

BOCA/DELRAY *lifestyle*

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Look Who's Cooking?

CHEF DONATELLA ARPAIA
PREPARES FOR SOBEWFF
& TWO NEW MIAMI
RESTAURANT CONCEPTS



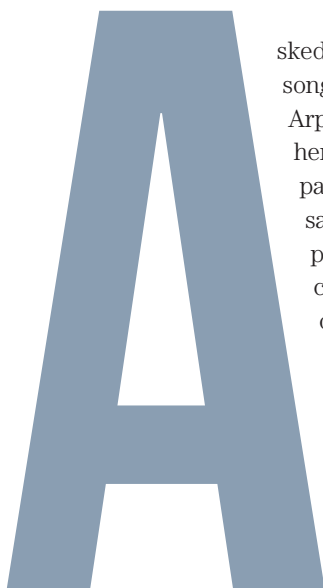
RECIPE FOR SUCC

CELEBRITY CHEF DONATELLA ARPAIA ADDS TO HER RICH RESTAURANT LEGACY
WITH A CULINARY CHAPTER IN MIAMI

BY DANIELLE CHARBONNEAU
PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDUARDO SCHNEIDER
SHOT ON LOCATION IN CORAL GABLES
INSIDE NOMA BEACH AT REDFISH



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sked to choose a swan-song meal, Donatella Arpaia points to one of her own—homemade pasta with tomato sauce and hand-pulled Stracciatella cheese, a dish that’s on the menu at Noma Beach at Redfish, the Coral Gables-based restaurant she recently opened in Matheson Hammock Park.

The celebrity chef—made famous by her string of wildly successful restaurants in New York City and her longtime seat as a judge in Kitchen Stadium on Food Network’s fierce competition show *Iron Chef America*—says the dish, if done well, harmonizes nature with nurture to produce an exquisite plate.

“You can have spaghetti and tomato sauce that’s absolutely sublime—that’s when technique and love of ingredients come into play,” Arpaia says. “That’s like my deathbed meal. I know it’s so simple, but to me it’s a reflection of me in cuisine.”

The chef behind not one but two new restaurants in Coral Gables—including the soon-to-be-reimagined Forte—is indeed a balanced blend of her naturally inherited love for food and her nurtured culinary talent.

She literally grew up in a restaurant kitchen. Both of her parents were first-generation Italians to the Big Apple—her father from Naples, her mother from Puglia. When he came to Manhattan, her father worked his way from busboy to cook to chef in the legendary kitchen of Delmonico’s. As a baby, Donatella’s crib was stationed in the back of a restaurant next to the dishwashing station. She was lulled to sleep late into dinner service by the sound of swishing water in the machine.

Arpaia spent her childhood sum-

mers in Italy. She watched as local cheesemakers stretched homemade cheese curds into long strands, then folded them into pillowy round purses of burrata, oozing with creamy centers. She witnessed fishermen at the docks as they pulled fresh catches straight from the ocean, scraped away the scales and carved into their meaty centers, resulting in thin slices that were later drizzled in squeezed lemon. She wandered the rows of olive trees at her grandfather’s farm, where her family pressed fresh oil to be loaded into suitcases to bring back to New York.

The restaurant business, however, is a tough industry. Arpaia’s father urged her not to follow in his footsteps. So, she pursued law school, passed the bar and began practicing at a corporate law firm. But that lasted only a few months. Arpaia couldn’t resist the gravitational pull toward culinary creativity.

Her brother, who, unlike her, was groomed for the restaurant business “because he was a boy,” was running his own Midtown Manhattan restaurant, Cellini. Arpaia was there one night for a free meal and stepped up to hostess. She suddenly felt alive. Food and hospitality were her true callings. She quit her job at the firm and set out to open her first restaurant, Bellini, at age 25.

With a penchant for front-of-the-house customer service, Arpaia quickly earned the affection of her guests, including CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite, who became a regular. She handwrote notes, learned customers’ first names and created a welcoming atmosphere that made the restaurant a neighborhood success.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

At 28, she found a prime location on East 61st Street between Park Avenue and Lexington Avenue. A customer connected her with chef David Burke to create a new restaurant. When it came time to develop the brand, Burke was adamant about



DID YOU KNOW: Noma Beach at Redfish is the first of two restaurants Arpaia is opening in partnership with Rodney Barreto. The second, Forte, will be another fine-dining establishment in Coral Gables.

calling the restaurant David Burke. But Arpaia, who possessed the lease and the funds, used her attorney prowess to advocate for herself. She suggested the name davidburke & donatella.

“[David] had a name already. I needed one. He said it’s gonna sound so stupid. It’s gonna sound like a wedding,” she says, laughing at the memory. “I was a nobody then. Most people thought it was Donatella Versace. They thought I was the coat check girl.”

The restaurant became tremendously popular and catapulted her career. It was there she met Bruce Seidel, a producer at Food Network.

“I was a hot little thing and he [Bruce] recognized that I was in fact the owner, and not Versace,” she says. “He asked if I wanted to judge an episode of *Iron Chef America*. And that’s how it all began.”

Surprisingly, she had to conquer extreme camera fright to tackle the challenge.

“I was a shy girl,” she recalls. “People don’t realize this, but the first time I did TV I was throwing up off on the side. I had to overcome a lot to [be on camera].”

She entered Food Network, she says, at an interesting time—just before the advent of the superstar chef.

To nurture her abilities, Arpaia went to school at the French Culinary Institute and the Italian Culinary Academy. She moved to Naples, Italy, to study the art of Neapolitan pizza at the Vera Pizza Napoletana under famed fourth-generation pizzaioli, Enzo Coccia.

