

Aly's on Main

Michael Mazaferri, owner of Aly's at 911 Main St., prefers "cook" to "chef."

No shrinking violet, Mazaferri compares himself to Mansanto the way Uber compares itself to the taxi industry. "I want to encourage people to ask questions about their food, to have higher expectations," Mazaferri said.

His mission: make organic, sustainable and GMO-free food the norm, not the exception.

"I had a customer tell me that I am politicizing food," he recalled, "but I told him food was politicized a long time ago. I'm just picking a side."

Choosing his side of the food divide was the natural development of his background. As a freshman studying Aeronautical Engineering at UC Berkeley, he had the opportunity to work for famed farm-to-table chef Alice Waters at Chez Panisse.

Having graduated from Berkeley with a masters degree in Aeronautical Engineering, Mazaferri moved to Italy and attended culinary school in Bologna in the 1990s "just to see what it was I didn't know."

Mazaferri's world, and his perspective on food, shifted off axis when his Italian fiancé lost her battle to pancreatic cancer.

"I found myself wandering Europe, lost in a haze. It was when I came back to the states that I started healing through food." He adopted what was for him a new approach to cooking.

"Before, it was about ego, 'Look at the beautiful food that I make.' Then it became about what food is, excitement, nourishment. I started using the best ingredients, not just the most expensive, and developing the philosophy that we employ here today."



Michael Mazaferri

One of Redwood City's only green-certified restaurants, Aly's focuses on a gentle food cycle.

Mazaferri explains.

"There is a cycle of life to food, from the soil, to what the animals are fed, to how they are treated, to the farmers and ranchers, down the chain to our hands and our customer's mouths.

"We want to be a part of a cycle that benefits everyone."

Aly's is a family effort. Mazaferri quietly opened in 2013 with his wife, Alison, the restaurant's namesake.

Every ingredient, down to the flour used to create the handmade pasta and the olive oil drizzled on the salads is organic and GMO-free.

The vegetables, like the caramelized brussels sprouts or the beet salad, which can only be described as brilliant, are sourced from local farms. The grass-fed, often heritage breed meats, are from local

ranches. The only ingredient not locally sourced is the Tuscan olive oil.

It might seem that such a high bar would go with high prices, but Mazaferri said that would defeat Aly's purpose.

"It's important to Alison and I that we don't serve anything we wouldn't eat ourselves, and that we don't charge anything we wouldn't pay. This isn't about the dollars and cents, it's about the craft and integrity."

The craft and integrity can be tasted from the first bite of prosciutto-wrapped dates to the last spoonful of silky pot de crème. The classics are elevated, such as lamb chops with pistachio pesto, and haute creations like the roasted bone marrow or beef cheek served on pillowy gnocchi, each dish a highlight.

Not least, there is the burger, a dish of exacting preparation. The meat is butchered and ground in-house, which makes for a hearty patty that is so light and delicate that any other burger will be doomed to hockey puck status. Add the melted 36-month aged cheddar cheese and hand-cut fries, and it's no one wonder Aly's was featured on the Bay Area show, *Check Please!* The exposure, however, means reservations are highly recommended for peak dining hours, or plan to sit at the bar.

Though the aeronautical engineer turned chef turned culinary philosopher and activist has carved a niche in Redwood City's gastronominc scene, he is not one to settle. He pauses while sharpening a kitchen blade on a whetstone.

"I want to do something that is even more gentle. I think my next career will be cheesemaking."



Read more of Emily Mangini's food adventures at www.mytartufo.com, or Twitter @mytartufo