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Eat No.17 Behind the Scenes at a Gotham Classic

February 21, 2019
Manhattan, New York
by Lisa Arcella

Many celebrity chefs will relate that they developed a passion for cooking as a small child at the heels of their mother or grandmother's apron strings. While Alfred Portale certainly doesn't discount the value of his Italian mother feeding the family homemade pasta and sauces in his childhood home of Buffalo, New York, he found his passion for cooking through the beauty of presentation.

"I have always had a strong interest in art," the renowned chef, author, and restaurateur explain. "As a child, our neighbor across the street would come to the house and give us painting lessons. Later I was dating this young woman whose family was well traveled. They had been to Europe, and I had never been out of Buffalo. They had a large cookbook collection in the house. I picked up this book probably written in the 1940s, and it had page after page of these elaborate cold and hot buffets. Back then they would present things on mirrors with aspic, and there would be a lobster with medallions and ice sculptures and carved birds out of tallow... so I was looking at this going, 'Oh my God, its edible art.' I knew that was what I wanted to do."

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He enrolled in the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, that counts Todd English, Cat Cora, Charlie Palmer, and the late Anthony Bourdain among its many famous alumni.

Portale, now 64, graduated at the top of his class and still believes that the training he received was critical.

“When I first started to hire staff as a chef I thought it was critical that a job applicant had gone to the Culinary Institute. I immediately knew a lot about them. Number one he or she was committed—it’s an expensive and difficult program and the education is invaluable.”



Portale’s name is, of course, synonymous with one of Manhattan’s best-known eateries, Gotham Bar and Grill on East 12th Street. Portale joined the restaurant as a chef (and later as one of the owners) about a year after it opened in 1985. In a city where restaurants come and go in the blink of an eye, Gotham has been a mainstay for a nearly unheard of 35 years. During that time Portale has been a mentor to a host of notable chefs like Scott Bryan, Bill Telepan, Diane Forley, David Walzog, Gary Robins, Jacinto, Tom Valenti, Wylie Dufresne and Top Chef host Tom Colicchio (who has had Portale as a guest on the show multiple times).



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He notes that one of the secrets of his success is that customers can be sure of what their experience will be at the restaurant even before they walk through the door. “I have every bit as much passion creating dishes and running the restaurant that I have always had,” he says. “We also have a large team of highly motivated and dedicated employees who have been here for many years. We are so consistent in our service and food that people trust us. If you go to a restaurant and you have a great meal, and you tell your friends, and you go back, and it’s good, and then a third time you go it’s not great, you will never go back there again. That doesn’t happen here.”

Resting on laurels and praise isn’t acceptable. Portale and his team are continually looking for inspiration and regularly changing the menu to accommodate seasonal ingredients and to keep things interesting.



“We just came off of fall and blurred into winter, and then there is a significant springtime change. What happens every year in spring is that most of the ingredients that one associate with the season is not available yet, so we have to be careful to take everything that says wintery off when it becomes spring, but that change is spread out over four weeks, and then we move into summer.

“Some dishes have a very short life span because the ingredient is only around briefly. I did this thing with white asparagus for example. I get these massive ones that are only available for like 4-6 weeks, and as tomatoes get better into the summer, etc., we are constantly changing,” he continues.

“We are fortunate enough to be in the market where there are amazing vegetables. We also have long-standing relationships with a lot of farmers and they will grow stuff specifically to the size we need. We may want baby bok choy exactly 4 inches and things like that.”



The food at Gotham is a sophisticated and thoughtfully planned menu of mainly contemporary American cuisine, that has to accommodate sometimes 300 covers at a time.

“There are times when a dish turns out too expensive to produce or too labor intensive. That can happen,” Portale says. “But that’s what I’m very good at — engineering a dish so that it can be produced quickly and consistently.”

Also as important as the taste is a dishes’ visual appeal and the decor that surrounds a visitor. When Portale first came to the restaurant back in 1985, it was struggling to find an identity. In addition to a lackluster menu, Parisian posters covered its walls. Instead of the mismatched bistro vibe, Portale and his partners hired an art curator that helped them amass a collection of New York-themed photographs including a massive piece by Vera Lutter called Camera Obscura that decorates the main dining room. In addition to clarifying what they want to present to the world, Gotham’s longevity comes in part from understanding who the customer is as well. That means skipping the overly fashionable.



“There are many trends I find interesting, but I don’t employ them here,” he says. “I think five years ago that’s all anyone wanted to do. It’s interesting to see and experience things like caviar made from apple juice, but are you going to bring your in-laws when they are in town? It’s just not practical.

“We do get many tourists here,” Portale says of his patrons. “Look in any guide book, and we are there. In Zagat, we are the highest rated American

restaurant in New York City, and we have a Michelin star which means a lot to Europeans. During the week we have a lot of New Yorkers and business people, and we have a lot of people from the surrounding areas who come in on weekends. They come because it's an excellent restaurant and we work hard to appeal to a wide variety of customers."

