

Gourmet Finger Foods



by Lynn Ogryzlo

photography by Nick Perry

Turchi's latest creation is a game of edible chess. He's designed hors d'oeuvres in the likeness of the queen, king, pawns and rooks. The checkered board is made from ice to keep the foods cool during an elaborate and delectable chess match. The better you are at this game, the more of Turchi's creations you get to eat. That's enough to make any gourmand take up the game of chess.



It all looks so easy when you see them on a platter, a tempting dish of finger foods. A little of this and a little of that all put together with a sauce and a garnish, and just like that, a beautiful serving of gourmet nibbles is created.

When you try to duplicate it at home, you discover each element in the cozy little presentation is like an entirely separate dish. And complicated dishes at that... don't you sometimes wish you had "people" to do the work for you?

Enter Oscar Turchi. The 40-year-old Italian from Torino, Italy has spent most of his life in the kitchen striving to please the palates of his patrons with his and his nation's culinary culture.

Turchi speaks English through a sexy Italian accent. He's an extremely intelligent, energetic

and handsome man. He's also a successful man, with his St. Catharines company, Savoia Hors d'Oeuvres Inc.

In just three years, the name Savoia has become synonymous with gourmet finger foods in major hotels, restaurants and wineries throughout Niagara.

It's a delicious life for Turchi, dedicating himself to the creation of Niagara's gourmet hors d'oeuvres. Each one of his little tidbits represents Turchi's culinary passion and style. What you don't see serving Savoia hors d'oeuvres are the numerous steps in the kitchen needed to achieve the simplest tidbit, or the complicated techniques involved. As a customer, your job is to simply place them on a platter—it requires no tricky timing or elaborate garnishing.

His signature canapé is an exquisite combination of sweet crab, fresh chive and an earthy red pepper puree. It is an original Turchi. He moulds thumb-sized savoury sweet crab cakes and tops them with a dollop of red pepper aioli before spearing the centre with a chive stalks.

What better to complete the picture than sparkling wine with thousands of tiny bubbles to play on the palate? Any of the seafood hors d'oeuvres, such as the Seared Scallop with Braised Leeks and Mango Chutney on Sesame Toast, with its clean and sweet flavours, will make any bubbly fresh and crisp.

Turchi was already one of northern Italy's top chefs when he was offered a term position as executive chef at Ristorante Giardino at the Gate House Hotel in Niagara-on-the-Lake. It was here in Canada on his second term he met his future wife, Vicki. From Niagara-on-the-Lake, he took prestigious jobs in Toronto such as opening Aqua with then owner and Toronto restaurant mogul Franco Provedello. He opened Tula and worked at Borgo Antico and Oro, all the while looking for an opportunity to move to Niagara to settle his young family.

To Turchi, the opportunity in Niagara was obvious. While in Toronto, Oscar used the services of independent hors d'oeuvres companies and saw there was no such service in Niagara. So in September 2002 he opened Savoia.

Turchi does a lot of customized work, he can create themed hors d'oeuvres such as Hawaiian, Caribbean, Mexican and of course, Italian. He also does private catering for corporations or home parties. Turchi will even go into your house and cook an entire meal in your kitchen for you and your privileged guests. How decadent.

When he talks about his company, it's easy to see Turchi is not afraid of work. Each and every piece of finger food Turchi prepares is done mere hours before delivery. Nothing is done days in advance. "It's absolutely impossible to do anything ahead," he continues in his Italian accent. "You need it that day, that's when I make it."

Turchi's work is also very niche, striving to

please his demanding customers who always need something unique and different from him. He matches the style of hors d'oeuvres to the style of the restaurant menu or the theme of the party. Few hors d'oeuvres are duplicated.

His favourite job? When someone asks for originality, and he is inspired to create something new from what's in the fridge, cupboards or at the market. "I like to create new things all the time.

"I test my customers. When they like it, I add it to my menu... like the crab cakes."

Turchi is also adaptable and recommends as a prelude to dinner, hors d'oeuvres should have some elegance of their own. Those designed to create a celebratory theme skew to the luxury end of the scale, while a more casual mood demands simpler fare.

Regardless of the theme, these tiny edibles may look simple enough to eat, but they're pretty complex on the palate. Tiny triangles of savoury grilled polenta are topped with a spoonful of vegetable ratatouille— savoury eggplant, refreshing tomatoes and tangy capers— and sprigs of fresh basil. The result is a stunning study in textural contrasts and flavour layering typical of Turchi's work.

Likewise, the combination of slightly meaty beef carpaccio, goat cheese and balsamic reduction is magical and does great things with most red wines. A cabernet simply melts its flavours so well into the savour, it's quickly becoming a top choice for red wines. That's why so many wineries love Turchi.

"The wineries don't have a kitchen or staff to create the small foods they want at each location so my appetizers are perfect for them," he said.

For the man who has it all, Turchi says he would have done this much earlier if he knew it would be so successful. Not only is he a Niagara success, but more important to Turchi, he is living where he wants to be with his wife Vicki and two young sons, Dario and Luca.

Even though he has set down roots in Niagara, Turchi's influence in the culinary world still extends across the Atlantic. He was recently in Torino engaged in meetings over the position of head chef for the promotion of the Torino Olympic Games in 2006; big shoes that are easily filled by this creative and brilliant man. ■

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