

Alfonso Contrisciani at his farm near Thornville



the farmer's chef

Alfonso Contrisciani wears many hats—chef, farmer and educator among them—but his passion for great cooking and dedication to local food remain defining elements in the long and impressive career of the chef and owner of Plate.

STORY BY IVY LAMB • PHOTOS BY WILL SHILLING

He walks the length of the greenhouse, pointing out different vegetables—radishes, tomatoes, lettuces—and animatedly describes his growing process. “This is all completely natural,” he says. “No chemicals or pesticides have touched any of these plants.” He gestures to the stinking vat of water and chicken excrement he uses to fertilize his tomatoes, casually stirring the brew as he explains the fermenting process.

This is Alfonso Contrisciani, a man equally at home on the farm and in the kitchen. Today he looks more like farmer than chef in blue jeans, a plaid shirt and dirty work boots. He’s a big man, and his Stetson hat, which he wears pretty much everywhere, makes him seem even bigger. He might not be wearing a pristine white jacket and toque, but don’t let his down-to-earth appearance fool you—Contrisciani knows his way around a professional kitchen. He is a certified master chef with more than 30 years of industry experience.

You might know him as the co-owner and head chef at Plate, a farm-to-table restaurant in New Albany that serves American fare with an Italian twist. He’s also the dean of hospitality at Hocking College in Nelsonville, a passionate advocate for local and sustainable food and a farmer. He’s always got a new project in the works, and during our conversation he jumps from discussing his plans for his farm to upcoming fundraising events to new initiatives designed to enhance Hocking’s culinary program. “He’s full of energy,” says his wife, Jen. “Sometimes he starts at 6 a.m. and goes until 1 a.m. to prep for events. He lives to cook.”

Contrisciani’s love of cooking combined with his boundless energy helps explain his wide-ranging resume. He got his start in the food industry washing dishes at a truck shop near his home in Clifton Heights, Pennsylvania. After earning his culinary degree from Johnson and Wales University, he went on to open

restaurants, direct food service in casinos, captain the culinary equivalent of the U.S. Olympic team and teach at his alma mater. “I always liked challenges,” he says, and his career has largely been built on constantly seeking the next one.

Perhaps one of his greatest challenges was taking the certified master chef (CMC) examination. In 1996, Contrisciani had more than 15 years of experience under his belt and was teaching at Johnson and Wales when he decided to attempt the exam. Administered by the American Culinary Federation, the CMC test is like an episode of Bravo’s “Top Chef” on steroids: a multi-day, high-pressure event performed in front of a panel of judges that covers every aspect of cuisine from nutrition to sanitation to classical-cooking techniques. There are only 67 master chefs in the nation, and the pass rate is only about 17 percent.

“It was the worst 10 days of my life,” he says. “They call us the Navy SEALs of the kitchen because it’s so excruciating.” He didn’t expect to pass—he says he wanted to benchmark his strengths and weaknesses as a chef—yet he earned the CMC title on the first try.

Not one to rest on his laurels, he went back to his home state to open his first fine-dining restaurant in Philadelphia’s Rittenhouse Square. For a few years he thrived, enjoying the chance to showcase his own cuisine, but in 1999 he was bored and restless once again. He worked casinos in Atlantic City and Las Vegas and then opened a few more restaurants, which ranged from Caribbean to South African cuisine. In 2007, Contrisciani decided to tackle cooking on a scale he’d never attempted before. As the vice president of culinary development for Centerplate, a company that provides catering services to sports stadiums and convention centers around the nation, Contrisciani found himself in charge of catering events hosting upwards of 60,000 people.



He even catered both of President Obama's inaugural balls, which presented unique challenges of their own. "It's stressful feeding 48,000 people," he says. "But the hardest thing is when the Secret Service decides to do a sweep right before a party." The kitchen would be filled with frenetic energy as chefs raced to prepare and plate enough food for thousands of hungry partygoers, when suddenly the Secret Service would arrive unannounced and give everyone five minutes to turn off the ovens and store raw food in the refrigerator. The entire staff was marched downstairs to the front lobby while the Secret Service searched the kitchen.

In 2009, thanks in part to the financial crisis, the company was bought out, and the entire corporate office, including Contrisciani, was laid off. While he was looking for the next opportunity, another chef persuaded him to take an open position at the New Albany Country Club. After living in glamorous locales such as Las Vegas and Laguna Beach, Contrisciani hesitated to move to Ohio, but once he arrived, he fell in love with the area's verdant farmland and thriving agriculture,

but Contrisciani still manages to keep things light. "Sometimes he reminds me a little of Peter Griffin from 'Family Guy,'" says student affairs coordinator Jennifer Yanity, laughing. "He's always positive and energetic, and he's great with the students. Even though he's a master chef, he treats them like peers."