Unlike many other celebrity chefs, Portale seems uninterested in expanding his empire beyond Manhattan these days. He has made numerous television appearances, written cookbooks and had other restaurants in Philadelphia and Miami in the past, but don't hold your breath waiting for a Gotham Bar and Grill to pop up in Atlantic City or Las Vegas any time soon.

"It's a combination of things," he explains. "Gotham is a big 165 seat restaurant in one of the greatest restaurant cities in the world. It does tremendous numbers. If I had a 40 seat, little restaurant I would be dying to go to Vegas and do this and do that. However, this has been pretty financially rewarding and has won every accolade including four James Beard awards.



"The other part of that is that I always felt it was important to balance my professional time with my family time. I was always able to spend much time with my children growing up. I have guys who are my friends that are on planes every single week, and I don't want that...they like it, and I don't." There is a cocktail book in the works, a new chocolate business under the helm of Executive Pastry Chef Ron Paprocki and a partnership to create a yearly menu for Singapore Airlines that allows him to fly anywhere in the world.



Even though he has often found travel to favorite spots like the South of France, Sicily, Thailand, Morocco, and Japan has inspired creativity. These days he tends to find his muse closer to home where he can be a dad to his four-year-old and two-year-old sons (he has two older daughters from a first marriage) and use his rare free time to build furniture at his studio in Connecticut.

Portale says that naming a favorite dish in his restaurant would be akin to proclaiming a favorite child—something he would never do. In part, it's because he wants every diner to feel that their experience as singularly superb.

"We have many people who think of Gotham as 'their' place, and we love that," he says. "I would say we are a New York City icon in every sense of the word."

Details

For further information like menus, opening hours, and reservations, go to: www.gothambarandgrill.com

Photography by [Daniela Stallinger](#)

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39°

clear sky
48% humidity
wind: 4m/s SE
H 41 • L 37

35°
SUN

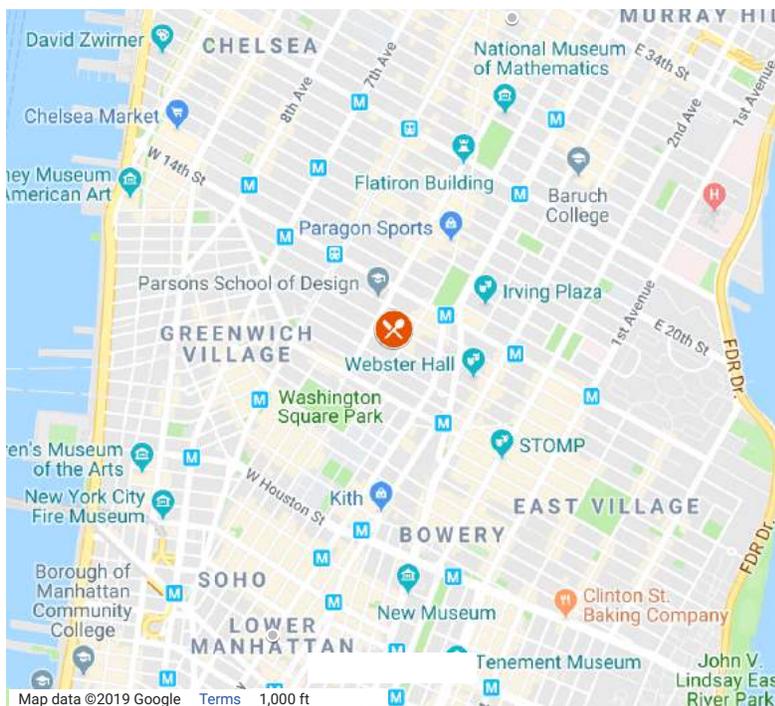
51°
MON

33°
TUE

27°
WED

25°
THU

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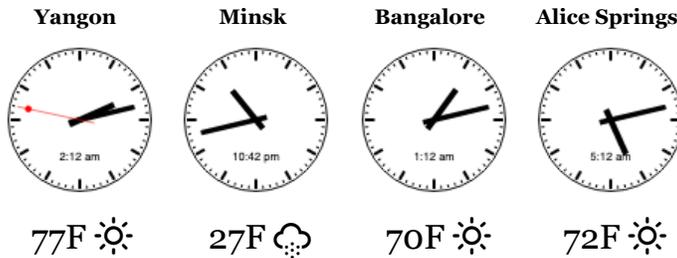
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Mon	64 F ☀️	33 F ☁️	56 F ☀️	84 F ☀️
Tue	67 F ☀️	34 F ☁️	54 F ☀️	84 F ☀️
Wed	70 F ☀️	29 F ☁️	63 F ☀️	85 F ☀️
Thu	67 F ☀️	33 F ☀️	65 F ☁️	85 F ☀️

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