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High-Profile Cuisine

CHEF MIKE ISABELLA WILL OPEN A SECOND GRAFFIATO IN RICHMOND

When the news hit that celebrity chef Mike Isabella was opening a second location of his successful D.C. restaurant, Graffiato, Richmonders promptly lost their minds. That it was to be located in the Popkin Tavern space — a restaurant that was still open for business and hadn't been for sale, as far as anybody could tell — increased the collective astonishment.

It's the first time that a well-known restaurateur from a larger city has chosen Richmond as the location of another outpost. And although Malcolm Mitchell of Mint Gastropub was a *Top Chef* competitor, Isabella competed in both the regular series and was one of the last two finalists in *Top Chef All-Stars*. In addition, before his TV days, Isabella worked under James Beard award winners José Andrés, Marcus Samuelsson, José Garces and Douglas Rodriguez. He's also written a cookbook (with Carol Blymire), *Mike Isabella's Crazy Good Italian*, and owns two other restaurants, in addition to Graffiato. Oh, and he was Food & Wine magazine's The People's Best New Chef Mid-Atlantic in 2012. The man is well known — nationally.

The 39-year-old Isabella is third-generation Italian-American and comes to Virginia by way of New Jersey. He learned to cook from his grandmother at a young age. "I never knew anything else I wanted to do [other than cooking]," he says. "I went to culinary school, started cooking and never looked back." He took a different route than most chefs. Out of culinary school, instead of working for a single chef at a French restaurant until

he was ready to go out on his own, Isabella worked for chefs who specialized in very different cuisines.

"If you want to make the perfect rice and beans," says Isabella, "you go work for Douglas Rodriguez, the king of America when it comes to Latino cuisine; if you want to learn some unique stuff about flavor contrast, you work for Marcus Samuelsson. And if you want to learn Spanish and travel ... and [how to] put your stamp on things, you work for José Andrés."

You can see those disparate influences on the menu of the D.C. Graffiato. You'll find pasta with lamb ragu, chili, feta, mint and pistachio, or a pizza with Brussels sprouts, braised pork, sweet potato, maple and chili — not typical Italian fare, although there's plenty of garlic, rosemary and tomatoes sprinkled liberally throughout the choices. This background served him well on *Top Chef* — it gave him a lot of versatility.



And the television experience gave him another kind of education. He had to make the decision to leave Andrés and sign a two-year contract with the *Top Chef All-Stars* series without the safety net of a restaurant waiting for him at the end. Once he made the leap, "[*Top Chef*] puts you through a lot, and they push you to limits that you've never been pushed to before." The result is resilience. "When you can get through that," he says, "it makes you so much stronger and less fearful." The bonus? Appearing on the show is so stressful, says Isabella, that nothing else in regular life seems all that stressful again →

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— a big plus in the restaurant business.

Still, why is Isabella in Richmond? One part of the story is Rappahannock's Travis Croxton, who's partnered with him for the venture. Their friendship began when Isabella began buying oysters and clams from Croxton's Rappahannock Oyster Co. "He's been asking me to come check out Richmond for a couple of years now."

"Richmond is an amazing, upcoming city," says Isabella. "It's only an hour and a half [from D.C.], but it's still so different for me." It also made sense to open a location closer to many of his purveyors. "We do all of our sourcing locally," he says of his restaurants. "We don't really import anything. ... We call [Graffiato] 'inspired' because everything comes from the States, if not the East Coast. What better place to go than Richmond where all of the farms are, [and] where we're getting a lot of our product [already]?"

With assistance from Chris Fultz Architects and interior designer Shari Perago of Habitus, the Popkin space will be both transformed and preserved. "The space is super-cool," Isabella says, "with its high ceilings, and big glass windows on the corner, and old floor that's totally on an angle." He plans to install a wood-fired oven and create a pizza bar where you can sit and watch the pies rise. The main dining area's seating plan will be reconfigured, the upper mezzanine area will be transformed, and the bar will get a facelift. You'll see new lighting, plus graffiti on the walls similar to that of its D.C. sibling.

Nonetheless, despite changes, he says, "For me, it's about keeping that feel of Popkin's and trying to marry it with Graffiato. ... To me, it's a historical landmark in Richmond, and I want people to remember it." And the restaurant will probably be ready for business sooner than you might think. "It's not a big build-out — the HVAC's in, the structure's all there, so hopefully it'll only take three or four months."

Isabella isn't going back to D.C. the day after the doors of his new Richmond restaurant open. He's renting an apartment here, and he plans to stick around for a while. He also wants to bring some of his other concepts to the city, if Graffiato proves successful. "[This restaurant] is not a one [trick] pony for me. It's for the future." 

Portions of this article previously appeared online.