



By Doug White



Low Gap Café: Italian Hideaway on the Buffalo River



Photos by Bret Curry

I remember listening to “Fear of Music” by the Talking Heads in 1979 with a few of my closest college buddies

and thinking, “This is the coolest band on the planet.” My second thought was that I didn’t want anyone else discovering this band, lest they become popular and somehow spoil all the fun for us.

I have a similar preposterous feeling about Low Gap Café, the latest genius output from the culinary mind of Nick Bottini and his wife, Marie. The restaurant, to use the vernacular from my college days, is “wicked cool.” Everything about it – the rustic exterior, the sign (hand-painted by local artist and friend Phyllis Hurd), the bare-wood tables, the art (created by local artist Michael Daugherty), the overall ambience – is cool. Plus, it is next to one of the most beautiful spots in our state, the upper portion of the Buffalo National River and the bucolic Boxley Valley.

But the David Byrne (the charismatic lead singer of the Talking Heads) of the Low Gap Café is Nick Bottini. He is quite simply a rock star in the kitchen.

“My grandfather and mother were full-blood Sicilian,” said Nick. “I learned from

them, but just about all of my recipes, all of my sauces, are my own creation.”

However, the restaurant itself was a collaborative effort that included his wife, family and friends.

On a recent trip to the Ozarks, between Jasper and Ponca, the Let’s Eat team met Nick and his family for “il pranzo,” or as we call it, “lunch.” But this was to be no ordinary lunch. Not while Chef Bottini was in charge.

Nick, whom many readers will remember from his namesake restaurant in Harrison, smiles as he recounts just how he got to Low Gap.

“I studied five years at culinary school in New York,” he said. “Then I went back to California, bounced around at various restaurants and resorts, and eventually ended up in Arkansas after visiting relatives and falling in love with the state.”

When asked about some fond memories from his cooking past, Nick flashed a wry smile and said, “I catered Liberace’s birthday bash in Lake Tahoe, and we fed 1,800 people. It was wild.”

The Low Gap Café seats 36 persons, a far cry from the 1,800-person gig. But the goal is quality, not quantity, and on that Low Gap delivers and then some.

Yes, there are burgers and sandwiches on the menu. On our Wednesday visit, the restaurant special was a barbecue chicken po’ boy with cole slaw and fries (delicious!). But we came for some of Nick’s famous Italian cuisine, and after a few minutes speaking with the friendly staff (including Nick’s wife, Marie, teenage sons, Taylor and Andrew, cook, Adam, and waitress, Julie), a steady procession of homemade delicacies arrived at our table.

First off, chicken Marsala. The thinly sliced chicken breast was pan-seared to perfection, and the mushroom sauce was rich and infused with a nice mixture of herbs. The presentation of this, and all the dishes, reminded us of a four-star New York City restaurant, and we had to remind ourselves we were in Low Gap, not Lower Manhattan.

Second, the pasta bagliore was simply divine with its hearty meat sauce served over yummy pasta. We marveled at the unique sauce and asked Nick for the recipe. “If I tell you, I have to kill you,” he said, with a wink, but we didn’t press him for fear he may be serious.

Our third lunch entree (Nick’s wonderful creations are also available for dinner) was an Italian spin on an old favorite, Atlantic salmon. The Bottini version takes the broiled fresh salmon and places it on a bed of penne pasta with a dill cream sauce. We also had a prime rib entree, again over pasta, which we promptly consumed. Bellissimo!

Low Gap Café has a devoted group of regulars who swear by Nick’s fried catfish and



Staff of the Low Gap Café



fried frog leg dinners, served with fries and hush puppies. Speaking of customers, you might not find a more eclectic group, particularly if you account for their mode of transportation.

"Horseshoe Canyon Ranch Resort is just up the road, and we are only a few miles from the Buffalo River, so on any given day we will have customers who arrive by car, canoe (fresh from floating the Buffalo), horse and on foot (from nearby hiking trails)," said Bottini. The old general store that has been converted to the restaurant even has hitching posts for the equine traveler.

Nick's culinary training means his skills don't stop

with the main courses. Indeed, his "White Chocolate Ravioli with Raspberry Mousse Filling" is an award-winning dessert and a favorite of patrons. However, his wife is who you can thank for the incredible desserts. Marie makes most of the desserts herself. And after sampling the tiramisu, triple chocolate cake ("I dare you to finish it by yourself," said Nick) and coconut cream cake, it is easy to see she has talent in the kitchen as well. All were simply perfect.

After our feast, I sat down with Nick and asked him, "Why Low Gap? Why not a big city?"

He cracked that smile again and said, "I was always told that if you make good food, the people will come. We have been open since February, and so far they keep on coming!" Nick plans to build a deck on the picturesque back porch and has live music on Saturday nights.

Music and food. Two artistic endeavors. Nick Bottini is a true maestro, and you owe it to yourself to make the trek to Low Gap and experience it for yourself. This type of genius deserves to be shared. •



Low Gap Café

In Low Gap located on Arkansas 74 between Jasper and Ponca.
(870) 861-5848
Email: lowgapcafe@gmail.com

Wednesday - Thursday:

11 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Friday - Saturday: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Sunday: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Closed Monday and Tuesday

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