



Francesco Buitoni shares his passion for pasta with Michele and their kids, Luca Matteo and baby Giacomo Artemio

## Primo Pasta

Diners at Red Hook's Mercato enjoy an authentic taste of Italian life **By Jan Greenberg**

**A**t first glance, **Mercato**, located on Market Street in Red Hook, doesn't seem to merit a second look. Sure, the main room is pleasant enough, with wooden tables and chairs and a decent-sized bar with square-cut stools off to the side. The Tuscan-red trim and doors give warmth to an otherwise sparse space. In fact, the centerpiece of the room seems to be the large easel blackboard that casually announces the day's menu. But don't let the down-to-earth décor fool you. In the open kitchen at the back of the restaurant, a seventh-generation scion of one of the world's most famous pasta-making families is turning out the kind of rustic Italian cooking that first put his clan on the culinary map.

The pasta factory that Giovanni Buitoni and his wife Giulia founded in 1827 eventually grew into an Italian empire, expanding throughout Europe and North America. And

# Great Chefs

PROFILE



**Chef Jason Kooperman**



## Cosimo's Trattoria and Bar

120 Delafield Street, Poughkeepsie, NY

845-485-7172

[www.cosimosrestaurantgroup.com](http://www.cosimosrestaurantgroup.com)

### About the Chef:

**Where were you born?**

Newburgh, NY

**What is your chef training?**

C.I.A. and SUNY Delhi Hotel Restaurant

**Who is your chef mentor?**

Mark Susczynski, owner of Harvest Cafe located in New Paltz, NY

**What are three ingredients you can't live without and why?**

Extra Virgin Olive Oil, the finest of oils; kosher salt, the perfect seasoning; parmesan, the king of cheese

**What is your favorite beverage?**

Prosecco Champagne

**What is your favorite dessert?**

Anything chocolate

**What is the most useful cooking utensil?**

8 inch chef knife

**When did you start working at this establishment?**

April 2004

**What is the best thing about working at your establishment?**

Great staff and caring owners

**What is your signature dish?**

Our grilled chicken penne or any of our wood fired pizzas

## Dining Table Talk



Mercato's fettuccine with gulf shrimp is enhanced by arugula and cherry tomatoes

when it comes to pasta, Francesco Buitoni more than upholds the family name.

Fettuccine with gulf shrimp, arugula and cherry tomatoes, for example, was nothing short of thrilling. The long, flat noodles are house-made and cooked just to the edge of chewiness. The sweet, briny flavor of the fresh shrimp was set off by the contrasting tangy arugula and slightly crunchy tomatoes. Buitoni enhances both the flavor and texture of the meal by adding just a touch of aromatic stock (made from the shells of the shrimp) and a few bread crumbs right before the final toss. It's one of those touches that distinguishes a master

### The fettuccine was nothing short of thrilling

chef and turns what could be an ordinary dish into a tour de force.

Buitoni began cooking at his grandmother's side at the family farm in Tuscany. Later, he attended college in the U.S. while working part-time at family-owned restaurants in New York City. His first official job was with Tony May at Gemelli, the legendary restaurateur's World Trade Center outpost. But about ten years ago, Buitoni became captivated with the Hudson Valley — and spent several years working in the kitchens of Tivoli's Stoney Creek, Rhinebeck's Gigi Trattoria, and Hudson's Ca'Mea. In 2004, he returned to New York to become sommelier and manager of Mario Batali's casual restaurant, Otto.

Later that year, Buitoni and his partner,

Michele Platt, decided to relocate to the Valley. "The aroma and landscape of the Hudson Valley is reminiscent of the Roman countryside," he says. "We have the Hudson River, they have the Tiber. When you wake up in the morning, the smells are similar; the hay from the farms reminds me of Italy. That's why I moved here."

They opened Mercato Tivolio, a little hole in the wall behind the Red Hook Inn, where they served panini, soups, a daily pasta and salads. Last December, the couple moved to another space and opened Mercato in the century-old house formerly occupied by Luna 61 (now relocated to Tivoli).

Despite Buitoni's pedigree, Mercato is a real mom-and-pop operation, and therein lies its charm. I shared several meals there with a friend; each time we arrived, Michele greeted us with their newborn son, Giacomo Artemio, nestled in a Baby Bjorn against her chest (where he quietly remained throughout the evening). Another night, a relative from Rome pitched in. One evening I noticed a multigenerational family squeezed around the one large corner table, while animated couples and foursomes occupied the others. The following week, Mario Batali was celebrating a birthday with his extended family in the pasta room, a back area with a huge and sturdy farm table to accommodate large groups.

In the kitchen, Buitoni works with a single helper, a study in unending motion. The menu changes daily and is intentionally small — five appetizers, three pastas, a risotto and several entrées. Buitoni's model is traditional Italian seasonal eating, which emphasizes top-notch ingredients, local wherever possible, and

simple, at times minimal, preparation. Most of the food has that elusively fresh, nothing-is-prepared-until-the-table-is-occupied feel to it — something that bigger, less-committed restaurants rarely achieve.

