

DRIVE & DISH

CHEF MIXES UPSCALE CUISINE WITH B&T BACKGROUND

At La Cipollina Ristorante, right on the busy main street of Freehold, New Jersey, there's energy in the air as an April dinner is about to commence.

A new spring menu is about to debut. Waiters in suits bustle around discussing the changes and preparing for evening service in a brick interior where locals have dined for nearly 30 years. Just outside the doors, patrons begin to filter in, also discussing the new menu.

What they may not realize, however, is that this menu is the culmination of a fascinating journey from the streets of Freehold to the wooden floors of Walker Gym and Canavan Arena — and then back to the little restaurant on Main Street once again.

That is because La Cipollina's chef de cuisine, Matt Higgins '10, has been architect and steward of the menu since graduation.

Higgins graduated Summa Cum Laude with a perfect GPA of 4.0 and a bachelor's degree in business and technology. His accomplishments on the basketball court had been equally impressive: as a 6'4" power forward, he set a Stevens record by playing in all 112 games of his four-year college career, averaging 7.7 points and 4.1 rebounds per game as a Stevens Duck.

Higgins had dutifully carried out summer internships with Wall Street firms and exchanges, with an eye toward a future career in finance. However, his thoughts kept wandering back to the intimate Italian restaurant in his hometown where he had apprenticed with his uncle Anthony Braica as a child. Higgins had begun at La Cipollina serving desserts and washing dishes, and gradually worked his way up by dedicating evenings, weekends and summers to his passion; Braica had owned and operated the restaurant since 1989, when he himself was just out of high school.

With his uncle's blessing, he made the decision to leap back into the restaurant business as top chef and part-owner after graduation.

"Stevens' curriculum and internship programs prepared me incredibly well for what I am doing now," says Higgins. "There are four parts to a restaurant, not just one: the kitchen, the floor, the office and marketing.



PHOTO: ASHLEY EMMONS

▲ Matt Higgins '10 has carved out a red-hot career as chef of La Cipollina Ristorante in Freehold, New Jersey.

My training at Stevens helped me prepare for that environment."

"If you aren't aware of the financials, or marketing and promotion, or of what's current in the business, and you just keep your head down cooking, you won't survive in this business. After all, nine out of ten restaurants ultimately fail, and never for just one reason."

Today, La Cipollina is acclaimed for its upscale cuisine. The menu features a changing mix of traditional Italian pastas and main courses such as osso bucco, veal scallopini and chicken in a cognac wine sauce. There are also daring entrée choices such as filet mignon in an applejack brandy sauce, paired with saffron risotto; and pistachio-encrusted sea bass with amaretto.

Of the many reality-television depictions of the business now in circulation, Higgins says there are some elements of truth to the programs.

"Things can be peachy from 5 to 6, and then the evening rush suddenly hits from 6:30 to 9:30, and it's like war," he explains. "Even a five-second delay at one station, multiplied over five courses and 50 tables, can upset the whole service."

So far, Higgins has weathered the heat of the kitchen without breaking a sweat. He was recently recognized as one of the "Top 25 Chefs Under the Age of 25" by the South Carolina-based guide publisher *Best Chefs America*, which polls fellows chefs and food professionals for recommendations. The restaurant consistently receives excellent marks from reviewers in the Zagat restaurant guide.

"It's all about staying current, while staying profitable, while staying passionate," he says. "We've been here almost 30 years and that doesn't happen by accident, yet it's also never easy. Many, many weeks we work more than 100 hours a week and just break even."

The secret, he concludes, is remaining true to his roots.

"We have built this business on personal interactions and relationships, and that goes beyond the food and the service," Higgins says. "We try to treat everyone the same, from the President to the person next to you.

"That, combined with serving great and fresh food, is what I am passionate about." ♦ — Paul Karr