

in the **kitchen**



for the love of cooking



Chef Anna Paganelli wins hearts through stomachs at De Luca's Cooking School



by Erin Bend



Chef Anna Paganelli has one of those magnetic personalities. It's easy to be drawn to the diminutive, Italian-born beauty with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. But underneath her affable exterior burns a fiery passion for cooking — and the laser-focus precision it requires. To say she's a stickler for quality ingredients and proper technique is an understatement; she wouldn't dream of substituting, say, thyme for sage in her chicken with prosciutto or preparing a caprese salad with mealy, out of season tomatoes.

Fortunately, she doesn't have to. With De Luca's Specialty Foods adjacent to her cooking studio, Chef Anna has easy access to an enviable array of ingredients. "Tony lets me use all of the good ingredients," she praises of her longtime boss Tony De Luca.

These two Italian Canadians were united by a shared passion for Italian cooking, a bond that has translated into a symbiotic working relationship that is going on 26 years. (It's little wonder why students in Chef Anna's classes often mistake the pair for a married couple.) De Luca's



Anna Paganelli's menu:

- Orecchiette with Sausage and Rapini
- Stuffed Pork Tenderloin with Olives
- Fennel, Arugula & Radicchio Salad with Oil Cured Olives
- Buttercream Cake



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cooking classes are one of the city's lesser known dining gems, where \$50 yields a four-course Italian feast with entertaining demonstrations of technique peppered with candid audience involvement and charming, informative banter from De Luca. In the cooking studio Chef Anna enchants and teaches students how to prepare wild mushroom and goat cheese manicotti and fennel salad, while up in the market Tony demystifies nuances within varieties of olive oil and provides the goods needed to achieve Paganelli's dishes at home.

The pair hails from neighbouring districts of southern Italy, De Luca from Calabria and Paganelli from Puglia, that share many common traditions and dishes. Paganelli, the eldest in a brood of seven, was just 13 years old when her farmer

the student comfortable and give them a chance to learn.

For more than a quarter century, she has been sharing her trade secrets with hungry students. Tricks such as calming pungent thinly sliced red onions for salad in cold water baths and creating perfectly delicate tomato sauce with a vegetable mill that removes skin and seeds. To every dish she adds her not-so-secret ingredient. "Cook it with love. That's my most important thing that you can do with your food."

Although Paganelli is from the south of Italy, where dishes are based more on seafood, olive oil, tomato and garlic than the north's corn and dairy, her mother grew up near Milan and taught her how to make risotto and polenta. Chef Anna's vast repertoire spans all regions. Regulars of her classes cherish photocopied handouts

"Cook it with love."

parents prompted her to choose between continuing school or taking on the role of family cook. She chose the latter.

"I would cook for my family when I was small, and I got the passion," she explains. "When I was 16, I wanted to learn to cook like a chef." After a taking a short cooking course she found a restaurant job.

At 17, Paganelli took off with her sister across the Atlantic on a 'free trip' to work in a Winnipeg garment factory. Ever determined to better herself and return to her passion of cooking, she learned English by watching television and stringing sentences together. She got her foot back in the door of the culinary world with a 15-year stint in a succession of downtown restaurants.

A few years later, when purchasing supplies for her catering business, a De Luca's butcher suggested Anna connect with Tony, who was planning to open a cooking school.

For Chef Anna, teaching was a natural extension of her knowledge of Italian cuisine and passion for sharing joy. She attributes her patience as a teacher to her own sensitive nature. She aims to make

like maps to buried treasure and claim she hasn't repeated a dish in a decade.

What does repeat, time and time again, are expressions of gratitude — Paganelli estimates she's turned down hundreds of marriage proposals — and calls for her expertise. "They call me all the time and say, 'Anna, I did that and how can I fix it?' I never say 'I'm too busy, I talk to them, I help them.'"

But she is busy, planning and preparing for numerous events each week at which she plays host, entertainer, teacher and chef to groups as large as 150.

If she ever retires, it won't be from food. More likely that Paganelli will spend more time cooking for family, eating, loving and dreaming up new recipes.

The natural-born culinary talent exists in a perpetual state of energized creation. Contrary to industry mantra she never tastes or tests her recipes.

"It always comes out. I don't know why, I'm lucky," she explains. "Some people got it, some people don't got it."

For Chef Anna Paganelli's step-by-step guide to preparing polenta visit ciaowinnipeg.com.