



Flour & Water

The age-old craft of pasta making is sweeping Columbus restaurants. We went into the kitchens of four chefs leading the charge to learn the techniques and stories behind their favorite dishes.

STORY BY ANTHONY DOMINIC
PHOTOS BY WILL SHILLING

Tagliatelli ala
chitarra at
La Tavola

The secret was out with the bedsheet.

I can remember, as a child, walking into the kitchen, seeing the clean sheet spread across the dinner table, covered in teeny dough balls, glowing in the pale morning light. That's how my dad, like his mother before him, made pasta grattata. Grated balls of egg and flour were left to dry until dinner, then tossed into boiling water and served under slow-cooked red sauce.

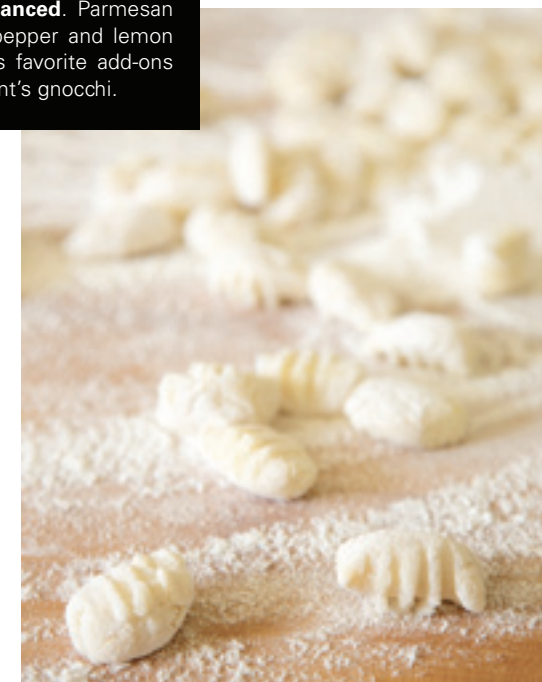
My dad didn't make pasta with any regularity; when he did, it was a surprise or a special occasion. He didn't have a hard recipe. It was all from memory—those of his mother and father, of smell, taste and touch. These childhood scenes came flooding back to me while talking with some of Columbus' pre-eminent pasta chefs. They reminded me pasta isn't something that's dried, poured into a box and thrown onto a supermarket shelf. It's a honed craft. And it almost always comes with a story.



One night, **Frank Serpico**, the famed New York City cop, stopped into the Inn and ordered gnocchi. "He actually told us, 'I can't even find this kind of gnocchi in New York,'" Kerns says. "He was blown away by it. And I have to give credit to Tom [Smith], Kent [Rigsby] and all these guys who I learned from."

Smith loathes pasta dishes that force the diner to eat "20 bites of the same thing." So he strives to make the Inn's plates **light, bright and balanced**. Parmesan cheese, black pepper and lemon are three of his favorite add-ons for the restaurant's gnocchi.

Terry Kerns makes gnocchi at The Worthington Inn.



Chef Tom Smith sources **free-range chicken eggs** for the Inn's pasta dough. "There's just a richness you won't have otherwise," he says. "It's just better when they're allowed to eat grass and grubs and worms."



When **The Worthington Inn** needs a batch of pasta, executive chef Tom Smith calls one man: Terry Kerns. For about 10 hours every week for the last three years, the Bexley-based faux painter stops by the Inn to hand-make big batches of gnocchi and ravioli. The supply is measured day to day. If the kitchen runs low, Smith simply sends Kerns a text message, and in between paint jobs he comes in to make more. It's an easy relationship based on shared history and a passion for scratch-made food.

Kerns' interest in pasta was piqued years ago while working at Rigsby's Kitchen. In the back, he would watch a fellow cook, known to him as Miss Paulette, craft plate after plate of gnocchi. From there, his interest in pasta making only grew. He read any book he could find. He was tutored by any "red-sauce Italian" who would take him up on the offer, including longtime cooks from Dante's Pizza and TAT Ristorante di Famiglia. When Smith, also a Rigsby's vet, asked if he would be interested in making pasta at the Inn, Kerns spent nine months researching for the role.

"He has a kind of painter's patience, an artist's eye," Smith says. "All the time he's perfecting it."

"Time and time again, I've basically been told: It's a feel," Kerns says of pasta making. "You'll know when the dough is right. It just flows. There's no way to explain it, really. When I make a batch, Tom and his sous chef—you can see it in their faces, if [the pasta] is there, or if it's not."

