

Bellanotte brings interesting dining ideas to Crescent City

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Going on 35 years, Steve Mann has been serving up cuisine to full houses,

be it his first venture in 1985 (the French restaurant Le Cafe Nicollete in downtown Minneapolis), or his most-recent eatery (Crabsters, on Fisherman's Wharf in the Bay Area, featuring lobster and crab rolls).

In all, Mann has had seven solo or combined restaurant ventures.

He hopes to continue that positive trend with his latest investment, in Crescent City — Bellanotte.

Located in the former Thai House at 105 N St., Mann said he saw a town with unlimited potential, albeit narrow fine-dining options.

"I don't know how it's going to pan out, but as I told everyone when I moved out here, I took my ideas of what I like and put them together with some of the things I've had great success with," he said.

As Bellnotte's menu puts it, Mann's food is Italian-inspired, what with his family Italian roots. He's looking to fuse that with his training in French cooking.

Take his clam chowder. Although not an everyday Italian menu item, the dish features an infused Italian flavor by adding Italian sausage.

Or his stuffed portabella mushroom appetizers. Mann fuses Italian and French influences by stuffing roasted mushrooms with Italian sausage and Asiago cheese, topped with a creamy, fresh tarragon béarnaise sauce.

"That's more French than Italian, but it's putting the two styles together," he said.

Bellnotte's pasta menu features an Italian influence by way of a house red sauce, marinara sauce, Bolognese, and spaghetti and meatballs.

On the other hand, most of his pastas are done al fresco, or made to order, ala the French style, each one started individually.

"Dare I say, we have spectacular pastas," Mann said.

Other menu selections not normally associated with Italian cuisine are his lamb chops. "I don't think they're going to sell well here, but I put them on there as a taste to see what happens," Mann said. "But I did win a national recipe contest with my saffron raspberry red wine sauce. I think it's spectacular."

Then, there are the ribs.

One of the restaurants Mann owned in Minneapolis was Brooklyn Ribs, not because it's Brooklyn-style, but because it was based in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota.

"The Minnesota Rib Festival, which is by invitation only, invited me and my ribs to compete," Mann recalled. "But I couldn't put it together, it was too last-minute. But they thought I had a good chance to win because of my sauce. So, I put them on the menu here.

"Is it going to sell? Probably not. People aren't coming to an Italian restaurant looking for ribs. But if it I build up a following for it, so be it."

He's also looking to build up a pizza menu when the restaurant's pizza oven arrives in two or three weeks.

Mann opened the doors to his restaurant on July 2, but staffing issues forced him to cut back his lunch menu and to offer dinner service only, 4-9 p.m., closed Tuesdays.

Now that new hires are on board, including another chef and kitchen manager, he's reopened for lunch, at 11:30 a.m. on Wednesdays through Fridays, featuring lots of \$12 pastas and soup and salad specials, he said.

Mann's also looking at opening for brunch. He already has a specialty menu all written and plans to be open Saturdays and Sundays, 10 a.m.-2 or 3 p.m., hopefully in the next two or three weeks.

He's planning a grand opening when that pizza oven arrives, with big advertising in The Triplicate, local radio stations and the farmers market.

As for the restaurant itself, right now the walls are a little bare. But he's got plans for those, too. "My uncle is a semi-famous Impressionist, doing an art show in Santa Rosa. When he's done with that show, he's going to bring a bunch of art to put on the walls.

"So, I don't have to spend money on a bunch of junk. I'd rather have some spectacular art that will be available for sale. It'll add a little extra character."

Not that anything's cast in concrete at this point. Mann said he'll let his customers dictate what he'll provide.

He's keeping his options open, such as swapping out dining-room service for counter service, with lower prices, where diners get a number and bring it out themselves to a table, like they have at airports.

"In some ways, this could end up being like an Olive Garden. If that's what people want, we'll give them what they want.

"That doesn't mean I don't have to bring the quality to make me feel good. I serve burgers here, but I think they're the best. Nobody else has a burger that comes close. You can't find a burger in this town where the bun doesn't fall apart.

"It's really hard to find quality food out here. We bring it."