

NAPLES

ILLUSTRATED®

WINE
PAIRINGS
for dinner with friends

ECO LUXURY
*Sustainable fashion
for the New Year*

DINING
AWARDS
*Restaurants are
surviving & thriving*



LISET ZELAYA, Sea
Salt's sommelier

FROM THE EDITOR

MEALS to Remember

My mom's father was in the restaurant business. I have so many great memories of him, a storytelling Greek man who loved to educate us grandkids on important things like the difference between frozen custard and ice cream. At one point, he owned a pastry shop in Brooklyn, New York. From there, he would make us the most amazing marzipan decorations to top off our birthday cakes. After dabbling in a few restaurants, he wrapped up his career by devoting several years to improving the nutritional quality (and taste) of the food served at a local all-boys Catholic high school.

My grandfather's legacy is my appreciation for those who work in the food service industry. It takes an unusual blend of optimism, grit, patience, determination, talent, and business acumen to make a restaurant stand out and succeed. To me, one of the best ways to get to know Naples is to eat out. Recently, my husband and I decompressed from our workdays and devoured oysters and stone crab claws at Captain & Krewe. I also enjoyed an amazing meal at Pazzo! with *Naples Illustrated's* publisher, Kaleigh Grover. We sipped cocktails at the bar, chatted with owner Skip Quillen, then sat down and ordered the specials—and they were, indeed, special. Next, I dined with *NI* account manager Kathy Beuttel at Veranda E at the Hotel Escalante. The snapper was amazing, and the way it was fileted so expertly at our table was entertaining to watch.

Now, more than ever, it's important to support the hardworking folks who own, run, and collect paychecks from Naples eateries. In a salute to all of them, whether they are mentioned here or not, we present our eighth annual Dining Awards, starting on page 79. Maybe we featured some of your favorites in our editor's picks. Or maybe the readers concur with your top spots. Maybe we missed something really wonderful. To keep things interesting, we added a few new categories, including Best Place to Dine with Kids and Best Place to Dine with your Dog. My pick for both would be The Lake Park Diner. I'm obsessed with their salmon Caesar salad.

When my college kid was in town this summer, I took her to 21 Spices. Chef Asif Syed graciously came to our table to see how we liked our food. Then he told her that every day he works to be the best at what he does, and that she should too, as an engineer in training. It was delightful to have chicken tikka masala, onion naan, and a side of a mini-Ted Talk. I got a kick out of his big "I beat Bobby Flay" personality and knew I had to figure out a way to get him into the pages of this magazine. Turn to "Table Talk" on page 102 to see what happens when he sits down for a meal with Sea Salt's sommelier, Liset Zelaya (our cover girl), and chef Paw Mikkelsen of Mikkelsen's Pastry Shop. The wine pairings, food preparation, and conversation were all fantastic.

Next time you have a positive dining experience, share the kind words with your friends and social network. This kind of grassroots buzz is more helpful than we all realize. Cheers to 2021!

Christina Cush

Christina Cush
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REMY CUSH



ABOVE: BEHIND THE SCENES AT OUR "TABLE TALK" FEATURE SHOOT WITH PHOTOGRAPHER VANESSA ROGERS.

LEFT: I GOT TO PICK UP THE GORGEOUS FLOWERS FOR "TABLE TALK" FROM GREG SARI AT THE GARDEN DISTRICT.



HOME FRONT

DECORATOR VS. DESIGNER: What's the difference?

After you put away the holiday adornments and look at your home with fresh eyes, you may conclude that it's time to shake things up. Since many of us are spending more time at home than ever before, we also might be taking notice of spaces in need of a refresh or rooms in need of repurposing. Homeowners' thoughts are translating into action, with phones ringing in the offices of many Naples decorators and designers. "It is a very lively scene, and it is busier than it's ever been," says Sherri DuPont of **Collins DuPont Design Group** (collins-dupont.com). Both DuPont and her business partner, Kim Collins, graduated

from Harvard University's Graduate School of Design before starting their enterprise and have since received four Sand Dollar Awards. Here's what to consider when searching for a professional to suit your domestic dreams and needs:

***Decorators** can choose the furniture and accessories for any room. Though they do not usually have the same degree or training as a designer, many decorators offer an abundance of talent and possess excellent taste in home decor. If you are looking for advice on style or help choosing furniture, paint, wallpaper, lighting, art, or accessories, a decorator can aid in those decisions.