Kerns' recipe for gnocchi is simple: Yukon Gold potatoes, all-purpose flour, free-range eggs and a shake of olive oil. Sometimes he'll throw in a little milk and water to get the dough moving. No two batches are the same.

"A lot of it's about atmosphere—the potatoes, the heat of the kitchen," he says. "You kind of go into a zone, and you have to be patient. You can't hurry this stuff. When I go in [to the restaurant] to do it, I have to be relaxed, in the right headspace, and I can't stress that enough."

"It's like a religion," he continues. "When you talk to these older Italian guys, when they say the word 'pasta,' it has a magical ring to it. I'm honored to be a part of their art."

worthingtoninn.com

Pasta is an exact science at **Veritas Tavern**. Chef and owner Josh Dalton has one recipe committed to memory—inspired by that of chef Thomas Keller—which he and his kitchen team employ daily to craft every piece of fettuccine, gnocchi and ravioli served at Veritas and sister restaurant 1808 American Bistro, both in Delaware. Here's how they do it. veritastavern.com

1 Milling around

Chefs mill organic heirloom grains from Anson Mills to produce flour unique to the restaurant. Each pasta batch begins with 900 grams (roughly 12 to 20 servings) of this flour. If Dalton is making specialty pasta, such as dark chocolate ravioli or pea fettuccini, he replaces 100 grams of flour with an equal amount of cacao powder or powdered freeze-dried veggies, respectively. "Flour is a vessel to carry the flavors," Dalton says. "Or, theoretically, it's a really subtle way to mute some flavors. It's all about adjusting your sauce or other ingredients to achieve that desired balance."

2 Can't make pasta without cracking a few ...

Crack a standard supermarket egg, and you'll likely find a pale, runny yolk. For his pastas, Dalton uses organic eggs laid by free-range chickens for their richer, brighter yolks. "Our pasta comes out a crazy, intense yellow," he says. "You can just tell it has a different flavor and texture." He occasionally uses duck eggs, which contain even fuller yolks. Dalton also adds whole eggs to his mix (a 2:1 yolk-whole egg ratio) to make the dough more adhesive.

3 Tying it all together

You'll find familiar pasta at Veritas year-round, but rarely will it be presented the same way twice. Seasonal veggies aren't only added onto the plate but into the pasta as well. Come spring, expect pea fettuccine with ramps and morels. In summer, tomato fettuccine and bright, citrus-spiked pasta salad served cold. Dalton also makes chocolate ravioli (made slightly bitter, not overly sweet, with cacao powder) with mascarpone filling for dessert. It's not always about what can be added to the pasta dishes, he says, but rather what can be taken away. "There's no sugar in our pasta," he says. "It's easy to add butter, cream and fat into a dish and make it tasty. We're always looking for ways to achieve those bright, super-clean flavors."