Contrisciani has also incorporated local food into the program at Hocking College. He implemented a course that teaches students how to source, clean and prep local produce, some of which is then frozen for the next semester. His passion for educating people about sourcing food locally extends beyond the college as well. He's presented workshops on bridging the gap between chef and farmer, plans the menu every August for Bounty on the Bricks—the annual farm-to-table dinner in downtown Athens that raises money for local food banks—and is contributing to the Ohio Ecological Farm and Food Association's annual fundraising dinner on Sept. 7 at Jorgensen Farms.

His perspective on local and sustainable food has been informed by his own experience as a farmer. In his early 20s,

the surface, he's serious about the quality of his food. "These days everybody says that they [use local products], but there are no rules in terms of what defines local or what percentage of local products you use," Gulis says. "We make an effort to work with local farmers as much as possible."

When he was first farming in the '80s, Contrisciani was shocked by how much money went to food brokers and retailers rather than the farmers who actually grew the product. He prefers to cut out the middle man so more profit goes to the farmers, but also because working directly with growers means higher-quality ingredients. Most vegetables have a small window of peak quality, so Contrisciani works one-on-one with farmers to time picking and delivery perfectly. The result is a better dining experience in terms of flavor, texture and aroma. "Food," he says, "is all about timing."

All these threads—the cooking, the teaching and the farming—will be woven together in Contrisciani's first cookbook, set to be published in fall 2015. Tentatively titled "From My Plate to Your Plate," the book will

"He lives to cook."

—JEN CONTRISCIANI

which reminded him of the countryside near his family home in Pennsylvania.

While he was falling in love with Ohio, he was recognizing he had a much more personal challenge to face: alcoholism. "Working 12 to 14 hours a day [in the food industry], it's easy to get sucked into going out drinking and using recreational drugs," he says. He was overweight and increasingly unhappy, so he checked himself into rehab for 28 days. "It was good because it gave me a chance to come back to my roots: who I am, where I came from, what I want to do."

That newfound clarity helped him decide he wanted to get back into education, and when he was offered the dean of hospitality position at Hocking College in 2012, he jumped at it. Giving back to his students has become a vital part of his recovery. "What keeps me sober is the fact that I can save other kids from going down the same path that I fell into," he says. "I also want to keep the cycle going and teach kids everything I learned from the various master chefs I've worked with over the years."

Teaching is a serious undertaking for him,

Contrisciani briefly owned a farm just outside Atlantic City. He wryly recalls one old man in particular who would stop at his produce stand on the state highway. "He kept telling me, 'You know, Al, you need to go into organics; it's going to be big one of these days.'" Back then in the 1980s, organics were pretty far from the mainstream, and Contrisciani thought he was crazy. "I wish I'd gone full-scale organic back then," he says.

Today, he's rekindled his love of the land and owns a 70-acre farm in Thornville where he grows chemical- and pesticide-free produce and plans to start raising hogs and cattle. But he's quick to identify himself as a hobby farmer because, unlike the full-time farmers with whom he works, the majority of his income isn't tied to the vagaries of weather, blights and changing markets.

Even if he doesn't consider himself a "farmer farmer," that deep sense of respect for small farms and his intimate knowledge of how food is grown make him an unordinary chef. Phil Gulis, executive chef at Plate, notes while the affable, lighthearted Contrisciani might not be as intense as other chefs on

feature Contrisciani's creations and treasured family recipes passed down from his Irish and Italian relatives, bringing his culinary journey full circle. He still recalls fond childhood memories of watching his Italian grandmother cook, often helping to spoon tomato paste into a pot of sauteed onions and garlic or taking mouthfuls of fresh ricotta cheese while she made lasagna.

His Irish grandmother, meanwhile, introduced him to beef liver, leg of lamb and potatoes cooked every way imaginable. Contrisciani's approach to food—finding the best ingredients and preparing them simply so the natural flavors shine through—started in his family's kitchen. The recipes will also be paired with information on how home cooks can engage in the farm-to-table movement.

While his plate is always full, Contrisciani doesn't show any signs of slowing down. "When I hit 50, I thought, oh my God," he says. "But then I thought, you know what, I've got a lot more stuff I want to get done before I check out of this hotel. Now, I'm doing a million things, and people look at me like I'm crazy, but I'm having fun."



Mixed grill at Contrisciani's farm