***Designers** have extra training and degrees or certifications. They are very helpful in working with architects and contractors on remodeling projects when it's time to choose finishes (countertops, hardware, cabinetry, flooring, and more) or contemplate furniture orientation, color palettes, or a home's flow. —Megan Graham



COLLINS DUPONT DESIGN GROUP EARNED SAND DOLLAR AWARDS FOR THIS GREAT ROOM AND MASTER BATH.

NAPLES NOTES

BELOW DECK WITH A YACHTING PRO

Bill Charbonneau, the founder and principal of **Naples Nantucket Yacht Group**, grew up in Massachusetts and enjoyed summers in Cape Cod, where he slept with the windows open to hear the foghorn from the nearby lighthouse. "We had a boat anchored in front of that house, and I have an idyllic remembrance of the sea," he says. "I always loved it and wanted to be on it."

After graduating from Connecticut College, he worked in commercial and residential construction in the greater Boston area for almost 25 years. Then, a siren song pulled him to start something new: a charter yacht business he launched in 2005.

He and his partners acquired boats to-



gether, and this joint-ownership model still propels the company today; owners share the yachts as assets, as well as split the revenue from the charters. Charbonneau has steadily built up a mighty fleet, with boats ranging in length from 35 to 131 feet and boasting a spectrum of amenities including hot tubs, Jet Skis, and paddleboats. He likes to name some of his boats *Perseverance*, a character trait he says got him through the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

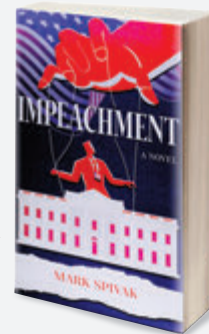
Providing five-star service on a floating vessel while following new health and safety protocols is possible, Charbonneau says. "We have our crews rapid tested in the mornings, and our boats are thoroughly sanitized. We wear masks for the comfort of our guests. There's plenty of sanitizer, and towels are washed constantly."

In some ways, he notes, yachting is a great diversion during these times. "We've seen a positive trajectory in terms of bookings and reservations," he says. "We're up 25 to 30 percent from last year, and our clients who book every year for New Year's Eve or other occasions have returned." (naplesnantucketyachtgroup.com) —C.C.

AUTHOR'S CORNER

NI'S FOOD GUY PENS POLITICAL THRILLER

For those of you who can't get enough political intrigue, there's ***Impeachment*** by Mark Spivak (City of Light Publishing, 2020). Spivak writes monthly for *NI* about restaurants, wine, and



spirits, and is considered an expert on such matters. In the past eight years, he has authored two nonfiction books on the liquor world, *Iconic Spirits* and *Moonshine Nation*. He took his first foray into fiction in 2016 with *Friend of the Devil*, featuring a chef desperate for fame and fortune. He tried his hand at the political thriller genre with 2019's *The American Crusade*. His latest work explores alliances and governmental disruptions through the lens of billionaire brothers Sheldon and Richard Haft. (markspivakbooks.com) —M.G.

ESCAPE

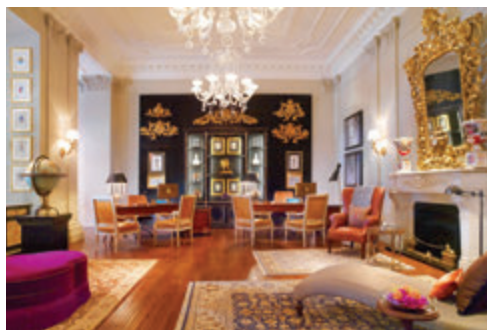
TRAVEL JOURNAL

Man in a SUITCASE

A graduate of Howard University and the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, restaurateur Michael Mir relocated to Naples in 1997 and subsequently opened Bha! Bha! Persian Bistro. The well-traveled Mir was attracted to the quality of life that Naples is known for, especially the natural amenities that are so readily available to enjoy. In 2020, Mir and his life partner of 17 years, Miguel Martinez, put a planned reunion with friends in Crete on hold due to COVID-19. They also skipped their annual summer vacation to Europe. To satisfy their wanderlust, the pair took day trips throughout Southwest and Central Florida. “The ability to experience the world through a different lens is why I love to travel,” says Mir. “That and learning and appreciating the treasures other countries have to offer.” When it’s safe and convenient to travel abroad again, Mir and Martinez are planning voyages to Puerto Rico, the Greek islands, Portugal, and Southern France. —Christina Cush



MIGUEL MARTINEZ AND MICHAEL MIR IN SEVILLE, SPAIN; MIR IN ROUTE TO VIEQUES, PUERTO RICO.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ISTANBUL; PERSIAN TEA; THE GRAND BAZAAR IN ISTANBUL; DALÍ MUSEUM IN FIGUERES; THE ST. REGIS FLORENCE.



