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Table of Contents

VOLUME 13, ISSUE 8

IN EVERY ISSUE

- 14 **From the Publisher**
- 16 **Correspondence**
- 244 **Where to Buy It** Retail listings
- 272 **Due North** Fudge Everything!



NORTHERN EXPOSURE

- 23 **Shore Thing**
- 24 **Food** Duckworth's Bistrot
- 28 **Drink** Warming spirits
- 30 **Health** Camera for a cause
- 32 **Food** Sweet cakes
- 34 **Night Life** Piano bar
- 36 **Style** Day to evening
- 38 **Home** Community greetings
- 40 **Holiday** Christmas in Salem
- 44 **Philanthropy** Gift of giving
- 46 **Holiday Gift Guide** More than 200 ideas for everyone on your holiday list—even Fido!
- 78 **Travel** Visit Stowe
- 80 **Town** Charming Andover
- 88 **Agenda** Seasonal activities
- 90 **Scene** Party pictures



DEPARTMENTS

- 94 **What's the Story?** Gabe Davis and Matthew Dorris of Grain Digital create compelling narratives through video. By Calvin Hennick
- 104 **Family Food Affairs** Brothers Louis and Michael DiBiccari find culinary inspiration in their North Shore upbringing and share it in Boston's South End. By Karyn Polewaczyk
- 126 **Time Keepers** Three North Shore jewelers offer trends and traditions in luxury timepieces. By Deborah Geiger
- 140 **Skate Club** The area abounds with indoor and outdoor venues for gliding through winter days. By Regina Cole
- 162 **Women Who Mean Business** Seven area entrepreneurs inspire with their success stories. By Susan Soule Shulins
- 174 **Anatomy Lesson** Local talent Tia Napolitano shares her story of becoming an ABC staff writer. By Nancy Hitchcock



DiBicari Duo
Chef Louis (left)
and businessman
Michael (right) glean
inspiration from their
North Shore roots.



Family Food Affairs

A few of the North Shore's beloved flavors are found in Boston's South End.

By *Karyn Polewaczyk*

BROTHERS LOUIS AND Michael DiBiccari have made a name for themselves as reigning sibling chefs in Boston's hospitality scene, having worked their way up the ranks at award-winning places like L'Espalier, Sel de la Terre, and Eastern Standard, to name a few. These days, the two have their own place, Tavern Road—a modern eatery located in Boston's Innovation District, which opened earlier this year. The DiBiccari brothers surprise and delight guests with a blend of sustainably raised fare, urban design elements, and second-to-none service, thanks to a rigorous training program that ensures each employee—from waitstaff to the chefs behind the line—thoroughly understands his or her role and the importance it plays in keeping the restaurant running smoothly.

Despite their successful tag-team approach—Louis in the kitchen as chef and Michael keeping the house and business operations in order up front—neither brother planned for a career in the restaurant industry. In fact, Louis didn't so much as touch a recipe until his early days at Fitchburg State College, where, discouraged by the lackluster selection in the school's cafeteria, he resorted to creating his mother's "gravy" (code for marinara sauce) in his dorm room. Michael's path to a career in fine dining was a bit more linear.



But, for both, it's food that helped shape the brothers into who they are today. Long, languid family dinners at their home in Lynnfield, prepared by the brothers' mother and grandmothers, featuring classic Italian home-style meals like linguini with white clam sauce, just-picked-from-the-backyard garden salads, fresh fish, lots of "gravy," and lots of family—anywhere from 12 to 15 aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents sat around the table at any given time during the boys' upbringing.

The North Shore also plays an important role in the brothers' lives—family dinners still take place on Sundays, though whether or not they attend depends on the restaurant schedule. Both admit to occasionally stealing away to their former stomping grounds for classic North Shore eats.

Northshore sat down with the pair to talk about their working-class background, their views on Boston's (and the North Shore's) recent boom in the hospitality industry, and the importance of *famiglia*.

NS: It's interesting that neither of you planned for a career in hospitality, yet you've been at the helm of restaurants all over the city. How did that happen?

