

By Tom Vannah



For many people in and around South Deerfield, the opening of Alina's Ristorante on Elm Street in February, 2010 was big news, though not necessarily for any reason related to the culinary achievements of Martin Amaya, Alina's owner and head chef.

Even before the first plate of Amaya's exquisite ossobuco came out of his kitchen, the opening of Alina's breathed new vitality into a grand old building that had, in an earlier life, been home to a very popular and well-regarded restaurant called Sienna. For a small-town center like South Deerfield's, having so prominent a building—with its mansard roof and two-story porch supported by elegant columns—unoccupied, even temporarily, was far from optimal. Although it's less than a half mile from one of the Pioneer Valley's leading tourist destinations, Yankee Candle, a simple right turn off Routes 5 and 10 northbound, the village of South Deerfield isn't exactly on the beaten path that leads to, say, Historic Deerfield or even Deerfield Academy. To keep the momentum of recent efforts by area businesses to promote South Deerfield going, it was important to have the building at 6 Elm Street occupied and busy.

The big news for South Deerfield, it turns out, was even bigger news among the Valley's culinary cognoscenti, many of whom were already enthralled by Martin Amaya's cooking. In a region loaded with good restaurants and more than enough hardcore foodies to keep a lot of them viable, Amaya earned a huge following while serving as chef at Carmelina's in Hadley, a restaurant founded in 1985 by Amaya's mentor, Damien DiPaola, and sold in 2007 to Hadley residents Debbie and Dave Windolowski.

Amaya stayed on at Carmelina's a while after DiPaola sold the restaurant—Amaya had been with DiPaola since 1994, starting at the now defunct Mezza Luna in Northampton and going on to impress the boss with his strong work ethic and confident flair with Northern Italian cuisine—but like many young, talented chefs, he dreamed of owning his own place. Even an invitation from DiPaola to join him in his recent restaurant enterprises in Boston, where he runs the critically acclaimed Damiano's, wasn't enough to pull Amaya from his desired path.

"I always had a dream to have a small restaurant," said Amaya, casting his eyes around Alina's dining room, which, with its high ceilings and tall windows, feels plenty spacious. "A place close to home, where people from my community come to eat and I see familiar faces every day."

When the building in South Deerfield came on the market, Amaya and his wife, Maritsa, made the decision to do without the guarantee of a steady paycheck and throw all their energy into a restaurant of their own.

Alina's, Martin says, is exactly the small, family-owned place he saw in his dreams.

The menu at Alina's is small but open-ended, offering a choice of meats and fish for many dishes. It will seem familiar to any fan of Italian cuisine, since it includes items such as frutti di mare, linguini con vongole, veal (or chicken) piccata, and marsala di carne. But it is dazzling just the same, showing both Amaya's passion and his sense of discipline.

The same balance is evident in the preparation: an elegance that comes sandwiched between extravagance and restraint. Consider the scallops mare e mont, an appetizer of scallops over sautéed wild mushrooms, finished with a spicy tangerine sauce, or the risotto primavera, risotto with seasonal vegetables and parmigiano pecorino cheese, simple but wonderfully indulgent.

## Food: A Place Like Home

In most cases, the actual cooking of a meal "is the easy part," Amaya says with a shy smile. The procurement of fresh, local ingredients and the prep work—the butchering, the cleaning, the boiling and blanching behind the scenes—matter just as much.

As he describes what it takes to clean and blanch fiddleheads, one wonders if he's thankful that the baby ferns are a delicacy only available for an impossibly short time each spring.

"No, it's wonderful," Amaya says, grinning. "I think it's amazing to have all this around us. I can have the fresh asparagus, the best meats, grass-fed, and fresh fish—the best stuff. And we have the people who live here or come here [to the Valley] to enjoy all of this. That's important. We are successful because I love what I do, but also because we are blessed to be in this place, with the farms and with people to come to enjoy and appreciate good food."

"It was scary to take a chance," Amaya says of the decision to go out on his own. But at every point in the process, he adds, "we have been blessed."

In the course of a long conversation with the Amayas one morning in June, I hear that one word again and again:

"To have found this amazing location, 15 minutes from Northampton and Amherst, two minutes off [I-91], we were blessed," says Martin.

"We have been blessed to have wonderful friends who have helped guide us, support us," says Maritsa.

"Blessed" to have met a deadline to open February 2, 2010 that seemed impossible at the outset; "blessed" to have found great waitstaff—"the best kids ever," says Martin; "blessed" to have regular patrons, some who knew Martin from other restaurants, some who as new neighbors welcomed Alina's and have become the familiar faces Amaya dreamed he'd cook for one day; even "blessed" to have great meat and fish suppliers [Arnold's for meats and Masse's for seafood] and an abundance of local farmers bringing an amazing variety of fresh produce; the Amayas are effusive with their gratitude and humbled by their good fortune—good fortune that includes their daughter, Alina, the restaurant's namesake.

"That is always something I thought to do," Martin says, referring to his decision to call his place Alina's. "No other name went into my mind." Shaking his head, he adds, "People ask if it's short for Carmelina's. No, it's not. It's for my daughter."

Amaya knows that the foundation of his restaurant is the reputation he gained at Carmelina's and the education he obtained from DiPaola. Asked whether, now that he's his own boss, he plans to include any culinary elements from his native San Salvador, Amaya quickly shakes his head: "I like Spanish food, but my mother and sister—they are the best. I'm good at this specific cuisine, so it's probably not so smart to change."

Since arriving in the United States from San Salvador at the age of 19, when he hoped to be a paramedic someday, Amaya says he's realized dreams far beyond anything he could have imagined as a boy. But, blessed as he may be, he acknowledges that the key to success in the restaurant business is hard work, the kind of work that can only be sustained by passion and gritty determination. For him, that has meant working every day—every day—since opening Alina's, even though the restaurant observes the time-honored tradition of closing Mondays.

"But I am still smiling," he says, beaming at Maritsa. "There is always work to do, yes, but there is nothing better than to work for yourself, surrounded by friends, supported by family, in a place that feels like home."

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