NI: Where have you been that you hope to visit again?

Mir: Morocco, Turkey, and Iran. Istanbul is truly an East-meets-West experience. The energy of the city is mesmerizing and unlike any other big city I have visited.

What are your bucket-list trips?

I was able to check zip lining and treetop roping in Costa Rica off the list. But I'd still like a complete cultural and culinary tour of the grand cities of Isfahan, Yazd, and Kerman in Iran.

Does any domestic travel look interesting to you right now?

Going to our little place out in Palm Springs is always something I look forward to. There we go hiking and enjoy great dining, which are two of my favorite things.

What's the best meal you've had on a trip?

Abbacchio allo scottadito con patate. It's a delicious roasted lamb with olives and laurus nobilis leaves. I had it in a restaurant in Rome named L'Osteria L'Antico Moro.

Do you have a favorite hotel?

Yes! The St. Regis in Florence on Piazza Gnossanti. Somehow we

got lucky and were upgraded to the same exact suite that Princess Diana used to stay in, complete with our own personal butler.

Any particular markets or shops you recommend?

The Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, but practice your haggling skills before you go. I also like the Galeries Lafayette in Paris, and I recommend a small perfume shop in Cassis, France, called L'eau de Cassis.

What is your favorite museum?

The original Salvador Dalí Theatre-Museum in Figueres, Catalonia, Spain. Immersive experience museums are my absolute favorite.

Is there a spa that stands out to you?

The Excellente Resort in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic

What are your go-to travel resources?

We refer to Rick Steves' travel guides and website.

When you travel, what do you need to bring with you?

I can't travel without my Persian tea, Sadaf's Special Blend black loose tea with cardamom. I always take a batch with me anywhere I go. It's the start of a perfect day.

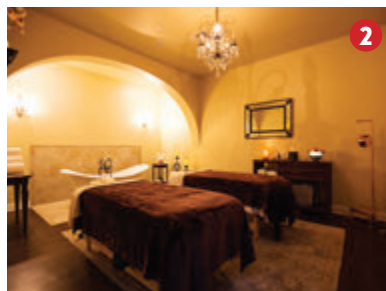
FAVORITE THINGS



MEG DAY PHOTOGRAPHY

Lexie Verbruggen has been the owner and operator of Sweetified for 12 years. The native Michigander earned her degree in baking and pastry arts from the Secchia Institute for Culinary Education and moved to Marco Island in 2012 to escape the cold. She met her husband, David, who is a managing partner at Ridgway and Tony's off Third, that same year. "We started dating in 2015 and married in 2017 and moved to Naples," Verbruggen says. To her, Naples is beautiful year-round. "Even our medians are green," she notes. Wedding cakes are a large slice of her baking business, so COVID-19 reception cancellations in the spring and summer of 2020 hit her hard. To pivot, she says, "we were able to overnight ship quite a few wedding cakes so our couples could still celebrate their wedding date at home. Another thing we did was offer cookie decorating boxes for delivery and nationwide shipping. Oh, and who could forget our toilet paper roll cakes? Those were a huge hit!" Understanding the need to diversify her business, she landed her Chocolate Grand Marnier cake on the menu at The Bevy. What's next for Sweetified?

"More retail offerings and dessert items that are available every day, rather than only pre-order," she says. Grateful for the opportunities this verdant area has given her, Verbruggen is passionate about supporting Our Daily Bread Food Pantry Ministry. Below, her favorite places to...



