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"nothing excites me or moves me like Italian food. Part of it is the ingredients, the smells, the essence of the herbs, the basil, everything. It just puts me in a different place." said Antonio Caruana, owner/chef of Luce in Norfolk. [Steve Earley | The Virginian-Pilot](#)

Pilot's staff epicure tastes passionate, authentic Italian food

By: [Lorraine Eaton](#)The Virginian-PilotNovember 4, 2015

Antonio Caruana arrives for lunch wearing a black leather cap atop his shaved head and a Technicolor neck tattoo, and looking more like a character on "Sons of Anarchy" than one of Tidewater's hottest chefs.

It's nearly noon on a weekday when we convene at 219 An American Bistro, Caruana's pick for lunch. A block down Granby Street at Luce, (pronounced LOO-chay), Caruana's crew has started dinner prep. A few blocks in the other direction is his next stop, a corporate food show at a Norfolk hotel, where he'll scout fare for his newest venture.

It's one that will please his fans: lunch at Luce. He'll start serving it any day.

At Luce, that edgy little bistro on Granby Street where waitresses decant infused water from a skull-shaped urn, Caruana seduces diners with osso buco over paccheri pasta, whole roasted branzino and wild boar ragu, authentic Italian dishes made with a bold hand and not one speck of compromise.

Leaning back in his chair, Caruana scans 219's menu, considers "going crazy" with the oyster po boy, then opts for a more virtuous turkey panini.

Revealing a total lack of willpower, I suggest sharing a fried oyster appetizer.

"I'm down for that," Caruana says. His tough-guy voice has a tinge of New York, even though he was raised in New England.

When the waiter returns saying that oyster appetizers are served only at dinner, Caruana flexes a bit. "Who's working back there today?" he asks. "Would you ask him to make some for me? Tell him Chef Luce is asking if it's possible. And tell him I owe him one if he can."

Then I lob a question about his family and learn that this man with a big laugh and plenty of presence is a pretty private guy.

"Wife and kids is perfect," he says. "Write that. Family man is perfect. But getting into the details..." He shakes his head.

When I ask about Italian food, though, he turns almost poetic.

Caruana's father, an Italian immigrant and chef, cooked constantly, and Caruana constantly watched. He remembers the first time his father invited him into the fold. It was a holiday, Christmas maybe, and in the midst of preparing a multicourse meal for the family, his father asked him to toss the clam sauce with the pasta.

"I remember I was too weak to hold the bowl," Caruana says. "So he got behind me to do it, and I still couldn't because I couldn't wrap my hands around that bowl. So he ended up doing it with me.

"That was a big deal."

By 13, Caruana had mastered the dishwasher pit at a high-volume, high-end Italian restaurant.

He moved on to salad prep, and then ascended to "pasta guy."

"I would put the pasta in the water, and I would take the pasta out of the water. I would put the pasta in the water, I would take the pasta out of the water, 300 times a night." He chuckles at the thought of it.

By 17, Caruana landed a coveted spot on the saute line. Intent on learning the front of the house, he added shifts busing and waiting tables.

"And it worked out great!" he said, throwing his hands up. "I've learned every dirty detail in the restaurant business - cleaning the dumpster, cleaning the grease traps, scrubbing the floors.

"Hey, I'm still doing that. You can put that in there, too," he says, pointing to my notebook.

"What the hell happened?"

He took vo-tech culinary classes in high school (very helpful) and a few more at a big New England cooking school (not so much). Coming from a family of good cooks is what fed his passion.

I say that every Italian I know, to a person, is a swell cook and almost none has formal training, and wonder if it's a DNA thing.

"Some suck bad." He nods assuredly. "See, here's the deal. And you can write this down. It's really important. There's Italian cooks and there's Italian chefs. There's such a long history of Italian food, etiquette, tradition, things that have to be followed and respected. The Italian chefs follow the etiquette. The Italian cooks just make it taste good. Same thing with France."

"So how does that translate into a dish like your wild boar ragu, which, by the way, I adore?" I ask.

"I take my traditions from the Tuscan way of game cooking where they focus on using the natural ingredients. They use root vegetables in there to gain the flavor, and there's no added flavors. There's no such thing. The boar is lean. You've got to make sure you introduce your products at the right time. I've been working on defining this since I was 14."

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Caruana mentions that as a kid he learned to make pasta from his aunt, "also a very, very talented chef at home" - which, I point out, bolsters my DNA argument. But he moves on to make another point.

"You know, there's a lot of misconceptions about pasta," he says. "There's only a few pastas in Italy that are actually used fresh. No. I don't make all my pasta fresh. I only use fresh pasta for a nice pappardelle, or a tagliatelle (the Italian pronunciation rolls off his tongue). Something like that."

"I saw someone on Yelp complaining that your pasta isn't fresh," I say.

"Yelp's ridiculous," he says.

"Anthony Bourdain says Yelp's like a gigantic bathroom wall," I say.

He does not laugh.

"The problem with Yelp is that a lot of people go on there because they have a problem. My waitress looked at them wrong. It's really annoying. I need to get on there and learn to reply, but I don't really want to get into that.... Because if you don't come back, I'm going to fill up with people who do. You know what I mean?"

It's true. His little restaurant rocks. I ask how many diners he serves on a busy night.

"I've never counted once, if you believe that. It's like getting on a scale when you are trying to lose weight. I don't believe in it. I'm not looking to get rich. I want to pay my bills. That's it.

Trying to get rich is going to kill me."

We eat our sandwiches, stabbing an oyster here and there. I wonder if there's any other food that moves him.

"This is good," he says, pointing to his plate. "It's very good. I like it. I enjoy it, but nothing excites me or moves me like Italian food. Part of it is the ingredients, the smells, the essence of the herbs, the basil, everything. It just puts me in a different place.

"The American Thanksgiving dinner is the only other food that moves me like Italian food - the history of it, the stuffing, the potatoes."

Then, "You want that last one?" He points to the last oyster with his tines, then pops it right in.
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<http://hamptonroads.com/food/766552/2015/11/pilots-staff-epicure-tastes-passionate-authentic-italian-food>