL HOLY GRAIL

The Cookery's conquest of culinary neo-nostalgia

By ANDREA KENNEDY

Plump and glistening, a suckling pig makes its way from fire to table. The muscly chef – Italian mane messily tucked behind his ears – presents the animal on a slab of wood to its ravenous feasters before carving the creature tableside.

It's a scene of bacchanal dreams. The full-pig dinner is just one of the extreme eating experiences by acclaimed chef David DiBari of The Cookery, a playground of innovative Italian comfort food, irreverence and gluttony. DiBari doesn't just plate up pork belly, he serves up the whole hog, unleashing eaters on a carnal, culinary escapade. He doesn't just offer oysters by the dozen, he hosts entire evenings where revelers drown as many half shells as they can handle with craft beer. He's been known to toss a fresh pig over his shoulders and bids guests to join in "gastronomic perversions and barbarism."

"It's simple human nature. We love to eat and we love to have sex," he says. "And, you know what? We can't live without both."

For having such a provocative philosophy, DiBari is surprisingly soft-spoken.

"Sometimes people need a way to scream," he says. "This is it."

His in-your-face food attitude has been heard loud and clear – what he calls a progressive approach to simplicity.

"What's more simple than roasting an animal and putting it on a table?" he says. "Something as dramatic and beautiful and simple as that? I thought, 'Why not?'"

A man of contrasts, he respects and rebels against Old World-style, from "The Last Supper" brazened on the eatery's main wall à la Andy Warhol to the pork-and-clam sausage that turns the classic combo on its head. DiBari serves up perfectly prepared traditional favorites like dense, rich, daily homemade mozzarella with a dash of fresh thyme, melt-in-your-mouth meatballs and his Zia Maria's broccoli confit with a kick. He rounds the corner on convention with striking, soulful pastas like gemelli slathered in crushed duck liver sauce and truffle oil then slams the blackboard with daring specials often featuring delicacies of animal extremities like fried duck tongues, veal brains or pig tails.

"We make simple, approachable things, and we make them really, really well," says



Chef David DiBari prepares to carve the whole hog. Photograph courtesy of The Cookery.

DiBari, the youngest chef in Westchester to earn an Excellent rating by The New York Times at the ripe age of 24. "That gains a confidence with your audience, and then you can just do whatever you want. They love it."

Perhaps his neo-nostalgic approach manifests best in DoughNation, his wood-burning pizza oven on wheels – a genius marriage of new school food truck meets old school symbol of the motherland. Speaking of mothers, this good Italian boy inscribed his mother's name, Laura, on the oven façade in mosaic. A longtime nurse for cancer patients, she also inspired DiBari to launch The Cookery's fundraisers for breast cancer patients, the next to be held Oct. 7. A coveted presence at foodie events, he'll also be on the town with The Cookery for happenings like Hudson, Hop and Harvest in Peekskill Oct. 5 and Cooktoberfest at Captain Lawrence Brewing Company Oct. 21.

He's become a veritable culinary celebrity who, for the record, prefers to go simply by David. Still, he's that strong, silent-type complete with rock-star alter

ego, tattoos and long hair that has women going gaga (and not just for his pork). No matter, ladies, he's taken.

DiBari is making dreams come true though for foodies with the upcoming launch of his highly anticipated brick-and-mortar pizza venture, The Parlor, just blocks away from The Cookery at 14 Cedar St. Set to open mid-October, he'll be slinging 16 styles of Neapolitan pizza, like a favorite that features lemon, basil, garlic and smoked scamorza that will forever change the way you view a pie. Vegetable- and fish-driven appetizers like roasted razor clams and Brussels sprouts will also get kissed by the flames of his second wood-burning oven. Not one to follow convention, all the beer will be bottled and all the wine on tap – a feature that also lets the chef tap into his own nostalgia.

"There's something about tap wine right now that reminds me about wine that people made in my town," says the Verplanck native. "There's a mineral content to it, it's easy to drink and it feels like it should be with pizza. We're going to fill carafes with it."

With his first two culinary hot spots as proof, DiBari has surely crafted another winning eatery with his forward-thinking creations that honor his past – and one woman in particular.

"My grandmother was most of my inspiration to be honest," says DiBari, wistful of the days he sat with her under a grapevine peeling peas from their pods – a scene Fellini would have liked. He credits her with roots of his culinary soul and even the prized family-style table in The Cookery's front window – the perfect size for his full-pig dinners – that once belonged to her.

"You try to do the craziest thing you can and emulate the chefs you work for," he says, "but it wasn't until I got here that I realized that everything I was searching for I had already known. I was searching for that closeness to the garden, to her, to those flavors she produced. It wasn't crazy at all, it was right there. ... Whatever she made she made with soul, and that's what I was looking for."

The Cookery is at 39 Chestnut St. in Dobbs Ferry. For more information, call (914) 305-2336 or visit thecookeryrestaurant.com. ■