2

KERI JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHY



1

PAUL G. OSBORN



3

Purchase gifts: Best of Everything



4

JOEY WAVES



5

Get a culture boost: The theater at Artis—Naples



6

MICHAEL CARONCHI

- 1. **Take visitors:** Naples Botanical Garden or on a sunset cruise
- 2. **Enjoy some pampering:** Woodhouse Spa
- 3. **Splurge:** Waterside Shops
- 4. **Grab a quick lunch:** LowBrow
- 5. **Watch the sunset:** Naples Beach Hotel
- 6. **Cheers to the weekend:** The Courtyard at Ridgway
- 7. **Buy groceries or produce:** Third Street Farmers Market
- 8. **Be sporty:** Gulf Coast Clays Shooting
- 9. **Have a date night:** Bayside. It has the best views.
- 10. **Meet for a business coffee:** Narrative Coffee Roasters
- 11. **Pick up takeout:** Thai Udon Café —Christina Cush





TABLE Talk

When a sommelier, a pastry chef, and an executive chef commune for a tasting dinner, the food and wine pairings are riveting—and so is the conversation

By Christina Cush
Photography by Vanessa Rogers

Shot on location at 16659 Lucarno Way in Mediterra, thanks to the Bua Bell Group at John R. Wood Properties, Naples.

Flowers by the Garden District, Naples.

LISET ZELAYA, SEA SALT'S SOMMELIER, POURS WINE FOR THE TASTING PARTY, WHICH FEATURES ENTRÉES BY CHEF ASIF SYED OF 21 SPICES AND, LATER, DESSERTS FROM CHEF PAW MIKKELSEN OF MIKKELSEN'S PASTRY SHOP.

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After slogging through almost a year of COVID-19 and its ill effects on their businesses and community, three Naples hospitality superstars seize a lighter moment to gather in a gorgeous home for a savory and sweet tasting dinner, accompanied by delicious wines. The first to arrive, with the sun bouncing off her shiny dark hair, is Liset Zelaya, a 10-year sommelier at Sea Salt. “Who doesn’t get excited when the guest with the booze shows up?” she jokes.

Zelaya was introduced to Naples during childhood winter vacations, escaping the chillier climes in Toledo, Ohio. “After college, I vowed I’d never suffer another winter again and moved down here in January 1998.” She still has a fondness for Ohio, mostly revolving around family memories that inspired her career path. “My mother wouldn’t let my friends leave without eating a full three-course meal.” And her father is responsible for her interest in other cultures and cuisines. “My dad traveled all over the world, often taking us with him,” says the mom of a kindergartener daughter. “He instilled in us to try the foods of wherever we were.”

The doorbell rings and a rosy-cheeked guest arrives—chef Paw Mikkelsen of Mikkelsen’s Pastry Shop, which he’s co-owned and operated for 20 years with his wife, Elizabeth. He carries in three big white bakery boxes, and Zelaya can’t wait to peek inside. He gently places them on the countertop and says, “I have things in here that I don’t sell in the bakery.” Growing up in Denmark he worked in his parents’ pastry shop at age 11, did an apprenticeship at 15, and came to the United States at 19. “I worked as a pastry chef for the Four Seasons in Houston and The Ritz-Carlton in



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: SAMOSA APPETIZERS; ZELAYA INTERACTS WITH THE CHOCOLATE FONDUE CAKE; MIKKELSEN RAISES A GLASS TO RESILIENCE. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SYED SLICES A LIME; SYED’S KEBABS; SEASONING THE SALMON ENTRÉE; THE ULTIMATE SPICE TRAY.





Boston,” says the father of three children, now all in their 20s.

Chef Asif Syed, a father of two young kids, is the next to arrive, bringing with him a little rock-and-roll attitude. Though everyone in this trio knows each other from living and working in Naples, it’s the first opportunity they’ve had to spend quality time together. Syed came to Naples more than 20 years ago, through an internship at the JW Marriott on Marco Island. “Later, I got a job at the Hilton hotel on Marco Island and worked to become the executive chef,” he says. “Fifteen years later, I opened 21 Spices in Naples.” Both Mikkelsen and Zelaya have eaten there and comment that they appreciate the vibrant decor and delicious flavors. Grateful for his colleagues’ kind words, Syed replies, “It was my dream to open an Indian restaurant, to showcase food from my home country. I am a culinary ambassador.”

Syed gets busy chopping and heating up vegetable oil on the induction stove. As she watches Syed do his thing, Zelaya says, “I love



FROM ABOVE: ZELAYA TELLS SYED AND MIKKELSEN ABOUT HOW SHE LIKES TO ENTERTAIN AT HOME, WHICH, OF COURSE, INCLUDES A TEMPTING SELECTION OF RED AND WHITE WINES; SYED’S SPICED GRILLED LAMB CHOPS FINISH SIZZLING ON A PLATE.



