

# Bringing 'Local' from Italy to Maine

BY MERRILL WILLIAMS

Lee Skawinski is a chef with one foot firmly planted on the coast of Maine and the other on the coast of Italy. Both places claim centuries-old traditions of fishing and farming that continue to define the cuisine of those areas even today. As executive chef and co-owner of two Portland restaurants, Cinque Terre and Vignola, Lee marries traditional northern Italian recipes to local ingredients to create food that he describes as “the freshest available, made with care and a light hand.”

After graduating from Newbury College’s Culinary School in Massachusetts, Lee spent time in Europe learning about seasonal cooking and how to pair wine with local ingredients, before working at the Four Seasons Hotel in Boston and the Harraseeket Inn in Freeport. Partnering with Dan Kary and Michelle Mazur-Kary, Lee took the helm at Cinque Terre in 2001 and opened Vignola five years later. He cooked at the venerable James Beard House in 2005 for Cinque Terre and will return in September to present a menu from Vignola. As a major player in the farm-to-table movement, Cinque Terre was recently selected by Epicurious, the national CondéNet food site for *Gourmet* and *Bon Appétit* magazines, as one of the top ten Farm-to-Table restaurants in the country.

As part of his continuing education, Lee travels to Italy at least twice a year to work with chefs from different regions. According to him, it’s anything but a vacation. “I fly in, take a

day to get to my destination, work five or six days, and leave,” he says. “It’s rushed, but on every trip I learn so much about technique and about different products that are indigenous to a particular area.” On a recent trip, Lee took some of his staff with him, and they are now getting ready to try out some new varieties of greens they discovered there: a four-colored lettuce, an Italian cress, a crinkly Tuscan spinach, and edible flowers.

The new varieties will be planted at Grand View Farm. A 40-acre spread in Greene owned by Lee’s restaurant partners, it supplies almost half of all their produce needs. The entire team—front-of-the-house and kitchen staff—pitches in to plant and harvest throughout the season. “I love to take ‘the kids’ to the farm,” he says, affectionately referring to his staff. “When we come back to Portland with 100 pounds of beets, the kids in the front of the house can say to our customers: ‘We picked those today.’ And our customers love knowing that their food can’t get any fresher than that. The “Grand View” designation on our menu tells our customers what comes from the farm, something they always ask about. They know all our ingredients mean great quality.”

Chef Lee Skawinski serves northern Italian dishes made with local ingredients



photography by Jim Bazin © 2008

## TO MARKET, TO MARKET

What isn't grown at the farm, Lee sources locally. He's been working with Lisa Turner at Laughing Stock Farm for nine years. "Lisa provides me with all the lettuces, arugula, baby Swiss chard, radishes, and tomatoes I need. Her tomatoes are so incredible, I couldn't come close to producing the quality tomatoes she does." Lee says he uses 20 pounds of cut lettuces every week and "a ton of basil" which she delivers twice a week to the restaurant.

Lee's commitment to sourcing locally extends to meat and fish too. "Hey, we only have lamb for eight months of the year," he says, "but when we do, it's the best lamb you can find. We get 70-80 lambs a year from a guy out in South Paris, three lambs a week from July 4<sup>th</sup> to the end of the year. It's a satisfying relationship because you know where the animal is raised, you know that it's fed well (they graze and graze), so the quality of the meat is fantastic."



Above: Matthew Brown of Browne Trading Company examines a freshly-caught monkfish with Lee Skawinski.

On this day, Lee is preparing a menu that includes local fish and local shellfish, and he has cultivated his favorite sources for these too. "I have a guy out on Peak's Island who scallops for me. We use 40 pounds every four days, and they couldn't be fresher," he says.

For the monkfish, he's headed to Browne Trading Company in Portland where he will select the key ingredient for one of his favorite summer entrées: monkfish with heirloom tomatoes and broccoli rabe. "Monkfish is quite popular in Italy," he notes. "I see them in the fish markets there all the time, although they're a little smaller than our indigenous monkfish from the Gulf of Maine. It's not the prettiest fish in the world," he concedes, "but it's a rich-tasting fish. They feed on crustaceans like crabs and scallops off the bottom of the ocean, so they've got a really great, lobster-like flavor. It's a firm fish, so it handles well and is easy to cook with."

