



Cinque Terre's Ostriche—
Winter Point oysters, roasted with
pepperoncini butter and herb crumbs



PHOTO BY KEVIN BRUSIE

**Chef Lee Skawinski
at Cinque Terre**

At **Cinque Terre**, in Portland, Maine, Chef Lee Skawinski honors the Italian tradition of using what is available in the garden that day, so that many of his signature dishes, such as the Cozze, or Maine Mussels, look quite different from season to season. Chef Skawinski is a member of the Maine Organic Farmers and Growers Association (MOFGA), and in addition to heading the kitchen at Cinque

Terre and its sister restaurant, Vignola, he helps tend a forty-acre spread of farm land and a 3,000-square-foot greenhouse. The busy chef goes to the fields each morning during the growing season and arrives at the restaurant with baskets full of homegrown vegetables. "We grow all our own potatoes, and eight or nine varieties of squash, heirloom Italian tomatoes, zucchini, fennel." And thanks to the greenhouse and to an ambitious scheduling of canning, pickling, and preserving, many of the (literal) fruits of Chef Skawinski's labor will be featured throughout the winter.

For the aforementioned Cozze, the basic preparation of steaming the sweet mollusks in a flavorful mixture of aromatics doesn't change much, but the seasonal ingredients Chef Skawinski uses vary greatly throughout the year. A typical wintertime treatment includes roasted garlic, lemon and vermouth, and is finished with a generous dollop of sun dried tomato butter, prepared from Skawinski's house-dried tomatoes, made from Laughing Stock Farm tomatoes and preserved in olive oil. On the side is a cluster of savory chickpea fritters seasoned with fennel pollen, lemon zest and chili flakes.

Skawinski almost always features some version of Ostriche, or oysters, on his winter menu, and one of the chef's favorite ways to prepare them is to lightly roast them on the half shell until they are just warmed through. A recent incarnation involved a topping of pepperoncini butter and herbed crumbs. A quick turn under the broiler creates a sizzling, aromatic topping, while the briny oysters below receive just enough heat to become plumped and bursting with flavor.

A risotto dish is often featured on the menu, and in winter it likely involves a hearty preparation of braised Maine lamb or veal. Chef Skawinski starts his risotto the classic way with gently sweated onions and garlic, then proceeds to add shavings of Alto Adige Speck, a salt-cured and very lightly smoked ham from the far north of Italy. Once the rice is added, Skawinski slowly adds the rich, almost demi glace-like stock that comes from slowly braising lamb or veal shoulder for hours with aromatics and red wine. Chunks of the tender braised meat are pulled from the bone and added to the risotto at the end, along with a swirl of butter, a sprinkling of Parmigiano Reggiano and some freshly minced rosemary and sage.

Chef Skawinski features plenty of fresh Atlantic fish and shellfish on his menu throughout the year, and Seared Sea



**Seared Scallops at Cinque Terre served
with a parsnip purée, house pancetta,
tri color greens, fresh citrus and balsamic aioli**



**Maine Mussels, roasted garlic,
lemon and vermouth, sun dried
tomato butter, chick pea fritters**

Scallops, or Capesante, are always a customer favorite. A recent version was served with parsnip puree, tri color greens, and lightly crisped slices of house-cured pancetta. For his pancetta, Skawinski rubs pork belly with a mixture of salt, chili flakes, fennel seed, black pepper, and bay leaf and sets it to cure for up to two weeks, then lays it on refrigerated racks to air dry for another week or so. It's not an exact science, according to the chef, who says, "it can cure for anywhere from 8 to 14 days, depending on the thickness of the belly." Not only does Skawinski prefer the flavor that results from the house-curing process, but he says, "It's a little more wholesome when you do it yourself; you can control the salt, and you don't have to use nitrates, and it gives you a chance to use the whole animal."

The dessert menu changes just as often as the dinner menu, but chef Skawinski always includes housemade gelato in one form or another. Buttermilk Gelato was featured on a recent menu alongside Warm Rum Glazed Spice Cake and Brown Sugar Roasted Pineapple.