

DONE TO PERFECTION

Halifax's restaurant power couple have just finished constructing the ideal environment for a glass of wine, great food, a little music and a lot of conversation—and they're already thinking ahead to when they'll tear it down to start all over again.

Story by Stephen Kimber; Photos by Mike Tompkins

STEPHANIE BERTOSSI comes up with her best ideas in bars—most often in bars she owns. “I love sitting in a bar,” she says, “watching the people, looking around, thinking.”

Let's go back to an early evening in the summer of 2010. Bertossi was sitting at the bar in Bish World Cuisine, the “casual yet elegant” Halifax fusion restaurant she and her chef husband, Maurizio, had launched nine years before. In 2004, *Flare* Magazine had pronounced Bish—located in Bishop's Landing, one of Halifax's trendiest waterfront addresses—New Yorkesque “hip,” and gushed that it “lures you with its seafood, chic interiors... and superb service.”

Bish was still doing all of that—and still very successfully—on that evening in 2010 when Bertossi and a girlfriend were sipping a glass of wine at the bar and basking in the restaurant's ambience. Looking around, the girlfriend declared what the Bertossis had wrought with Bish was “perfect, just perfect.”

That was the moment Stephanie Bertossi knew it was time to rip it up and start over again.

A few months later, Bish was history, replaced by The Bicycle Thief, a still trendy but much more relaxed and lively bar-restaurant serving “North American food with an Italian soul.”

Eighteen months ago, Bertossi had yet another bar-inspired light-bulb moment. She was sitting, alone this time, in the bar at il Mercato, the popular, no-reservations, brown-paper-instead-of-linen-table-coverings Italian trattoria she and Maurizio had been operating on nearby Spring Garden Road for 19 years. The lunch hour rush had subsided, and Bertossi was relaxing with a glass of wine, watching, thinking.

Il Mercato's lease would soon be up for renewal. Should they renew for another 10 years? Should they move? Or should she and Maurizio perhaps invest their considerable energies in creating that smart boutique hotel Stephanie had been fantasizing about—“I know what each room looks like”—for years. No, not that... Not yet anyway. Maybe it was time to move... Bertossi swirled a few potential restaurant sites around in the bottom of her glass. But Spring Garden Road, downtown Halifax's traditional carriage-trade shopping/dining heart, seemed in the process of reinventing itself after more than a decade of decline. A few blocks to the east, a stunning new public library was rising from a parking lot. Mills Brothers, the elegant women's clothing store, was about to relocate into renovated digs closer to her restaurant; Foreign Affair, the high-fashion ladies' boutique, was opening a second level; A Touch of Gold Fine Jewellery had announced expansion plans... And there were new nearby condo projects, opening and in the works, to breath new life into the old street. They should stay, Bertossi decided finally, be part of the renaissance.

(L-R): Lawry Deneau, chef; Stephanie Bertossi, owner; and Maurizio Bertossi, owner/executive chef of recently launched Italian restaurant, La Frasca Cibi & Vini, on Spring Garden Road, Halifax.



(Top to bottom): Servers Michelle Johnson and Kenzie Gunn; La Frasca's welcoming décor is anchored by a 900 sq. ft. Italian-themed collage; one of Stephanie Bertossi's custom-made light fixtures, proof of her exquisite attention to detail.

But not with the same-old, same-old. "Il Mercato was a great restaurant, a great brand, but it was time to change," Bertossi says today. "For me, we needed something vibrant, something new on the street, something now."

And that was that. The end of Il Mercato. The beginning of...

YOU CAN TRACE the beginnings of what has become the Bertossi restaurant empire—four different, all commercially successful, all critically acclaimed Halifax area dining establishments employing more than 250—to the summer of 1976 when 16-year-old Stephanie Eaton set out from her Dartmouth hometown to visit her older sister in Calgary. Entranced by the adventure of it all, Stephanie stayed on for her final year of high school, landed a part-time job serving tables at Verona's Pizzeria and discovered her passion for the restaurant business.