Left: Lisa Turner harvests French Breakfast and Easter Egg radishes. Laughing Stock Farm in Freeport has a 60-member CSA.

Laughing Stock Farm, 79 Wardtown Road, Freeport 207.865.3743  
[www.laughingstockfarm.com](http://www.laughingstockfarm.com)

Browne Trading Retail Market, 262 Commercial Street, Portland  
207.775.7560 [www.brownetrading.com](http://www.brownetrading.com)

## TO MARKET AND HOME AGAIN **LEE SKAWINSKI**

“Monkfish isn’t the prettiest fish in the world, but has a great taste,” according to Chef Lee Skawinski.

### **HOME AGAIN, HOME AGAIN**

Back at Cinque Terre, Chef Skawinski surveys his kitchen where boxes and bags of fresh ingredients are being delivered by local purveyors. It is this bounty of just-picked and just-caught food that turns him on. “The key to cooking with great products,” he says, “is not to manipulate things too much. I teach my staff to complement the focus piece, whether it’s beets, tomatoes, a piece of fish, or a scallop, and find what could enhance it.”

Lee says he likes to look through cookbooks, but not for recipes because “recipes are only guides, and any recipe is going to change the second you get into the kitchen because of what ingredients you have available. I really find more inspiration in the field, the market, and the walk-in refrigerator,” he says.

“You know,” he says thoughtfully, “We’re getting back to some key traditions and an understanding of what it means to eat local. I think it’s great when people come to Maine and eat what’s grown and raised here. The further south you go into more populated areas, food is being sourced from all over the country. Here, it’s a different mentality.”



Cinque Terre, 36 Wharf Street, Portland 207.347.6154  
[www.cinqueterremaine.com](http://www.cinqueterremaine.com)



photography by Jim Bazin © 2008

## Crab Cannelloni with Fresh Tomato Sauce

*Lee prefers to use pasta sheets he makes himself, but he says pasta sheets made by Barilla are suitable. Just parboil as if you were making lasagna, and roll it up.*

### Filling

2 cups white beans  
 ½ cup spinach  
 ½ onion  
 1 Tablespoon rosemary  
 1 Tablespoon olive oil  
 ½ pound Maine crabmeat,  
 checked for shells  
 Salt and pepper

Simmer beans in water with spinach, onion, rosemary, and olive oil until tender. Drain, purée, and set aside.

### Sauce

8 small, red heirloom tomatoes  
 1 shallot  
 1 cup olive oil

Simmer all ingredients in saucepan for 20 minutes. Purée in blender, and season with salt and pepper.

### Cannelloni Shells

6 pasta sheets, freshly made or packaged  
 6 teaspoons heavy cream



Parboil pasta sheets until softened but not completely cooked. Drain. Preheat oven to 350°. Place pasta sheets on a cutting board, add a heaping Tablespoon each of the bean purée and crabmeat along one edge, and season with salt and pepper. Roll into a tube, keeping the roll firm. Cut roll in half and place on sheet pan, seam-side down. Spoon heavy cream over filled pasta tubes and bake 15 minutes, or until golden brown on top.

To serve, place cannelloni on warmed plates and spoon tomato sauce around the pasta. If you wish, garnish with basil leaves that have been quickly fried in olive oil.

Serves 6.

## Summer Greens Soup with Seared Scallop and Beet Agrodolce

*Chef Skawinski likes pairing the earthiness of the vegetables with the sweetness of the scallops in this summer soup.*

### Soup

1 onion, diced  
3 ribs celery, diced  
1 head fennel, diced  
1 Tablespoon olive oil  
2 medium zucchini  
1 large Maine potato, diced  
4 large leaves Swiss chard, stems removed  
½ cup peas  
1 quart vegetable stock  
½ cup basil  
1 pound spinach  
Salt and pepper

Sauté onion, celery, and fennel in olive oil for 2 minutes. Peel zucchini to separate green skin from the white flesh. Dice flesh and reserve the skin. Add zucchini flesh, potato, Swiss chard, peas, and vegetable stock. Cover and simmer for 1 hour. Remove from heat, and add basil, spinach, and zucchini skin. Purée in a blender. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

### Beet Agrodolce

6 baby beets  
1 teaspoon honey  
1 teaspoon white balsamic vinegar  
Salt and pepper



Add beets to saucepan with enough water to cover. Gently simmer until tender when pierced with a knife. Remove beets from water, allow to cool, and use a towel to scrub off skins. Cut beets into thin slices. Dissolve honey in vinegar, season with salt and pepper, and toss with beets.

