



MY WASHINGTON

MIKE ISABELLA | Chef and restaurateur

BY CATHERINE TRIFILETTI

Long before Washington gained national attention for its exploding food scene and was named Bon Appétit's restaurant city of the year, there was Mike Isabella quietly perfecting his craft at José Andrés' Zaytinya. The New Jersey native got his big break on season six of Bravo's "Top Chef," where he consistently wowed judges with dynamic dishes. Though he didn't return home a winner, he landed runner up in "Top Chef All Stars" a few years later. Isabella's good humor and quick wit also made him a fan favorite and helped build a loyal following for his first restaurant Graffiato. He then extended beyond his Italian roots to open Kapnos, a Greek-centric concept which has offshoots in Arlington and Bethesda. Now, with nine popular eateries to his name and a blossoming dining scene at his fingertips, the options for Isabella appear endless. >>

SPEAKING OF EXPANSION, WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR ANTICIPATED FOOD EMPORIUM, ISABELLA EATERY, COMING TO TYSON'S GALLERIA THIS FALL? It is the largest project I've taken on, and while that can be scary, it's also really exciting. There are lots of moving parts – from full-service restaurants, fast-casual spots and bars to catering and retail – so it will be very dynamic and high-energy.

YOU RECENTLY PARTICIPATED IN THE GOURMET SYMPHONY WHERE YOU PREPARED DISHES IN TANDEM WITH MUSIC FROM THE NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA. WHAT WAS THAT EXPERIENCE LIKE? Coming from the perspective of a culinary artist, working with a musical artist was a great challenge and a fun experience. It gave me a different appreciation for both food and music, and the relationship between the two.

IT SEEMS LIKE YOU HAVE DONE IT ALL IN THE CULINARY ARENA, FROM TELEVISION TO COOKBOOKS TO WORKING WITH A SYMPHONY! WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU HAVEN'T TRIED THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO DABBLE IN? What we're planning for Isabella Eatery – that's the next new frontier for me. We're taking all of the concepts we've built over the years and putting them into one space. It's something that hasn't been done before on this level.

NAME ONE DISH FROM ANY OF YOUR RESTAURANTS THAT BEST EMBODIES WHO YOU ARE AS A CHEF. I would say the spit-roasted lamb we serve at Kapnos. It exemplifies old-world cooking with lots of flavor and elements that change with the seasons. As I evolve, the dish evolves.

IF YOU COULD CHOOSE YOUR LAST MEAL, WHAT WOULD IT BE? Hands-down, my grandmother's Sunday gravy. **WL**

NOW THAT YOU ARE OFFICIALLY THE RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION OF METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON'S RESTAURATEUR OF THE YEAR, CAN YOU TELL US HOW YOU MADE THE TRANSITION FROM CHEF TO OWNER OF SEVERAL HIGH PROFILE EATERIES HERE? I've made the move from chef to restaurateur because I love to be challenged to do new, fun things and get creative in developing new concepts. As I grow as a restaurant owner, my team continues to grow, which is important to me as well.

IS THERE A SECRET TO MAINTAINING CONSISTENCY AND HIGH STANDARDS ACROSS THE BOARD AS YOU CONTINUE TO GROW? Our goal is to get better every day by improving service and giving our guests the best experience possible. A big part of achieving that is to build and educate a strong team at each restaurant.

MY TOP SPOTS



THE MALL IS SO SPECIAL WITH THE CAPITOL, the monuments and the activity of all the tourism... It really takes you out of the city.



DATE NIGHT SPOT: Marcel's – my wife and I go once or twice a year for special occasions. The service is some of the best in the game. I really love the food and the whole experience.



HANG OUT SPOT: I like to bounce around Penn Quarter and 14th Street. There are many great restaurants in both neighborhoods.



AFTER A LONG DAY OF WORK: Mandu is open late, has good drinks and great food... I love to grab a bite at the bar and hang out with Danny Lee, the co-owner.

MIKE ISABELLA PHOTO BY SRES POWERS CAPITOL AND 14TH STREET CORRIDOR IMAGE VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS SCALLOP TERRINE PHOTO BY SCOTT SLECHMAN COURTESY OF MARCEL'S MANDU INTERIOR COURTESY OF MANDU