Four years later, while tending bar at a Calgary restaurant, she fused that passion with one for the chef, Maurizio Bertossi, equally ambitious but born to the business, the son of a five-star Venice chef. Bertossi had arrived in western Canada after a 1976 earthquake devastated his Friuli region of northern Italy, and worked his way from construction camps to upscale Calgary restaurants.

The two soon became a romantic couple, as well as wannabe business partners. Their dream: open their own restaurant.

That opportunity came three years later back in Nova Scotia where Stephanie's father hooked them up with a friend who happened to have some unused storage space above the Pearl Café in Dartmouth. Squeezing eight tables into the cramped quarters, using home appliances, working 18-hour days, scheduling two

meal sittings a night to make ends meet and even enlisting the aid of a girlfriend to help out on busy Friday and Saturday nights, La Perla, Halifax's first northern Italian restaurant, became an instant success.

In 1987, the Bertossis sold their interest in the restaurant and moved to Italy. They intended to open their own restaurant in Maurizio's hometown. But "the bureaucracy did us in." So they returned to Halifax instead and opened da Maurizio's in the Halifax Brewery Market in December 1988. They'd considered the space before they left for Italy, "but the time wasn't right." Now it was. Because it had formerly housed a restaurant, there was "plenty of expensive stuff still there." To save money, the Bertossis did most of the renovating and repainting themselves—learning to do by doing—but they also began working with high-end local contractors, tradesmen and specialty suppliers, establishing relationships that continue to this day.

Despite her own penchant for change—sometimes for the sake of change—in her restaurants, and what she acknowledges is the "erratic nature" of the restaurant business, Bertossi says she appreciates "the sameness of people I work with"—from contractors to restaurant staff.

By the time the Bertossis sold da Maurizio's in 2007 (to the chef-manager couple who'd been running it for them for years), their empire had grown to include two Il Mercatos (the one on Spring Garden, as well as a second location in Bedford's Sunnyside Mall), Bish—soon-to-become The Bicycle Thief, and Pizzeria a Mano, a gourmet pizza restaurant located in another part of the Bishop's Landing development, which they opened just as they sold da Maurizio.

The secrets to their success: The Bertossis are hands-on, both in their business dealings and their restaurants. Everything, from pastas, to soups, to bread, to ice cream, is made *a mano*. "We're dinosaurs in a franchise world of heat and serve," she says. "We still make our own everything." They also fret the smallest details: from ingredients, to food preparation, to servers, to cleaning, even to the music playing in the background. "I wouldn't have chosen this playlist," Bertossi says as we talk over lunch in The Bicycle Thief. Later, she sees some crumbs on the floor under a nearby table. She makes a mental note to follow up. "The floor in the men's bathroom," she tells me pointedly, "should be clean enough to eat off."

Although, theoretically, Maurizio “is food, I’m business,” they work as a team. “We’re always in our businesses, and each of us can do everything,” she says. “It’s self-preservation. We don’t have investors. Everything is on the line every day.”

In a business where failure is the norm, the Bertossis have leapfrogged from success to success, partly because of that obsessiveness and partly because they’re not afraid to reinvent themselves—regularly.

Which brings us back to that afternoon in the bar at il Mercato. “I knew it was time,” Bertossi says simply.

DESPITE THAT, and despite the reality she already knew what she wanted to do with the space, Bertossi “waffled, for the first time ever. I’m not sure why.”

It may have been that the restaurant she envisioned—a casual, modern-day version of a “frasca,” a farmhouse tradition in Maurizio’s Italian home province where the owner would put a tree branch by the road as a sign of welcome, and friends would stop by for a glass of wine, some great food, a little music and a lot of conversation—required a high volume of

business to succeed. Bertossi knew high volume. “One day in August last year,” she recalls, “we had a 1,000 people through The Bicycle Thief. It was ugly.”

She and Maurizio went to Italy in September 2012 to unwind—and think. “I thought about it some more, but I just couldn’t pull the plug.”