### Scallops

6 scallops  
2 Tablespoons olive oil  
1 Tablespoon sea salt  
Pepper

Dry scallops well, and season with sea salt and pepper. Heat sauté pan over medium-high heat until hot, then add olive oil. When oil shimmers, add scallops and cook until golden brown, about 1 minute. Turn and cook other side until golden brown.

To serve, adjust seasoning of soup if necessary, and ladle into warmed soup bowls. Place one scallop atop soup in each bowl, surround with beets, and drizzle with olive oil.

Serves 6.



photography by Jim Bazin © 2008



## Monkfish with Heirloom Tomatoes and Broccoli Rabe

*Lee suggests asking your fishmonger to cut a loin from the monkfish, trimming away any silvery membrane. At home, it's easy to cut the loin into half-inch thick slices, or scallopini.*

Monkfish loin  
½ cup flour  
Olive oil  
Salt and pepper

2 cloves garlic, peeled  
1 Tablespoon capers  
1 ounce anchovy fillets  
1 Tablespoon olive oil  
4 ounces white wine  
Juice of 1 lemon

2 pounds heirloom tomatoes, quartered  
8 basil leaves, sliced into thin strips  
3 Tablespoons olive oil  
1 Tablespoon tomato vinegar  
Sea salt  
Chili flakes

½ pound broccoli rabe  
½ cup flour  
6 ounces soda water  
Olive oil for frying

Slice monkfish into 3-ounce scallopini about ½ inch thick, and lightly dust with flour. Heat sauté pan over medium-high heat until hot, then add olive oil. Sauté monkfish about 3-4 minutes on each side until golden brown, and remove from heat. Season with salt and pepper.

To make the sauce, combine garlic, capers, and anchovy fillets and chop medium-fine. In the same pan that was used to sauté the fish, heat 1 Tablespoon olive oil and add the garlic/caper/anchovy mixture. Sauté until golden brown, add wine and lemon juice, and reduce by half. Add fish back to pan, re-season, and drizzle with 1 Tablespoon olive oil.

Combine tomatoes and basil, and toss with olive oil and vinegar. Season to taste with salt and chili flakes.

To prepare broccoli rabe, heat olive oil in a fryer or deep saucepan. Combine flour and soda water and mix well. Dredge broccoli in batter and allow most of the batter to drain off. Fry battered broccoli until crisp, drain on paper towels, and season with salt while hot.

To serve, place monkfish scallopini on warmed plates, and add tomatoes and broccoli rabe on the side. Spoon sauce on fish first and then onto broccoli.

Serves 6.



## Crêpes with Grand View Farm Peaches

*"We grow white peaches and cherries on the farm," says Lee, "and they have beautiful flavor."*

6 ounces milk  
6 ounces cold water  
1 Tablespoon brown sugar  
3 Tablespoons Grand Marnier  
1 cup flour, sifted  
4 Tablespoons butter, melted  
Salt  
6 ripe peaches, peeled, pitted, and halved  
1 cup pitted cherries  
2 cups red wine  
1 Tablespoon honey  
1 piece star anise

Make the crêpe batter by combining milk, water, brown sugar, Grand Marnier, flour, butter, and salt, and blend until smooth. Refrigerate 1 hour.

Slice peaches thinly and place in an overlap pattern on a sheet pan. Sprinkle with brown sugar and broil until caramelized.

To make the cherry sauce, combine cherries, red wine, honey, and star anise. Simmer until reduced by half, remove from heat, and discard star anise.

To serve, melt a Tablespoon of butter in small, nonstick pan. Add 1 ounce of the crêpe batter to pan and swirl to coat bottom of pan evenly. Cook for 20 seconds to set the crêpe, then turn and cook another 20 seconds. Fold crêpes in quarter circles and stack 2 or 3 on a warmed plate.

Place peaches next to crêpes and spoon 2 Tablespoons of cherry sauce on and around crêpes.

Serves 6.



Chef Lee Skawinski of Cinque Terre and Vignola restaurants with the complete meal he prepared.



photography by Jim Bazin © 2008