Michael: To be honest, none of us [there are four DiBiccari brothers] had any intention at all of setting out on the restaurant, hospitality, culinary arts path. It chose all of us [their brother Matthew works as sous chef under Michael Schlow at Alta Strada in Wellesley, and brother Neil had a brief stint in the industry before pursuing other ventures] at different moments in our lives. My father owned a martial arts studio in Wakefield; I was involved with soccer and martial arts and Louis was very competitive in basketball and track. I think we realized that a lot of those things that captured us as a family growing up—[the joy of] food, being around people, camaraderie, and entertaining—served as early [indicators of] where we'd eventually wind up. We just didn't know it at the time. I started working in food service when I was in high school, and by the time I got my driver's license and graduated high school, I decided to continue on, since I was already immersed in the business.

Louis: I actually hated food growing up. I was a cut-the-crust-off-the-peanut butter and jelly [sandwich] kind of kid. I didn't like mustard on my sandwiches. I wasn't experimental; I was scared. I'd eat ham and cheese sandwiches, or butter on my pasta. My mother had a hell of a time trying to break me of that. I was 18 or 19 [years old] when I started to come out of my shell—ironically, when I ate family dinners at friends' houses. It was like, 'Come on, you've got to try these new things.' I found I actually liked what I was eating. And my interest grew from there.

NS: The North Shore is your home, but you've decided to make a second one in



Method to the Madness: Above, Louis takes time to explain his methods to each employee; Left, Tavern Road's open-concept kitchen is a place for professional creativity and personal connection.

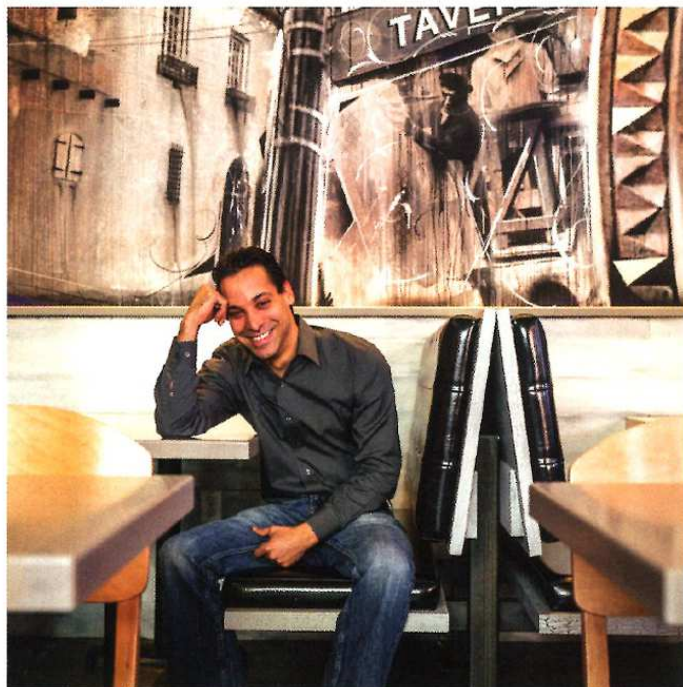
developed [while] growing up—[friendships] that we sustain to this day. We've got deep roots. We're constantly using that to help develop our relationships with our guests here.

That said, I've certainly thought about the possibility of having a restaurant on the North Shore. I think as the suburbs evolve, it becomes an increasingly viable option. I wouldn't be surprised if we did open one there, someday. Our brother Matthew has been in the suburbs forever. I think if one of us were to do that, he'd be the first.

Louis: Is there room for exceptional dining on the North Shore? Yes. I don't want to say that metropolitan cities are all saturated. But New York City remains the food capital of the United States. Other cities, like Chicago and San Francisco, and yes, Boston, will continue making names for themselves as food cities, and evolving and thriving and challenging the dining scene. I think what the North Shore is experiencing is a

Boston. Yet this area is buzzing with new restaurant openings, many of which are run by award-winning chefs and restaurateurs from around the world. Do you think you'll eventually come back?

Michael: [The move to Boston] wasn't so much a deliberate decision as a natural transition. If I really think about it, Boston is our home, [too]. We've got family in East Boston and on the North Shore. We've never been a family that's distanced itself. Lynnfield has shaped who we've become outside of what our parents instilled in us. My brothers and I often talk about the level of friendship we



Taking Care of Business: Michael ensures the house runs smoothly on the business front.

stronger demand for restaurants [like those] you'd see in a city like Boston.

