

# NORTHERN ITALY, *by way of* New England



by Abbie Jarman

The people behind Portland, Maine's, Cinque Terre saw a gap in the market, and jumped to fill it



The interior and exterior of Vignola.

A few years back, as chef Lee Skawinski and his crew from Cinque Terre in Portland, Maine ([www.cinqueterre-maine.com](http://www.cinqueterre-maine.com)), travelled through Italy, meeting food artisans and exploring regional specialties, they fell in love with the Italian osteria. This casual eating establishment focuses on great wine and unfussy food in a convivial atmosphere. Portland had no place for good late-night dining, and Skawinski and Cinque Terre's owners Dan Kary and Michelle Mazur-Kary saw a way to fill the niche while expanding their own repertoire.

And so Vignola was born in July 2006, in a spot located next to then-5-year-old Cinque Terre in Portland's historic Old Port neighborhood. They took the name from a small town in Italy known for its thriving food culture.

"It's been a big learning curve, having two facilities," says Skawinski, who has been with Cinque Terre for six years. "The upside is that we've been able to explore some other styles of food in a more casual format that we've always wanted to. And we source a lot of things that people don't see at other places."

## Two concepts, one kitchen

Cinque Terre's menu focuses on Northern Italian cuisine: Liguria, southern Piedmont and western Tuscany. This part of Italy is coincidentally quite similar to Maine in geography—which makes the Northern Italian menu only natural for Skawinski. He focuses on local, sustainable foods grown and raised by area farmers. Seasonality and freshness are also of great importance to Skawinski—as it is in Italian cooking.

The Cinque Terre menu starts diners off with antipasti such as the Tri Colore salad of radicchio, endive and arugula with white beans, mozzarella and anchovy crostini, and Bar Harbor mussels with Berkshire pork sausage, chickpeas, lemon, garlic and parsley pesto.

Pasta options consist of the classic rigatoni with venison bolognese and pecorino cheese, and gnocchi with speck, parsnips and Parmigiano. The entrée menu features roasted sea

bass with an oregano crust, endive, olives and blood orange salad, and a pan-seared Maine pork loin with truffled beluga lentils, roasted carrots and tomato conserve.

Meanwhile, over at Vignola, Skawinski is more free to experiment with unique dishes—and so far, diners have been up to the experience of eating head cheese, duck hearts and lamb neck stew.

"We are able to find things that most [restauranters] don't take the time to, and that follows our philosophy on the wine too. Every year when we go to Italy we visit with our Prosciutto producer and our Reggiano producer. Those are relationships that we have been building for three, four, five years now. They are fun relationships to have."

Having the two operations has also given Skawinski a lot of buying power. It allows him to source whole animals and fabricate them in-house to not only cut down on costs, but also to give his kitchen crew a chance to experiment

with interesting cuts and dishes. "The kids are like, 'I never learned any of this at school!'" Skawinski laughs.

Dishes at Vignola are more rustic, such as the lamb crepinette and cotechino sausage with green herb sauce and eggplant caponata, and Berkshire pork and veal meatballs with porcini mushrooms, tomato and pancetta. Vignola also houses a Baker's Pride Al Forno stone oven to make the restaurant's Neapolitan-style pizzas, like the Cinghiale with provolone, tomato, roasted balsamic peppers and boar sausage. The oven cooks the pies at 700°F for no more than three minutes.

Skawinski has found that having the stone oven in the restaurant goes way beyond sling-pizzas: "It's been a real asset for roasting vegetables, cooking small crostatas, and all the pizzas. I think it's one of those items where as you grow and experiment and play around a little, you realize how flexible it can be. It's a fun tool to have."

## Building a sustainable staff

Opening Vignola has allowed Skawinski and the rest of the Cinque Terre team to spread their wings and thrive in the restaurants and the food community as a whole. They have four acres of land where produce is grown for the restaurants; Skawinski names rows of plants after members of the kitchen crew, giving them a sense of ownership and pride over the food as it is grown, harvested, prepped, cooked and served. "Working a garden is never a short task, but the rewards are great," he says. One day per week is spent on the road, picking up produce, whole animals and other ingredients from local farmers and the garden.

The Cinque Terra and Vignola crew members are taught to truly appreciate the food they cook—from tending to the garden, to learning to cook from snout to tail, to annual trips to Italy to learn more about its cuisine and the artisans who cultivate it. Meanwhile, the Portland community benefits from great Italian food in two unique settings. ●



The seasonal antipasti platter at Vignola.