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Flavors *of* Home

At newly opened **Tavola Rustica** in Lambertville, restaurateur John Procaccini uses Old World-inspired food and ambiance to transport guests to a different time and place.

It takes more than just great food to build a restaurant empire. One necessary ingredient: the leadership of a savvy restaurateur who is committed to excellence at every property—someone like John Procaccini of Gretalia Hospitality Group.

With more than a dozen restaurants in New Jersey, and more to come, Procaccini and his business partner Zissis Pappas have built their reputation for excellence in hospitality on a foundation of quality, attention to detail, and always putting customers first. Their newest venture, Tavola Rustica, recently opened in Lambertville, just across the river from New Hope.

"Lambertville is a hot restaurant area right now," Procaccini says. "It's very well known

for all the various restaurants there, because it's a quaint town by the Delaware River with a cool restaurant scene. It's a restaurant destination place. Whether it's for a date, party, or celebration, everyone wants to be in the New Hope/Lambertville area."

Situated in a dense but tree-lined area of town, Tavola Rustica offers ample parking—a unique feature for restaurants in the neighborhood. Tavola Rustica, Italian for rustic table, offers an interior atmosphere to match its welcoming location. Procaccini credits Zinc Home, an "awesome and local" home-furnishings store in Lambertville, which provided all the décor.

"If you've ever been to Italy, picture the

architecture,” Procaccini says. “We brought in all this block stone and built the restaurant to look like it’s 200 years old. We even created a courtyard in the lobby of the building. People in Lambertville/New Hope love this type of rustic antique. As soon as you walk through the town, you can feel it. That’s why I felt a rustic Italian restaurant would really work. There aren’t any Italian restaurants there that feel remotely like what we’re doing.”

Tavola Rustica has a dish for any palate. Offerings range from *antipasti* and *zuppa* (soup) to wood-fired pizza and pasta, to *tutto il resto* (everything else).

“We wanted this to be a neighborhood place,” Procaccini says. “Nobody at home cooks gourmet, upscale, fancy meals every night. It’s rustic stuff, and being where we are, we want people to be able to come to our place five nights week and not feel like they’re at a restaurant. It’s designed as if Mom and Dad were cooking, and I think we accomplished that.

“Hundreds of years ago, people didn’t have gas or convection ovens; they used fire,” he continues. “Our restaurant is a pizzeria and *forneria* (the Italian word for bakery, though it refers to the fact that the restaurant cooks fully with fire) because we have a wood-fired oven. Everything is cooked in that oven the way it used to be.”

The wood-fired oven offers unique flavors unmatched by any other heat source, according to Procaccini.

“When you put food into an oven normally, for example, you’re not cooking at more than 450 degrees at the most,” he explains. “With fire, our goal is to cook north of 700 degrees—700 to 1,000 degrees—to have that quick sear that locks in all the flavors. The essence of wood is a whole other experience itself, the flavor of it. The extreme temperature and how it sears food, with blistering from the fire, you don’t get the same from an oven.”

Founded on the concept of *cucina povera*, or “poor kitchen,” Procaccini devised the Tavola Rustica concept to highlight the best in simple home cooking.

“Peasant cooking is rich in humanity and heritage,” Procaccini says. “*Cucina povera* is about making great food with simple ingredients to make simple but flavorful and hearty dishes that make you feel the love of family and friends.”

Procaccini himself remembers his parents cooking in this style.

“My parents immigrated here in ’72 and I was born in ’74, and I remember my father had a garden,” Procaccini recalls. “I remember my mom going outside and pulling potatoes. Whatever we had in the garden is what we cooked. I remember my father going to the butcher and skinning and butchering [proteins] himself. That’s how I grew up and that’s how I want to cook here.”

Procaccini has forged partnerships with



Offerings from the Tavola Rustica kitchen



→ Tavola Rustica

To learn more about Tavola Rustica or the other restaurants in Gretalia Hospitality Group, visit getforky.com. Tavola Rustica does special and private events, as well as catering. Reservations are welcome.

various local farms, including Ironbound Farm and Ciderhouse, located in Hunterdon County, New Jersey. As such, menus will evolve with the seasons.

“We’re blessed in this area to have four different seasons,” he says. “We have root vegetables in the fall, citrus in the summer, so why not capitalize on that and offer people what’s in season?”

Seasonal produce appears across the menu, at the moment in dishes such as a gnudi preparation featuring ricotta, gorgonzola, butternut squash, toasted walnuts, and sage to accent the gnocchi-like dumplings. A roster of other house favorites is sure to please diners year-round.

“Polenta we’re using a lot because it’s a very ‘poor’ food, and you can do it so many ways,” he says. “I’m a huge fan of roast pork, and we’re doing a fire-roasted porchetta. We’re also doing a really good double-cooked chicken thigh that we par cook, then throw in

the fire then roast with onions, peppers, potatoes and garlic.”

No restaurant worth its salt could run without a dedicated team, of course. Procaccini considers himself “blessed” to have a core staff of solid people, some of whom have been on his team for more than 20 years now. In fact, he’s a godparent to some of their children.

As Procaccini’s restaurant empire continues to grow, he intends for one thing to stay the same: He will always place the needs and interests of his customers first.

“Too often now I get people saying, ‘Oh, you guys are getting so big,’ and I hate to hear that because it means people assume we’re going to lose touch,” he says. “Even though we’re 15 units, every store still operates like a single-family restaurant. If I were to put a pin on every location, I am within 20 minutes of all my locations because I need to get to those stores every day, every week.” ■