With her newfound technical skills, her inherited love of ingredients and her business know-how from practicing law, Arpaia became an unstoppable triple-threat in the New York restaurant scene. She opened the only Michelin-starred Greek restaurant in New York with Michael Psilakis, started a national chain of fast-casual Neapolitan pizza restaurants called Prova Pizzabar (the original location is in Grand Central Station) and launched the acclaimed Mia Dona, among others. Over time, *Zagat* crowned her “The Hostess with the Mostest,” *Crain’s* honored her as one of its “40 under 40,” and the *New York Post* named her one of the “Most Powerful Women” in Manhattan.

For years, Arpaia stayed in the spotlight as one of New York’s most driven and recognized celebrity chefs. But at the age of 40, she shifted gears. She and husband Allan Stewart, a renowned and accomplished heart surgeon who once operated on former president Bill Clinton,

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“In my father’s generation, the chefs weren’t even known. Only the front of the house,” she says. “The whole dynamic changed with Food Network. I never thought that it would evolve into a whole new world.”

Arpaia has been firmly at the intersection of media and food ever since, on daytime talk shows, online cooking segments and as a longtime judge in Kitchen Stadium, tasting the culinary creations of the world’s best chefs on *Iron Chef America* and *The Next Iron Chef*.

At Food Network, Arpaia met other celebrity chefs like Bobby Flay and Masaharu Morimoto, who both inspired her and have personally cooked for her.

“I’m still dreaming about Bobby’s toasted polenta,” she says.

After making davidburke & donatella a success, Arpaia moved her focus from the front of the house to the kitchen.

“I was kind of annoyed that I didn’t have full control of every aspect of the business,” she says. “I didn’t want to be beholden to anyone. So, I decided to go to culinary school. I really felt that if you are a master of technique, then that’s the most important thing. I don’t think you can have one without the other. I always say it’s like nature versus nurture—ingredients, technique.”

welcomed their first son, Alessandro, into the world. Motherhood, she said, softened her in a beautiful way.

Then came the opportunity to move to Miami.

MIRACLES IN MIAMI

Her friends joke that she is the “original defector”—a born-and-bred, die-hard New Yorker who moved to the palm-lined streets of Miami. But Arpaia doesn’t mind the title. She’s happy here.

“I’m a New York girl—I’m a true New Yorker—but this is where I raise my children and I love this area and I love the community,” she says. “As a mother I look for a sense of community. I think there’s a very strong sense of it here in Coral Gables.”

When she moved, she wasn’t sure she wanted to run another restaurant.

“I’d been there, done that,” she says.

She told herself she would only do another restaurant if it was something special, personal and within 2 miles of her house, which felt unlikely. But then she visited the former Redfish Grille in Matheson Hammock Park.

Coming into the park, visitors drive through an archway of beautiful, twisted trees. At the end, the trees part to reveal a bay to the left, with views of the towering Miami

skyline, and a white-sand beach to the right. The historical building, built of coral stone in 1938, sits in the middle. It was a food stand first, then a restaurant in 1996. With deep roots in the Coral Gables community, Redfish has been loved for many years. Recently, Arpaia says, she met a 90-year-old woman who used to visit as a child.

“The idea of changing the name had a lot of people upset,” she said, so the restaurant maintained part of its historic name: Noma Beach at Redfish.

The name Noma, comes from a nickname she and her husband devised to collectively name their toddler twins, Noah and Emma. Arpaia likes to tell the story of the twins. At 45, she and her husband were having trouble conceiving. They had just about lost hope when Alessandro, only 6 at the time, came to his parents in the middle of night.

He said: “Mom, Dad, I spoke to God and God’s gonna bring you a boy and a girl named Noah and Emma.”

A few weeks later, Arpaia found out she was having twin boys. She was shocked Alessandro had been right about the twins part, but she told him he would be getting two brothers. He was argumentative.

“No, it’s gonna be a boy and a girl,” he said. “God told me.”

A week later, the doctor’s office called while she was shopping at Costco. There had been a mistake in the genetic testing, which happens only about 1 percent of the time. Indeed, she was having a boy and a girl.

“Miracle babies,” she says.

The restaurant has felt the same way—fated somehow. Like the name and dove logo (also inspired by the twins), the food and philosophy at Noma are influenced by her family. The menu features a lengthy, locally caught crudo menu to honor the fishermen she grew up watching on the docks in Puglia. The crudo menu at Noma is sourced straight from local waters, arranged by Noma’s executive chef, Joseph Bonavita (also a New Yorker).

The Neapolitan pizzas, which she crafts in a traditional wood-burning oven outside, are a nod to her father’s Naples upbringing. The homemade pastas are made with Italian soul. And most notably, the sea urchin and burrata pizza, she says with tears in her eyes, “is a love letter to my mother, who passed away a couple years ago.” Both burrata and sea urchin are native to her mother’s home, Puglia.

The environment, Arpaia hopes, will be fitting for families who want a casual environment on the water—but who also want upscale, fine-dining food.

“I feel like today, restaurants are either very high end and stuffy, or fun with bad food and service,” she says. “But why can’t there be a casual, upscale vibe with a seriousness toward food? Why does it have to be mutually exclusive?”

“Here you can have a margarita in the sand, but you can also have pasta with truffles.”



SOBEWFF: BEST OF THE BEST

WHEN: Friday, Feb. 24

WHERE: Fontainebleau Miami Beach

WHAT: One of the highlights of the South Beach Wine & Food Festival, *Wine Spectator’s Best of the Best* event promises tastings from more than 60 acclaimed chefs and 65-plus wineries. Expect offerings from James Beard Award winners and Michelin-starred restaurants as part of the festivities.

Donatella Arpaia will be on hand with her famous spicy meatballs prepared with her signature ingredient, Calabrian chili.

TICKETS: General admission tickets are \$395 per person.

CONTACT: sobewff.org/bob