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Rising star in kitchen

Tastings' chef Rich Garcia joins region's best at Governor's Ball

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Rich Garcia will take his place among some of his idols tonight.

The executive chef at Tastings Wine Bar & Bistro in Patriot Place will be preparing his chilled Westport Rivers poached oysters for an intimate gathering of some 300 VIPs at the Governor's Ball alongside some of Boston's "iconic" chefs.

"For me, it's quite an honor," said a humbled 30-year-old Garcia, the product of a military family who was born in Guatemala and spent much his childhood in Quincy and Marshfield. "Most of these are chefs I grew up hoping someday to work for."

Garcia is considered a rising star in culinary circles. He has twice been selected to cook at the prestigious James Beard House and has won a number of awards in the industry. He is among select company now, preparing his dish at tonight's two-hour tasting of the work of some of the top chefs in the Boston area, "A Culinary Affair."

And while he has built his career as a top-rated chef through a lot of hard work -- including a stint in the Marines as the top graduate in his class from the US Marine Food Service School and the U.S. Army Quartermaster School for Culinary Arts and in restaurants from Massachusetts to Miami to the U.S. Virgin Islands -- he says he owes a lot to Tastings owners Bill and Patti Martin.

The Martins were certainly impressed with his resume, but the big thing is that "we were blown away by his food," Patti says. They decided this would be a perfect match.

"I was hesitant at first," Garcia said when the Foxboro couple told him of the idea to open their unique restaurant in Patriot Place and asked him to come on board. "I was used to higher-profile locations and this was not at the top of my radar. I had no idea what Patriot Place was going to be."

This would be, after all, a locally-owned and operated restaurant sitting among larger chains and bigger names in the shopping and entertainment complex.

"I think he was hesitant about bringing this type of cuisine to the suburbs," Martin explained of Tastings' small-plate concept of matching a number of different foods with wines to enhance the taste of both and give the diner a variety of flavors with each visit.

Neither of the Martins had ever operated a restaurant before, which made this match a good one for both sides.

"Starting this without a restaurant background, we looked to Rich for his business background -- he had opened restaurants before," said Martin.

And for Garcia, the ultimate selling point was the promise of almost total control in the kitchen.

"They give me 100 percent freedom to do what I want in the kitchen, and that's very rare for a chef when you don't own the restaurant," he explained. "It was an opportunity for myself and my team to show what we could do."

That they have done.

Garcia and his Tastings team recently won the Star Chefs magazine Boston Rising Stars Sustainability Award for all of New England.

According to StarChefs.com, the award "celebrates a chef who has placed sustainability at the heart of his/her culinary philosophy, who works to embody and manifest that philosophy through every aspect of his/her culinary program, and is recognized as a leader in sustainability in his/her community."



Tastings Wine Bar & Bistro Executive Chef Rich Garcia, right, poses with Chef de Cuisine Matt Maue at Ward's Berry Farm. (Submitted photo)

Garcia not only tries to use local produce and meat whenever it is of the highest quality, but also looks, when he goes outside New England, to deal with companies he knows are environmentally responsible or promote Free Trade products.

"I'm focused on using products that are not depleting the numbers of that species, to make sure my children can enjoy that same product in the future," says Garcia, who has three daughters -- Brianna, Savanna and Summer -- with his wife Nicole.

For tonight's VIP tasting menu, he is focusing on Massachusetts products, starting with sparkling wine from The Westport River Vineyards and using oysters from Island Creek Oysters of Duxbury, "one of my favorites."

His poached oysters are topped with a golden whitefish caviar which, while not from the state, is imported by a Somerville company, Little Pearl, "which is the number one wholesaler of American sustainable caviar," Garcia says. "It's all about sustainability."

His menu at Tastings attempts to combine the best flavors of New England, but his style of "American Cuisine" is to look at the country as a great melting pot and to use a wide variety of different spices and flavors from all over the world.

Garcia was born in Guatemala, the grandson of a Marine who was stationed there at the time. He grew up in Massachusetts along the South Shore, before moving to Miami with his father during his high school years.

He admits that, "growing up, I was not the best kid," so he decided to follow his mom's wishes and enroll in the Marines "to put a little structure in my life."

But at the Marines office, the young man who had worked many jobs in restaurants and dreamed of being a chef, told the recruiter, "I'll only join if I can cook," Garcia recalls. "And they said, 'no problem.'"

Garcia says that most people are surprised at the level of culinary training the armed services offers, and he himself cooked for a number of high-ranking officers during his enlistment as one of the top chefs in the Marines.

But his most important lessons came from the "structure" he sought in his life, which the Marines provided.

"The military shaped who I have become as a chef," he said. "The leadership -- how to handle controlled chaos in a kitchen and work together with a lot of people like me."

Those leadership skills helped him land his first big job after leaving the military in 2002, as one of two corporate chefs for the five Stoneforge Restaurants, including the opening of the one in Foxboro on Route 1 which featured pop singer Michael Bolton. He helped create the menu for the chain, leading some 200 employees.

From there, he went to the U.S. Virgin islands to oversee three restaurants, including one in the Marriott Hotel in St. Thomas, and a market. And it was there he worked with many members of his current kitchen crew at Tastings.

"We're a team, we do it all together," Garcia says.

Martin says that Garcia being able to assemble his team from those he worked with in the Virgin Islands was a big help in starting up the business. "It all starts with the kitchen, and we didn't have to stress about that," she explained.

The fact that this is a small, independent business allows the Martins and Garcia to change their offerings on a regular basis, depending on what fresh ingredients are available on the market. "We don't have to deal with the corporate headquarters," said Martin, whose graphic design background lets her change the menu whenever she wants.

"Bill and Patti had a great vision," says Garcia, who says the flexibility of Tastings makes it unique and nothing like the other larger restaurants and chains in Patriot Place. "They knew something was missing in the area, and they have created it."

Tonight, Garcia will continue to create as he has at Tastings -- only this time he will be among some of his idols in the Boston culinary world.

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