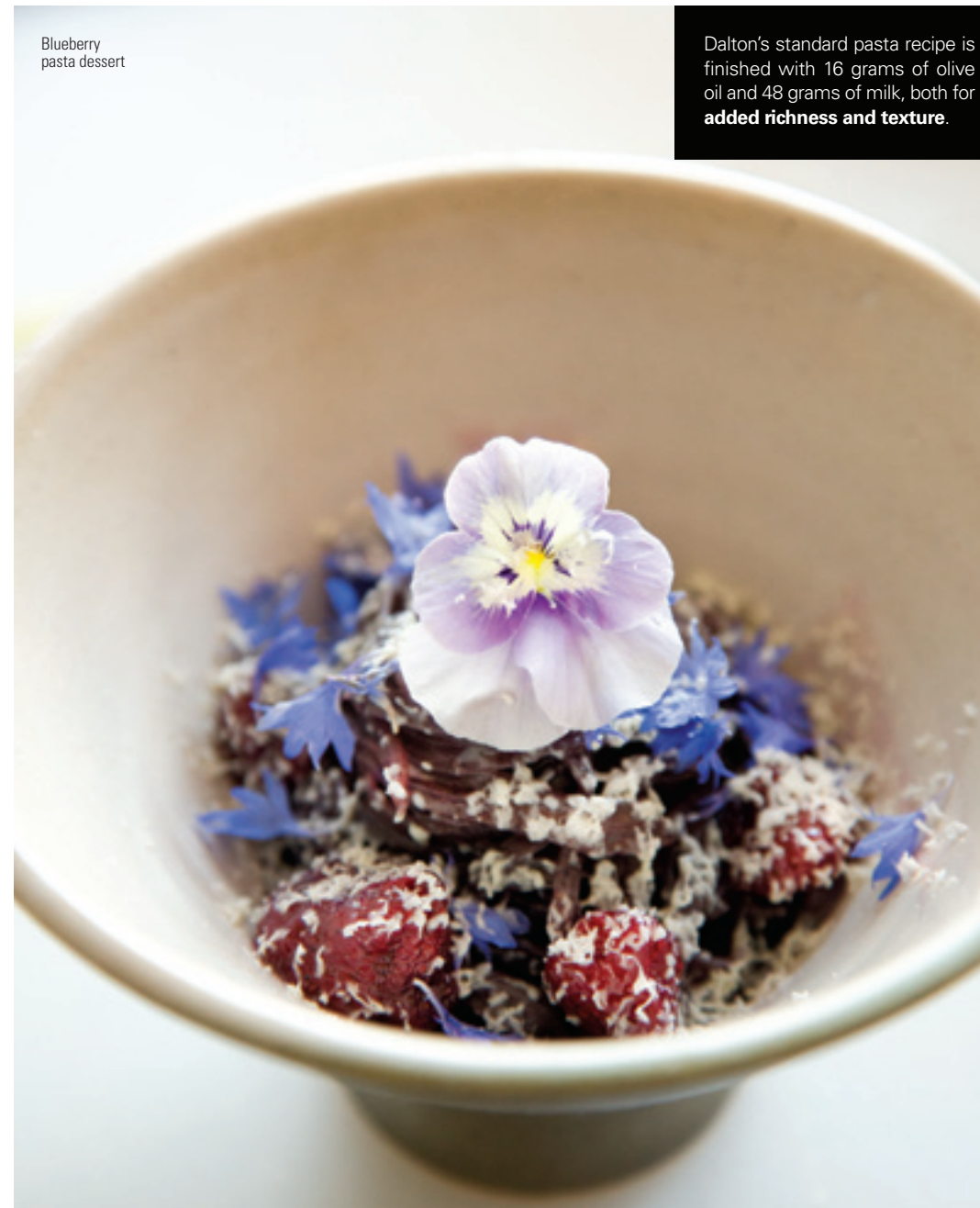
Owner and head chef Josh Dalton rolls out a sheet of pea pasta.



If you're served a plate of gray pasta, don't fret. Dalton sometimes supplements his pasta flour with **edible dirt or ash** from charred vegetables. "Ash is a lot of fun to work with and adds a really nice, earthy flavor," he says.

Every ingredient at Veritas is measured using the **metric system**. "I think it's the most important thing we do in the kitchen," he says. "Cooking by weight is how you get the most consistent product. One thing all people should have at their house is a scale that does grams."

Blueberry pasta dessert



Dalton's standard pasta recipe is finished with 16 grams of olive oil and 48 grams of milk, both for **added richness and texture**.



The secret to Veritas' delicate gnocchi? **Cake flour**. "It produces a lighter note and almost actually tastes cake-like," Dalton says.



Gnocchi with crab and truffles



Nicola Bedalli
at Nicola



Agnolotti
Lucchese



Every Saturday from 9 a.m. to noon, Nicola hosts **Nicola Mercato**, an Italian-style farmers market where guests can buy Bedalli's house-made pastas, sauces, infusions (think honey and vinegar) and a slew of imported Italian ingredients—all while snacking and sipping a cappuccino or bellini.

Since he was a boy in Siena, Tuscany, making a mess of his grandmother's kitchen with flour, pasta has never been far from Nicola Bedalli's reach. The chef descends from a long line of pasta makers, and he eventually married into another. For years, he worked in his father-in-law's restaurant, crafting ravioli, fettuccine and pappardelle in simple Tuscan fashion. When his father-in-law died and the restaurant was sold off, Bedalli was ready for a new adventure. So he and wife, Speranza, moved to Columbus (where they had family) in 1999, and brought with them a passion for sharing the rustic Tuscan cuisine of their heritage. Today, if you visit Bedalli's Upper Arlington eatery, **Nicola Bar + Restaurant**, you'll find the same fare—even made with the same ingredients—he cooked in Siena. Here, Bedalli explains why you won't find his style of pasta at any other Columbus restaurant. nicolacolumbus.com

On Tuscan-style pasta: "People think pasta, and they think South Italy, Sicily. That's different. You get a lot of sauces down there because they use a lot of tomatoes and spices. Important to us is stuffing. We don't have toppings. We make tortelli and ravioli with just a light drizzle of butter-

sage, or a little bit of Bolognese or tomato-basil. Our pasta is about balance, and the stuffing—veal, kale, broccoli, carrots, spinach, mushrooms—is that extra touch."