SYED'S SAVORY MENU INCLUDES CHICKEN KABOBS, CHICKEN TIKKA MASALA, AND TANDOORI PACIFIC SALMON. GORGEOUS BLOOMS BY THE GARDEN DISTRICT CREATED AN ELEGANT ATMOSPHERE AT THE COLLEGIAL GATHERING.



sharing a meal, wine, and conversation.” Then she adds, “Okay guys, which bottle do you want to open first?”

The men smartly defer to her, and she uncorks Chappellet Grower Collection Chardonnay, Calesa Vineyard, from Petaluma Gap in Sonoma County. “The boldness of the fruit and the bright acidity will go beautifully with the flavors of the samosa and chutney dish,” Zelaya explains. She grabs the bottle, and they all head out to the patio off the kitchen to nibble on appetizers.

The three collectively take a breath and exchange stories about COVID-19, concurring that Naples is a generous community. “We were closed for two weeks,” says Mikkelsen. “Then, we tried attracting more retail business, as our wholesale business—our backbone—disappeared. That was a big adjustment.” He notes that he has been fortunate to pick up hotel clients recently. “We fared better than many, keeping our staff working enough to survive. We hope Naples supports local restaurants and bars at this critical time, or they will be gone.”

Sympathetic to the bakery’s situation, Zelaya shares how her career plans derailed. “Prior to





WE HAVE A GREAT COMMUNITY AND WILL GET BACK ON OUR FEET.... IT'S IN OUR NATURE TO ENJOY EACH OTHER'S COMPANY AND DINE TOGETHER." —Chef Asif Syed



the pandemic, I was supposed to travel to Australia's and New Zealand's wine regions," she says. "We are all in uncharted waters, but our industries will pull through and emerge even better."

Syed commiserates, saying, "We were planning on increasing our retail space, but instead we will chip away a little bit at a time." Yet, he's optimistic. "We have a great community and will get back on our feet. We need to focus on our strengths. It's in our nature to enjoy each other's company and dine together."

On that upbeat note, Syed checks on the entrées in the oven. When they are ready, he calls his peers to the table, and Zelaya opens bottle No.2: Problem Child, Linne Calodo, from Paso Robles. "This is one of my favorite California

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MIKKELSEN'S OLD-FASHIONED CHOCOLATE FONDUE CAKE WITH DIPPING BERRIES; A ROSÉ CHAMPAGNE BALANCES THE SWEET TREATS; WHITE CHOCOLATE PISTACHIO NAPOLEONS; ZELAYA EXPERTLY SABERS THE CHAMPAGNE.



THREE OF NAPLES' HOSPITALITY STARS TOAST TO A SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY AND A BRIGHT FUTURE; MINI-BUNDT CAKES FLAVORED WITH FLORIDA RUM.



producers," she says. "This wine, a Zinfandel, Syrah, and Mourvedre blend, is ethereal and pairs well with bold flavors."

Digging into Syed's spiced lamb chops, the conversation turns to home entertaining. "The *parrillada* is my go-to," Zelaya says. "It's an array of grilled steaks, chicken, sausages, and vegetables, with an arugula salad and a selection of whites and reds." The men joke that they are ready for their invitation. Syed chimes in, "It is part of my culture to showcase hospitality. I truly enjoy hosting friends and family for dinner." Mikkelsen nods, as he feels similarly about honoring his background. "We try to include Danish meal selections, to keep our heritage alive. Desserts are pastries from the shop." Syed says he serves his grandma's rice pudding.

Speaking of dessert, Mikkelsen unveils them: a white chocolate pistachio napoleon, a Florida rum raisin Bundt cake, and a fondue cake with strawberries to dip into the chocolate center. Zelaya digs out a special box from her bags to reveal a sabre, meant to open the desert Champagne. The ceremony adds revelry to the gathering.

"It's delicious," says Mikkelsen after his first sip of the Ruinart Rosé. Zelaya nods, adding, "This is Champagne's first rosé wine. One of my go-tos. The bubbles refresh the palate after each decadent bite." Following more sipping and sampling sweets, the three professionals agree it's invaluable to take time to commune with colleagues. "Moments like this will make us always be on top of our game," Syed concludes. <<