

EDGE

interview

Emeril Lagasse



Photo courtesy of Steve Freeman

Internationally acclaimed chef, best-selling author, beloved TV personality, retail superstar—there isn't much **Emeril Lagasse** *hasn't* done in the culinary world. So it might surprise you to know that among his 12 award-winning restaurants there has never been an Italian one. Until now. This June, Lagasse opens Emeril's Italian Table at a casino near you—the Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem to be specific, just over an hour away, a straight shot out Rte. 78. It will be his third eatery at the Sands, joining Emeril's Chop House and Burgers and More (aka BAM). Emeril's Italian Table features the chef's creative takes on the rustic Italian cuisine he grew up on, as well as classic meat, fish and vegetarian dishes, wood-oven pizzas and artisanal cheeses. Diners will get to experience the cooking process up close thanks to a large window into the kitchen. EDGE editor Mark Stewart tracked down Lagasse as he put the finishing touches on his latest creation.

EDGE: Everything you do is accompanied with such high expectations now—do you experience more pressure or anxiety when you are creating a restaurant concept, or after the restaurant opens?

EL: Opening a restaurant is tough but I love it. With Emeril's Italian Table the feeling is definitely excitement. I've got a great team that has been part of my organization since the very beginning. We all work hard and put a lot of energy into the planning and the menu, crafting the right look and feel of the restaurant. Our style of service and hospitality originates from my restaurants in New Orleans and is a huge part of our culture and the



Emeril's experience. In the end, we're in the business of making people happy.

EDGE: What signature touches will veteran diners recognize at your new place in the Sands?

EL: When I opened my first restaurant, Emeril's, in New Orleans, we really wanted to take down the wall between the kitchen and the dining room. If you visit today, there's really no barrier between the kitchen and dining room—you can see us at work and we can see who's dining, and make sure everything is going smoothly out in the front of the house. Emeril's Table will include an antipasto bar and a food bar so you get that same experience and interaction up close. The food bar is still one of the hottest seats in the house.

EDGE: You opened Emeril's Chop House at the Sands a couple of years back, and people swear by it. What goes into making a first-rate chop house—from the menu to service to the atmosphere?

EL: This is our *only* Chop House, so the concept here is a steakhouse with a little twist on the usual standards – chops, steaks, free-range chicken, seasonal fish, lobster and there's also some Creole-inspired dishes. We wanted to keep a little sensibility of an American steakhouse, except more open and modern. It's a really inviting and comfortable atmosphere with great food and great service. Each one of my restaurants has its own personality. My belief is that a restaurant must have heart, soul, and always provide a great customer experience. Great food, great wines, and great service—that's our philosophy regardless of location.

EDGE: In the pantheon of "celebrity chefs" I think of you as approaching things with a rock-star attitude. Does that come from the days when you were considering a career in music? Are you kind of living both lives at the same time?

EL: Well, I grew up doing both and I still love both. Music was and still is another big passion for me. I was in a local band and played the drums in high school. I was even offered a scholarship to music school, but I decided instead to enroll in

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culinary school at Johnson & Wales University. I have been fortunate enough to overlap the two along the road.

EDGE: When was that moment when you said to yourself *Hey, I'm REALLY good at what I do!*

EL: I was probably 8 or 9 years old when I realized that I might want to cook and be a chef one day.

EDGE: You are a proponent of eating local produce, and obviously New Jersey has a lot to offer in that respect. What do you feel is the #1 most misunderstood or underrated vegetable?

EL: Kale. I love cooking with fresh greens, lettuces and kale—whether it's in a soup or sautéed and served with pasta and clams. Our menus generally rotate about three or four times a year. As we transition into summer we'll make a few menu changes for the season and incorporate the local summer corn and tomatoes and you'll really see the seasonal influences.

EDGE: This is our Mind Your Manors issue—manors referring to homes. What are some of the mistakes home chefs tend to make when they try to prepare big, bold cuts of meat themselves?

EL: Under-seasoning. Salt and pepper are a cook's best tool. Sometimes people are afraid to season, but that's the secret to a great steak—salt, pepper and maybe a little cayenne or essence. Sprinkle a little more salt at the end, and maybe a drizzle of olive oil and a squeeze of fresh lemon.

EDGE: Can you make a truly great steak at home without a commercial kitchen?

EL: A cast-iron skillet, grill pan, or a gas or charcoal outdoor grill are all you need. A lot of people are afraid of undercooking meat, so a good meat thermometer is a smart investment.

EDGE: How has home cooking—from your family background—expressed itself in your creations over the years? How often do you reach back 40 or 50 years for a little inspiration?

EL: Growing up, I was always interested in food from a very young age. My mom Miss Hilda, who is Portuguese and French Canadian, and my dad, Mr. John, were a huge influence on my life. I learned a great deal from my mom.

She taught me how to cook and that started my passion for the culinary arts. I also worked at a local Portuguese bakery while in school. I learned the art of making breads, pastries and cakes. Everything I learned early on shows up in some way in my restaurants.

EDGE: What did you learn from baking?

EL: What I learned is one of the most important foundations of my restaurants: make everything from scratch. Bread, pasta, Andouille sausage, Worcestershire sauce, ice creams, sauce—you name it.

EDGE: No shortcuts?

EL: No. There are no shortcuts. **EDGE**

Editor's Note: BAM! EDGE readers can Cook with Emeril. Go to edgemagonline.com for an Opening Night recipe from Emeril's Italian Table.



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