His favorite dish: "Raviolo con Nido. It's special ravioli with a big bird-like nest. We use fresh ricotta, lemon zest, parsley and an egg yolk in the middle. It's something nobody else does."

The importance of cooking time: "I do semolina (from durum wheat) pasta, and it's cooked al dente. Some customers get it and say, 'It isn't cooked!' Pasta al dente, or 'to the tooth,' is completely different. It's not mushy or gummy. If you eat that, you'll feel bad. It's heavy. Al dente is lighter, cleaner, simpler. It makes such a big difference."

Sauce secrets: "Some restaurants will mix beef and marinara sauce and call it Bolognese (laughs). Our original Bolognese is made with ground beef—85, 90 percent—then you add ground pork, carrots, onions and cook it nice. Then you add tomatoes, red wine, a little bit of chicken broth and spices for aroma. And it cooks for eight to nine hours to get that flavor."

Bird-nest-style Raviolo con Nido at Nicola

“It’s very physical, pasta making. A lot of people don’t do it and take shortcuts. But sometimes it’s best to go the old route.”

—Rick Lopez, La Tavola



Garganelli at La Tavola

Lopez uses **Plugra high-fat butter** in all of his pasta dishes. It contains less water than most table butters, he says, making it creamier and bolder in flavor and aroma.



Garganelli at La Tavola

The previous versions of **La Tavola** were pasta-centric, sure, but Rick Lopez has only fully realized the concept with the third incarnation of his Italian restaurant, now in Grandview. The space is homier, with quirky wallpaper and an open kitchen. The menu is more concise, spruced by daily specials, such as spicy Octopus Fra Diavolo, and anchored by Lopez’s signature baked potato gnocchi, based on his grandma Mary’s recipe. He serves it three ways: with marinara, butter and parm or baked with white wine, cheese and veggies. “It’s the journey of my life, this restaurant,” he says. “When I was younger, I tried to stretch boundaries, tried to do new things. Pasta is my go-to. I always come back to it. It’s what I love to do, and it’s probably what I do best.” latavolagrandview.com

TOOLS FROM THE OLD WORLD

Chitarra: Pasta alla chitarra originates from the Abruzzo region of south-central Italy and, as the name suggests, means “guitar pasta.” “It looks like a little box with strings, like a lute,” Lopez says of the device. “You put flattened pasta on top, push it through the strings with a pasta roller, cutting it, and it falls through and comes out underneath.” He uses the chitarra when making capellini- or angel hair-style pasta.

Garganelli board: Garganelli-style pasta is shaped and textured with deep grooves from its namesake board. “You cut little diamonds of pasta real thin, wrap them around a dial and slide that across the board with your hands,” Lopez says of the process. “I would probably spend five hours making five orders. It’s very time-consuming, but the payoff is great.” In addition to garganelli tubes, this technique can also texturize orecchiette and gnocchi. It originates from the Emilia-Romagna region of Northern Italy.

GRANDMA’S BOY

Mary Lopez: “She would take over our dining room table with pastas she’d make and lay out to dry—fettuccine, thin spaghetti, ravioli. I just remember her and her rolling pins, and I actually have one of them in the kitchen at La Tavola. I use it every day. It’s the perfect size for the chitarra.”

Gina DeMarco: “I really got the cooking bug from her, my mom’s mom. Gnocchi was her thing. She did it differently than other people. She would bake the potatoes before ricing them, just allowing them to dry so as to not get too heavy. I would help her at her house with big family meals and family functions.”



Lopez makes his own **marinara sauce** with imported tomatoes, olive oil and a mix of finely ground carrots, celery, onion and garlic. “It’s a Southern Italian-style sauce,” he says. “The idea is that it’s a ‘mariner’s sauce.’ With no meat, you could take it out to sea for a week, and it’d be fine.”



Tagliatelli ala chitarra