We shared everything and there was not a single disappointment. The assertive flavors of grilled radicchio, endive and ramps (wild leeks, plucked from a stream near Buitoni's house) were contrasted with a hint of aged balsamic vinegar and a young, cold-pressed olive oil. Grilled sweet sausage (from nearby Northwind Farms) was accompanied by a soft, creamy polenta. Spicy braised escarole was a perfect foil to the cornmeal's innate sweetness.

Mercato's robust Bolognese — made from prosciutto and ground veal, beef and pork — was used to flavor a bowl of Setaro rigatoni. (Made by the family of the same name, who live in the small town of Torre Amuziata, this "pasta artigianale" contains hard-grain semolina and water from nearby Mt. Vesuvius.) There is a different risotto each day, including a wild mushroom or smoked salmon and asparagus.

Grilled branzino with roasted potatoes and spinach was served whole, but our server asked if we wanted it taken back to be deboned, a thoughtful touch in a filled-to-capacity restaurant. The potatoes, red-skinned but pink inside, were pretty to look at and smashed, rather than mashed, with a nice floury texture.

The grilled salmon, the first wild catch of the season, was served with braised fennel and fregula, a rarely served Sardinian pasta that resembles couscous; it is made from coarse semolina and water, then toasted. A tasty poussin was grilled under a brick, its skin charred and crispy and the meat tender and perfectly cooked. The hanger steak arrived rare, as requested, with roasted herb potatoes and more of those wild ramps.

Desserts are limited but ample: a not overly sweet tiramisu, a warm flourless chocolate cake, and a cheese plate, served with fresh fruit, bread, and aged balsamic vinegar.

Service is friendly, knowledgeable, and efficient. This is not a quiet restaurant, however, and if noise is an issue, ask to be seated in the pasta room.

As of this writing, Mercato had not received its beer and wine license, which is expected early this summer. Until then, the staff will cheerfully open bottles brought by customers. ■

#### Mercato

61 Market St., Red Hook. 845-758-5879

Open for lunch Tues.-Sat. 11:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Dinner Tues.-Sun. 5-9:30 p.m. Entrées range from \$13-\$25. Reservations recommended on weekends.

The Ryan McElroy  
Children's Cancer Foundation



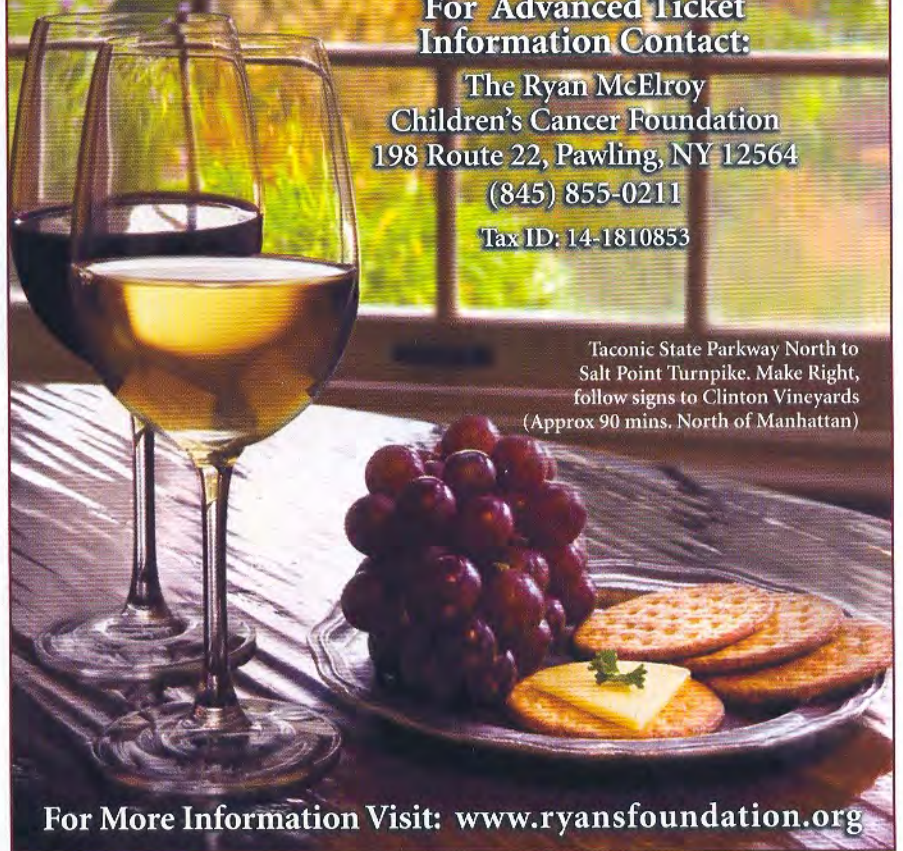
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