

Ready to please

‘There’s so much passion in my kitchen,’ newly opened North Italia’s executive chef says

By Greg Morago

With its fresh salads, hand-made pasta and crusty pizzas, Galleria-area newbie North Italia already has won a slew of devoted customers. And the restaurant’s fan base also includes its chef.

Jonathan Wills, who started with North Italia only two months before its opening, is among the new converts to the gospel of Fox Restaurant Concepts, the Phoenix-based dining conglomerate that first scored in Houston with the July debut of True Food Kitchen. Wills, North Italia’s executive chef, traded in a long association with Marriott - working in New York; Palm Springs, Calif.; Miami and, most recently, San Diego - for Fox chef whites. Even though he gave up his ability to surf Pacific waves to head to Houston, he said he doesn’t regret his move east.

“I took a leap of faith joining Fox,” Wills said. “But I wanted to get back into it.”

By “it,” he’s referring to a greater interaction with diners in a more visible, hands-on kitchen position. With North Italia he has just that. The handsome restaurant’s high-energy kitchen is visible through floor-to-ceiling glass walls. Within that kitchen, Wills can observe each station crafting the fresh outpouring of pizzas, pastas, salads and sandwiches (burgers, panini and grinders). He also has open access to the dining room and long bar to tend to customers noshing on arancini oozing scamorza cheese and sipping Bocce cocktails, made with Belvedere vodka, St-Germain elderflower liqueur, cran-



Spaghetti and meatballs from North Italia, opening March 3 at BLVD Place Phase II at 1700 Post Oak.

berry juice and soda.

“There’s so much passion in my kitchen,” Wills said proudly. “It takes a certain amount of craft and passion to make these things.”

Those things would be small plates such as zucchini chips, grilled artichoke with lemon aioli, mushroom arancini, burrata, steamed mussels in white wine and garlic, crisp calamari on arugula, bruschetta, and chef’s boards of cheese and meat selections.

Pasta dishes include spaghetti and meatballs; spinach tortelloni with roasted mushrooms and spinach; strozzapreti with chicken, roasted mushrooms and Parmesan cream; and gigli pasta with pesto chicken. Pizza? There are options: fig and



Atlantic salmon with roasted mushroom fregula, horseradish gremolata and bread crumbs.

prosciutto, mushrooms and cipollini onions, “patata” (bacon, potato, farm egg and garlic) and “The Pig” (pepperoni, soppressata, salami and Italian fennel sausage).

Main dishes include grilled branzino; braised beef short ribs with creamy white polenta; chicken Parmesan; rosemary chicken with roasted vegetables; New York strip with

smashed potatoes and Swiss chard; Atlantic salmon with roasted mushroom fregola; and prosciutto-wrapped tenderloin with great northern beans and broccolini.

The restaurant also plans to be a favorite with craft-cocktail lovers. The cocktail list features an Aperol Shandy (Dimmi Liquore di Milano, Aperol, lemon and Peroni lager), Molto Fresco (Ketel One vodka, Campari, muddled grapefruit and Italian oregano), the Ducati (Gran Centenario Anejo tequila, Solerno blood orange liqueur, grappa and clover honey) and the Quiet Italian Gentleman (Bulleit rye, Carpano Antica sweet vermouth, Campari and Disaronno). And there's a winning wine program featuring bottles from Italy and California. At happy hour there are half-off bottles of wine as well as the \$20 Bottle and Board special - pizza of the day, bruschetta or chef's board paired with a bottle of red or white wine.

Fox Restaurant Concepts is putting great faith in Wills given that its North Italia brand is among the company's most popular and successful concepts. The Houston store is the first North Italia in three years from Fox and the seventh overall for the company. By the end of the year, there will be two more, in Irvine and Manhattan Beach, Calif.

In short order, Wills had to get acquainted with a lot all at once: new store, new employees, new home. But so far, he's enjoying every minute. "The culinary scene here is unbelievable. I love it," he said. "There's nothing I want for in terms of culinary arts here."

He's also a believer in one of the great truisms: Southern hospitality. "It's great," he said with a grin. "I haven't met a mean person yet."



Spinach Tortelloni; roasted mushroom, bloomsdale spinach, ricotta, pecorino, saba.

North Italia's Spinach Tortelloni

Makes 4 servings

3 cups fresh spinach

2 large egg yolks

3 cups "00" flour

4 tablespoons diced garlic

2 cups sliced mushrooms, roasted

8 ounces burro fuso (or melted butter)

4 teaspoons salt

8 teaspoons Grana Padano or pecorino cheese

4 teaspoons saba (grape-must syrup)

Instructions: Using a large pot, bring water to a rolling boil. Have an ice bath ready. Working in small batches, place 2 cups spinach into boiling water; cook spinach to a point that it will just start to come apart between your fingers, then place in ice bath to cool. Drain spinach and wring out

all water with a cloth napkin, then chop spinach and place it in a blender. Purée spinach with the egg yolks until completely smooth.

With the flour in a pile on a work surface, make a pool in the middle of the pile; add spinach mixture to the center of the pool and start mixing it with your fingertips, incorporating more flour as you stir. Continue to mix until dough forms and you can bring the flour together. Knead the dough for five minutes by hand, wrap with plastic and let dough rest for 30 minutes before forming tortelloni.

Drop tortelloni into boiling water and cook until tender, or about 5 minutes. Sauté garlic, mushrooms and the remaining spinach and until slightly wilted. In a bowl, toss cooked pasta with the sauté mixture, burro fuso, salt and 4 teaspoons of the cheese. Plate in 10 tortelloni apiece in a bowl and garnish with each with an additional teaspoon of cheese and saba.