

## RESTAURANT REVIEW

### The Dining Dish

The spring scoop on new restaurant openings and what to look out for this summer

by [Frank Gabriel](#)

Downbeach gastronomic musical chairs: One of the area's most dynamic dining destinations has seen a number of changes over the course of this past off-season.

Most notable among these was the closing of **Café Lobianco**, after four seasons of critical praise and customer popularity. Owners Nick and Stephanie Lobianco, expecting a child and making a lengthy commute to the Shore, opted to leave their former location near the corner of Jerome and Ventnor avenues temporarily dark.

That however, didn't last long, as they were supplanted by another talented husband and wife team, Chef John and Vicki Merlino, of nearby **Manna**.

Coincidence or not, Manna had also replaced Lobianco last year at the 7309 Ventnor Ave. spot, clearly a fertile, fortuitous spot for nascent restaurateurs.

These days the most exciting news in Downbeach is Manna's precocious stand-in, **Gertrude's**. Operated by — you guessed it — yet another culinary coupling, Neil and Karen Elsohn, formerly of Cape May's spectacular **Waters' Edge**, Gertrude's is named in honor of the chef's mother.

The Elsohns, at the vanguard of Cape's gastronomic reign during the last two decades, are an inspirational, phoenix-like story, having risen again from personal tragedy and business struggles as well.

A recent meal here on opening weekend was superb from start to finish, with items like little neck clams in a soulful chorizo-infused broth and wide, wavy pappardelle noodles bathed in a rich, comforting duck and veal ragu.

Remember you heard it here: Gertrude's will be the hot BYOB this summer.

At the south end of Downbeach, another premier restaurant, Margate seafood emporium **Dune**, now has a new chef, Marino Rodriguez. Formerly the sous chef for several seasons under the previous executive chef, Rodriguez faithfully executes the clean, creative fare, which has led to universal praise for Dune during its initial half decade.

Several other notable restaurants will be joining the casino dining scene this summer, including **Izakaya** at the Borgata. Meaning “pub” in Japanese, Izakaya will be the first venture from executive chef Michael Schulson, most recently responsible for opening N.Y.C.’s outpost of Buddakan. Schulson’s concept is to offer the simple, hearty fare typically found at casual restaurants throughout that island nation, in “a unique setting that is upscale, but not uptight.”

The chef, through his own personal experience living recently in Japan, hopes to pay homage to the country’s rich culinary heritage but also integrate more modern elements of the culture’s pub cuisine.

Or, in the words of Borgata executive V.P. of food and beverage Nicolas Kurban, “Izakaya will offer guests a seamless blend of dining and nightlife in a singular destination.”

Next in our triad of casino additions is **Il Mulino**, at the Trump Taj Mahal. Originally opened by brothers Gino and Fernando Masci in New York’s Greenwich Village in 1981, Il Mulino has consistently been considered one of the finest purveyors of Italian cuisine in the metropolitan region. Two separate dining concepts will be encompassed here: Il Mulino New York, a traditional fine dining experience and Trattoria Il Mulino, offering pizzas and lighter fare in a more casual atmosphere.

Atlantic City’s version of the Abruzzi-oriented southern Italian restaurant will actually be the 10th Il Mulino operation, joining high-status locales like Tokyo, Las Vegas, Chicago and Washington D.C.

If the ocean’s bounty is your dining preference, our final major casino addition, fabled seafood house **McCormick and Schmick’s** should be on your short list once open in early summer.

Founded 35 years ago in Portland, Ore., McCormick and Schmick’s presently has expanded to include more than 50 restaurants, with Harrah’s A.C. having the distinction of being the first within a casino hotel.

Offshore in Linwood, **Treo** restaurant has a new chef, Thomas Masarro. A veteran of the casino industry, the 39-year-old Masarro brings a wealth of experience to the bright, glass-walled environs of Treo.

When asked about revised menu items recently, Masarro enthused about a cilantro/ginger salmon sided by cous cous plated with beurre blanc sauce and pan-seared grouper crusted with tri-color tortilla chips served with fruit salsa.

Meanwhile, in neighbor Somers Point, **Mac's** has re-opened under new ownership and the former Tucker's has re-opened as **Fanucci's on the Bay**.

Traversing a bit to the east, the Camden County-based Lamberti family's latest venture, **The Shore Club**, opened weeks ago at a site on the Longport Causeway (actually in Egg Harbor Township, go figure) that has housed numerous restaurants over the last decade. After a complete renovation, this incarnation appears built to last, with a gorgeous interior design that compliments the sweeping, panoramic bay and ocean views.

One island south, Ocean City's longtime favorite **4th Street Café** has moved their funky, esoteric coffeehouse fare to 104 Asbury Avenue. **Positively Fourth Street** (400 Atlantic Ave.) a similar business, whose name is derived from the title of a Bob Dylan song, replaces them at their original home.

Finally, a few miles further down the coast, tiny gourmet treasure **Sea Salt** of Stone Harbor (8307 Third Ave.) will be joined by a new sibling, **Quahog's Seafood Shack**, at 206 97th Street.

Owned and operated by our personal favorite chef, Argentinean wunderkind Lucas Manteca and his wife Dina, Quahog's represents a departure from the wide-eyed, molecular gastronomy Manteca and crew often pursue in their original environs.

Quahog's — after a Rhode Island shore town — will serve “contemporary seafood shack” fare while adhering to Manteca's promise to utilize only sustainable, seasonal products.