Back in Halifax, Bertossi sat down with Dawn MacLachlan of Halifax-based MAC Interior Designs. They’d worked together on Bertossi restaurant renos for 19 years. “Our first project was the original il Mercato Trattoria (on the other side of Spring Garden Road),” Bertossi recalls. They blue-skyed some ideas, MacLachlan did some drawings. Bertossi did some more mulling.

She contacted Doug Doucet, the president of RCS Retail Construction Specialists which has been handling the contracting side of the Bertossis’ renovation projects for “so long I can’t remember exactly how long, or what our first project was.”

“We’re going to have something for you,” she told Doucet.

“When?”

“Uh, I’ll let you know.”

Finally she called him back. “It’s a go,” she said.



The Bertossis’ latest creation is designed to live up to its name. A “frasca” is an Italian farmhouse tradition where friends would be informally invited to stop by—for wine, food, music and conversation.

ON THE NIGHT of Saturday, April 13, 2013, da Maurizio's served its last meal. Just five weeks later, on May 2 (if all went according to Bertossi's tight timeline) La Frasca Cibi & Vini would open in its place.

The morning after closing da Maurizio, the Bertossis and their staff returned to wipe out the traces of what had been: dismantling the decor, dispatching useful utensils to the company's other restaurants, packing furniture for storage, emptying trash.

The morning after that, the contractors arrived to begin jackhammering out the floor. This was to be no minor renovation. "We demolished everything," Bertossi says proudly.

Inside the gutted space, it quickly became tradesmen's old home week. There was "Sparky," Mike Yue of Twin City Electric, the electrician; Tony (Di Quinzio) the tile man; Albert (Gannon), the painter-owner of Gannon Painting; and, of course, Bill Smith, the chief painter and wallpaperer.

"I like to work with the same people over and over," Bertossi says. "They get me."

The new restaurant would have two new kitchens, new wiring, new plumbing, new tiles, a new bar, even a new garbage

room—not to forget, of course, an entirely new look and feel.

Two weeks before da Maurizio had shuttered, Bertossi spent Easter weekend in Toronto test-sitting chairs, trying out china, considering lighting. "I'm the lighting queen," she jokes. "Everything," she adds, "is custom made. I get all the finishes I want."

Not to forget all the personally chosen art, knickknacks and tsotchkes that accent and add personal meaning to every one of their restaurants. "My dad's house was full of stuff," she says, pointing out that the books gracing shelves at The Bicycle Thief came from his library.

She and a few of the staff—not to forget Bill the Wallpaperer—filled up one entire Saturday recently creating the 900-square-foot collage wall that will dominate La Frasca. It features an eclectic-but-just-so collection of Italian-themed travel and movie posters, random wine labels and blown-up photographs. Here's one of a smiling Maurizio, holding up an eat-or-die T-shirt, she explains as we snake past half a half-dozen workers putting finishing touches on this or that. "And this is the Bertossi farm... This one up here is of our friend Chano and his bar in Italy..."

"No one will know," I muse. "All this detail and no one will know enough to appreciate it."

"I'll know," says Bertossi. "I'll know."

IT IS MAY 28, the belated morning after the opening night before. They'd had to postpone their planned start-date by a week, not because the restaurant wasn't ready but because they had to wait for the fire marshall to bless the new digs.

Not that they were sitting around. "We were prepping right until the minute before the doors opened," Bertossi admits. Despite a few inevitable glitches (the handheld credit card terminals failed in the middle of their first busy lunch hour so "we had to pull out the old-school credit card imprinters with carbon receipts"), Bertossi describes it as "the smoothest opening night we've ever had. Must be all the practise," she jokes.

Although "the tweaking will never end... I'm sure we'll continue to find ways to make La Frasca better and better," Bertossi knows there will come a time, perhaps sooner rather than later, when she will sit in the bar again, sip a little wine, watch the people and wait for the next inspiration. TABLET