For example, there's the Meadow Walk in Lynnfield. It's 365,000 square feet. There are some big Boston chefs headed out that way. I have friends who've opened restaurants in Beverly and are bringing a bit of the Boston food scene to their menus. But, I don't think you'll [find it to be] as edgy and as challenging as [it is] here in the city; like I said, the suburbs...are still evolving.

NS: Tavern Road is a warm, inviting space even though much of the area surrounding it is still developing. How did you achieve that?

Michael: Coming from a larger family, there's a notion of sharing. It stayed with us. You'll see [that] with the menu, [which changes frequently and relies on seasonal ingredients like farmers' market picks, local farm bratwurst, and fresh catches from area fishermen]. Many dishes [on the menu] can be shared—there's a family-style element to it. We translate that into sharing responsibility with each other and with our staff....The guests can feel that energy and camaraderie.

The name Tavern Road came from our father's uncle, Arti [Adio DiBiccari]—a fine arts sculptor who worked with his brother-in-law, Angelo Casieri, on Tavern Road near Fenway in the 1950s. He was heavily involved in the arts community. We were aware of [his] career growing up, but

we weren't aware of just how important it was until we were older. We wanted to pay homage to it and to the strength of family, and [we wanted] to carry forward a piece of what [he and Angelo] set out to do.

Louis: One of our founding principles is that a restaurant is an extension of people's homes. People should come in here and immediately be put at ease, no matter what's going on in their personal lives. You can pick up on the energy of a restaurant the second you walk in, good or bad. We want people to have a great time, to feel great energy, to eat great food [of] good value, and to be entertained. We're always trying to find opportunities to take someone's experience and bring it to the next level, [which is what Louis did with his live-chef events, "Chef Louie Nights"]. Is that genetic? It's more intuitive. It can be taught. Our staff is taught to really listen to our guests. And we've got a full open kitchen to connect with the guests, to make sure [those of us] behind the line feel like we're as much a part of the dining room as they are.

NS: What are your favorite dishes on the menu?

Michael: Our salads are unbelievable. The flat iron steak with chimichurri [sauce] is unreal. And I love our spätzle, even though it's a side dish.

Louis: Oh, man—that's like asking me to choose between my children. It's funny, when we opened the restaurant, *porchetta* [—a rich, classic Italian take on pork roast, complemented by bitter greens and dried fruits—] was our signature dish. [As] I learned about myself as a cook and as an instructor, [I discovered] that my favorite thing to



Favorite Flavors: Chef Louis's flat iron steak with chimichurri sauce is triumphant.



Native Nosh: The steak and cheese sandwich is a nod to the North Shore.

work with is whatever I’m inspired by at the moment. I’ve just come back from the market, as we speak. I’ve got baby heirloom tomatoes, corn, plums, peaches, [and] beans. I was inspired by the freshness of it [all]. We support our neighbors and farmers. We also reprint the menus every day, because things change all the time here. A lot of the daily specials I create are inspired by recipes from my grandmother and mother.

NS: What are your favorite places to dine on the North Shore?

Michael: I like Barrel House and Soma in Beverly, Finz in Salem, Woodman’s of Essex. Putnam’s Pantry for ice cream, and Kelly’s [for roast beef]. And of course...my parents’ house!

Louis: Let’s face it: There are guilty food pleasures on the North Shore that you just can’t get in Boston. You cannot get roast beef in Boston like you can on the North Shore. To this day, the Lynnfield House of Pizza makes the best

Italian sandwich that I’ve ever had. What I wouldn’t give to run to Bill & Bob’s Roast Beef to grab a sandwich right now. I mean, I put a steak and cheese sandwich on our “street food” menu because I couldn’t find one I liked around here. [There are] certain staple foods, the kind of stuff I liked to eat growing up, that the North Shore just does better than anyone else—delicious and consistent. tavernroad.com 

Add to the Bucket List

Tavern Road’s new “Studio Sundays” from 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. when the restaurant will showcase innovative food and drink selections as well as the creative work of local artists.